

the dots

a podcast about connecting.

Cora Neumann Transcript

Announcer: [00:00:04] Welcome to The Dots. A podcast about connecting. The Dots is a series of conversations with artists, community leaders, entrepreneurs, and change makers who talk about how they connect the dots and bring things together for their communities, companies, and themselves for a better life. And now your host, Digital Strategist, speaker, and entrepreneur, Kathleen Buczko.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:00:31] Cora Newman is founder of the Global First Ladies Alliance. Cora's experience ranges from the Director of Policy in Women's Initiatives at Care dot com, co-founder of the African First Ladies Initiative at the RAND Corporation, to Senior Adviser at the economic Bureau of the U.S. State Department at G.F.L.A. She convenes change makers and leaders in inspiring places around the world to spur a deeper connection to people and place and to galvanize a commitment to action. Connecting individuals to self, humanity and the planet so that together we can reset our collective course towards a more resilient future. Cora, welcome to The Dots.

Cora Neumann: [00:01:10] Thank you. Happy to be here.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:01:13] Tell us a little bit about your journey. Where did you grow up?

Cora Neumann: [00:01:17] I actually grew up in Montana. I was born in Canada and grew up in my from my childhood I spent in Bozeman Montana. And since then I have lived on the East Coast. I've lived in Europe. I spend a lot of time in Asia. But my background really is in the mountains of Montana.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:01:35] What a beautiful place to have grown up.

Cora Neumann: [00:01:38] Yeah, I feel lucky.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:01:40] Tell us about your journey through your education process. How did you get to Oxford?

Cora Neumann: [00:01:47] Ah, that's a great question. So my undergrad actually was focused on art and international relations and political science and I was, I've always been really interested in the intersection between global development issues and the more creative process of creating change. And so I started off just exploring various topics. I ended up at Columbia University which was my grandparents alma mater. They actually fled the Holocaust already with Ph.D.s and J.D.s and ended up in New York City and both went to Columbia University to get their degree in social work and that's where they met. And so I had always had my, even as a girl in Montana I had had my sights set on Columbia. So I ended up going to Columbia to focus on refugee health which you know my grandparents were refugees and I had watched them support refugees throughout my lifetime. And so I ended up at Columbia and was really focused on empowering vulnerable populations. I had learned from my grandfather and from my grandmother that there's no such thing as helping others you can help them help themselves. But the best way to really empower populations and individuals is to really give them the tools and the skills so they can help themselves. And so my master's focused on refugees and refugee health and supporting local populations in helping themselves. And then from there, ended up at Oxford University for a Ph.D.

I just love learning. So I thought I might as well take my education to the very last stop. So the advisor that I was I actually met my advisor from Oxford while I was at Columbia. He was a guest speaker there and was speaking about indigenous rights and indigenous knowledge among refugee population which I thought was really fascinating.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:03:39] That is incredibly fascinating.

Cora Neumann: [00:03:41] Yeah.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:03:41] That is part of it's not a very visible part of the conversation around refugees.

Cora Neumann: [00:03:46] Not at all. And they have you know refugees have they come to their you know situation displacement with a huge background of knowledge and systems that they they were a part of. Right. So but it's too often neglected and with something it's really interesting that happens in the displacement process especially in the humanitarian context is a kind of version of Westernization and even neocolonialism if I can go so far as to say that. Where you know populations are displaced. Western aid has come in to help. And through the process there delivering western medicine. Western education. And really often neglecting the systems and bodies of knowledge that exist among the population. And so that was really actually ties back to my childhood growing up in Montana and feeling a really close connection to nature and having a lot of respect and regard for local you know indigenous knowledge.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:04:42] Yeah. No I mean.

Cora Neumann: [00:04:43] The population

Kathleen Buczko: [00:04:44] You don't survive in the mountains if you don't know a mountaineer.

Cora Neumann: [00:04:50] That's right. And even just like learning the history of the native populations in Montana as a child. And thinking about what a terrible loss it is to to have not had continuation and real support for those populations. And so it just kind of all came together in my Montana background. My grandparents refugee story. And so my Ph.D. focused on supporting indigenous medical systems among displaced populations in Asia. So very much kind of niche area but something that I really felt was important because what happened in these in these settings is a very rapid loss of identity, loss of knowledge. And it's not really good for anyone. So that is my that is an education, long story of my education background.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:05:31] It's not a long story at all. I mean I have a counter it's really a very short encapsulation of what your educational life is done. How did that education in that journey inform where you are today?

Cora Neumann: [00:05:48] Well I have the story of how I ended up working with First Ladies is quite a.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:05:51] Because they're not exactly a refugee or an indigenous population.

Cora Neumann: [00:05:55] No [laughs] And so I do get this question quite often and that's why at the beginning I started off by saying that my focus across all of my different areas of work and expertise is about empowering populations and individuals. It really is about helping people find their place of power and connections that they can operate, and be most effective and really leverage the position there in and create the most change. So when I was a doctor I was really I was

a Ph.D. student when the first when the First Ladies opportunity came to me. I was introduced to or connected to a small organization in Los Angeles that focused on medical aid to Africa. And out of the blue one day I received a press release from them saying a group of African First Ladies were going to come to Los Angeles for a big gala star studded gala event and something happened in me. It was just this kind of aha moment. Like I'd never thought about First Ladies. And I actually kind of shied away from working with women. I didn't want to be kind of pigeonholed as a you know working in women's issues. Now of course I fully embrace it and it's almost everything that I do.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:07:03] Right.

Cora Neumann: [00:07:03] But I was kind of resisting it. Which I mean I see a lot of women do it actually in the beginning of their careers. And so I never thought about either of these topics. And I actually worked in Asia not Africa. So all of it was very new to me but I just had this kind of lightbulb switch moment. And I actually often described it as almost like a maternal instinct overtook me and I thought, no there's no way we're going to bring 20 First Ladies from Africa to trot them across a stage with a bunch of celebrities.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:07:31] Yeah.

Cora Neumann: [00:07:31] This, this needs to be this is an opportunity to help these women move beyond being seen only for what they're wearing. Right.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:07:40] Right.

Cora Neumann: [00:07:40] And only being seen as on the arm of the President. And really understand more about who they are. The power they're in. The position of power that they potentially have and the change that they can impact. And so just kind of that was it. I just had that moment and you know basically overnight moved into high gear to conceptualize and organize the largest gathering of African First ladies out of the outside of the United States that had ever happened. And we had Sarah Brown, who is the wife of the Prime minister of the U.K. We had a video message from Laura Bush. We had representation from the White House, the World Health Organization, Vital Voices. It was an incredible summit with many First Ladies from across Africa, the U.S. and the U.K.. And it just turned into you know, all of a sudden I was working with First Ladies, I was working with women and I was thinking about how to help empower this population that nobody really thought of. Had really thought about empowering right you think of them as being in a position of privilege and having all of the resources they probably need at their fingertips and what I found out was it was very very much not the case and that there had been no standard set for First Ladies. There were no set expectations for their role and what they needed to achieve. They didn't even necessarily have a standardized type of office or budget. And so yeah. So it just, that was back in, started in 2008. The first time it was in 2009. I was a Ph.D. student the whole time. And then I took it and I actually brought it to the Rand Corporation because it was one of the most well resourced and well established organizations in Los Angeles which that's where I was at the time.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:09:12] OK. But in empowering this group, it is, there is the potential for a level of understanding globalization that heretofore we've never brought to the forefront.

Cora Neumann: [00:09:28] Yeah yeah. I mean a in terms of of collaborating across boundaries.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:09:36] Yeah.

Cora Neumann: [00:09:36] Which part of.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:09:37] All of all of the above. Collaborating across boundaries. Women naturally collaborate. We give birth to multiple humans and they have to learn to play together and we're the primary caretaker into doing that if you go to the most basic level. I'm talking to a Ph.D. and indigenous people but how do you empower them in a way of standardized, scaleable, motion to really take the power that they have worked. First, in some cases how many of these First Ladies understood that they actually had some power to take advantage of?

Cora Neumann: [00:10:13] That was interesting. I mean there's obviously a huge spectrum. Every office in every country has a different expectation of the First Lady. It's definitely more well-established in the United States. But even here in the U.S. it wasn't really until the 70s that the Office of the First Lady began to receive some more, some more standardized practices. And so the initiative was formed really together with the First Ladies. So we asked them what they wanted. Right. We brought them to the stage to present on what what what it was what their visions were. Which in and of itself was kind of revolutionary. They'd never been asked to speak on speak about their own priorities. They've been asked to champion other priorities but not really speak about their own. And so we really just spent time talking to them about what it was that they wanted. And what we learned through the process was it really you know the program turned into a form of leadership training which was not not anything I would really call it. But it, you know was certainly high-level policy dialogues. Linking First ladies with potential funders and partners and really helping them think about their office. But what it turned into as well was that it was a leadership training of sorts where we helped First Ladies share their priorities, their needs, their challenges. We start every meeting with a closed off-the-record roundtable among First Ladies. So that they can speak with one another about their needs, about their challenges. They had never had that chance before to really just sit together and talk. And so through the process of asking questions and listening, we learned what if any standards existed or if any best practices were to come out of this process. We learned it from the First Ladies and explored it together with them. So it was really a exploratory process and one of the things that I learned in my work with indigenous populations and refugees was the value of listening. Right. Asking good questions. listening. letting them tell us what they need, instead of telling them what we think they need. Which is a very common approach in the in the world of international politics and humanitarian aid. Is you, we, you know a lot of top-down assumptions about what a population needs as opposed to really just, really listening.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:12:30] I find that fascinating because we as you said earlier contextualize everything in terms of western culture.

Cora Neumann: [00:12:37] Right.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:12:37] And so we begin to look at hierarchy of needs and that everyone needs to have a house, the way we defined it as a house. And food the way we've defined it as food. And integrate with their tribe or their people the way we've defined it. And what I find so fascinating about that is that that theory was so limited to such a small part of the population of the world, that we haven't spent enough time understanding how others define that. And in that we we create or exploit these chasms that really don't exist because, as you found with indigenous populations, each population solves the problem as they need to and how they see fit.

Cora Neumann: [00:13:22] That's right yeah. I mean it's sort of like you know, we actually have this fall we have an event with Facebook, MAC AIDS Fund which is the foundation part of MAC cosmetics and OK Africa and a few other partners, the U.N. Foundation. Well we're going to bring the First Ladies together to talk about alternative systems in the future. It's entitled The future of Women and we're going to move a little bit outside of the policy conversation and really have a more creative brainstorm around what we as women writ large and these women leaders will bring

to the table, would like to envision in terms of what this you know what the future holds. And if women were able to to think through and recreate new ways of operating right outside of the classic global economy, what would it look like? What is post capitalism look like? What is it. What is the new what does the future look like in terms of how we operate and how can we really think outside of the box and create societies and systems that work work better for families. Right. It's not just women, it's not just children. I think one of the things that I've said I learned and have you know continue to face in all my work with women including at the State Department and at CARE dot com is that all issues related to social impact, education, families, is relegated into this kind of amorphous area of women's issues. Which is of course laughable because children aren't a women's issue right. Families aren't a women's issue. It's a societal issue.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:14:50] Right.

Cora Neumann: [00:14:50] But the way that we operate now in our current economy is that anything related to care is relegated to the back the back rooms. Right? To the caregivers. To the mothers. It's hugely neglected area that if we don't get creative and find ways to operate in a more holistic way that we, you know, will continue to create huge disparities among population. So it's, I'm excited about the upcoming event and thinking about you know having this conversation outside of just the classic policy conversation really getting into thinking about the future. And thinking about obviously given the current political climate in the U.S. and around the world where there's a lot of you know just division and turbulence as I've been describing it. You know how it's really actually an opening in time and an opportunity for women to rise up and women are rising up to take on more leadership roles across across all sectors. So I'm excited about about having that conversation and pushing it to the next level.

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Kathleen Buczko: [00:16:15] Cora, how did you find your voice?

Cora Neumann: [00:16:19] How did I find, I [laughs] that's a great question. I help others find their voices all day long.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:16:26] Yeah.

Cora Neumann: [00:16:26] I found my voice through helping others. And I've found that that's one of the places where I see women who have otherwise potentially not felt, you know, lacking confidence or had fear around taking a stand. When you when you couch it in the context of helping others and empowering others you see the most powerful energy arising from these women that you may not have seen otherwise. So I actually, I am in that camp. [laughs] When I'm fighting for others or for something, that's where my that's where my clarity and vision comes through. I'm happy to just I'm happy to lead and I'm also, I really love to stand behind and help elevate women who I see, and anyone but really I work with women. Help them identify their potential, step into their power. I've had so many beautiful moments with the First ladies where you know one of the quotes one of my favorite quotes was from the former first lady of Kenya. Wife of a Prime Minister she said "when we met Cora we were all on a train. Now we're on a plane". You know I just sort of it was this kind of helping them see the potential that they had and see the platform that they had. If they were able to take advantage of it and that was just you know one of the highest compliment I could have ever received. So that's really where I find my power and voice is in opening doors for others.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:17:58] When you talk about taking things to the next level with your upcoming conference and summit obviously including some of the tech luminaries of the globe, where do you find yourself in brokering that conversation? Kind of bringing and candidly I consider kind of Facebook and some of those all those population or excuse me those platforms as kind of old time population stirrers. Where how can the humanism and the true connection to their communities, through the First Ladies bridge the gap to and how do you find yourself bridging your gap to these kind of older platforms? Platforms that they're looking to create in the future? And then platforms that they're looking to exploit not only to tell their own stories but to motivate change in their environment. Where do you find yourself in that conversation?

Cora Neumann: [00:19:00] Thinking through the various channels through which First Ladies can amplify their voices and how they use these different tools.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:19:07] Yeah.

Cora Neumann: [00:19:09] I mean we know that Facebook is the largest organization in the world. Right. It has two billion users a month. It's very powerful. It's obviously learning some pretty intense lessons around the last election and really having to do some reflection on the role that they play in society and in creating social movements and connecting people. And so it's been a really interesting and exciting conversation and collaboration so far just to help also push these organizations to think about how they can help emerging leaders have more of a platform without necessarily taking sides, so to speak. So how how do we take an existing tool, that's very very powerful, and help it create more positive social impact? And I think that it's I mean what I'm experiencing is that there are some real earnest effort there. And so that's and that's working with, we work with a lot of partners right. So this is just one of many. We've worked with you know GE, PNG, Mirc you know large large companies as well as or as foundations like UN Foundation and others. So you know what we try to do is offer a menu of resources to First Ladies from nonprofits, smaller nonprofits, to you know multinational organizations; like the United Nations and the World Bank, to corporations that have foundations that are doing good. And we do you know we assess each one. Given their priorities and the value they might bring to the First Ladies and really end up being in a position of more of a matchmaker and a door opener. We'd like to create opportunities and look for you know programs and tools that are going to be useful to the First Ladies. And the event that we're having September is bringing rising women leaders to the table as well. We've actually never facilitated a conversation directly between First Ladies and rising women leaders. We usually have a conversation between First Ladies, partners, and then have sort of a more formal program. So this is going to be a direct conversation between rising women leaders and First Ladies and it's going to be you know streamed live to the world through Facebook. So I think that we're trying to to pave a new path forward. Use these technologies to you know try something that haven't been done before. So and reach an audience that otherwise may not have the means to receive this message. Or to be at this meeting. So we're excited about you know taking advantage of the opportunity to have broader reach and more positive social impact. We will also be giving an award to some rising women leaders and really honoring the work of young women who are shaping the future of Africa. Across Africa I should say.

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Kathleen Buczko: [00:22:11] If you had the opportunity to sit down with your younger self, what would you tell her?

Cora Neumann: [00:22:22] Trust yourself.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:22:24] Was it hard to find trust?

Cora Neumann: [00:22:27] Yeah and I really see it in so many young women now. I look at them and just want to go up them and say "you are, you have everything you need". You know, "Stop. You don't need to doubt yourself. You don't need to be cute. You don't need to be sweet. Just be who you are". and I'm seeing that in younger generations. But I think you know what I'm finding and what we do and a lot of this work, so I work with First Ladies but I also work with women leaders and women across all sectors and at all levels, is that most people know what they want and they know where their strengths are and they do have an inner confidence that is, you know, dwelling inside them somewhere. And so helping women see that, get some clarity around it and then act on it. And just take one step in front of the other in terms of trusting themselves and believing that they know why they're here and what they're, you know, who they're here to serve. And because once once there is clarity around that, that's where I see that like that 'we were on a train and now on a plane'. It's just, it's not about coming up with anything new or even gaining that many new skill,. although that's helpful. Really it's ultimately so much of it is about tapping into who you are. Your purpose and trusting that you know why why you're here and what you're here to kind of serve and give. And so that is I would I would say that myself and I and I I find myself saying some version of that to most of the women that I work with. I for some reason I think and I think this is no surprise to men as well. But I think that there is just so much doubt cast on and ways that women are taught to limit themselves. To please others. To be extremely attached to external validation. To you now, to be liked. And a lot of really great research around that coming out right now. And so just you know kind of helping and you know unbreak that conditioning or or create a breakthrough of that that conditioning isn't so strong in women. So yeah trust yourself. Believe yourself. Spend time getting to know yourself, right.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:24:33] Yeah. No I think that that's that's part of the dynamic right is learning. Learning what makes you happy.

Cora Neumann: [00:24:41] And not even happy. It, I mean yes, but I think that sometimes that is even to aspirational. I think it's more, just feeling settled in and connected to yourself. There's a there's a huge, I mean that's where my you know my G.F.L.A is evolving into and I'm also working on an initiative called Reset which is really about connection to self. Connection to purpose. Connection to the planet. I'm going to you know get back into my focus on indigenous knowledge and be you know more and more focused on the climate and on our connection to the planet because women I think are going to be some of the most righteous and powerful climate and climate champions of the future and so that's and that's the next wave of women that I'm hoping to to cultivate and serve.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:25:26] So what motivates you at this point.

Cora Neumann: [00:25:31] Wow, let's see. I love these questions.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:25:36] It's not like a pop quiz or anything is it Cora?

Cora Neumann: [00:25:38] [laughs] Know it's great.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:25:39] You have a lot of education.

Cora Neumann: [00:25:40] I mean it motivates me right now is are these bigger questions around what it means to be human. What it means to be a woman leader. Really bigger kind of almost philosophical question because I think we are going through a crisis of sorts. Nationally and even

globally where we really have to rethink how we, how we operate. So that's a question I contemplate a lot. What does it mean to be human? And what is the future of women's leadership look like? That question motivates me. And you know the exercise of exploring that together with the women I serve, and my own colleagues is a major driver.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:26:24] So we've talked about the conferences and we've talked about the new levels of research that you want to do and an outreach to empower women as the change makers certainly of our climate in our earth. But what's next for you?

Cora Neumann: [00:26:43] I had to focus on returning to the focus on climate issues and you know looking at indigenous rights, indigenous knowledge, and kind of returning to the source in a sense. So that is certainly a pivot for me away from foreign policy, you know, and international policy related to health and development is going to be you know is weaving. And finding a way to bring the narrative out of you know generally when you talk about these issues you're kind of relegated to to climate and environmental issues but really it's it's bigger than that right.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:27:22] It's about food.

Cora Neumann: [00:27:23] It's related to everything.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:27:25] You know it really is you know it is about sustainability and the heart and the core of who and what we are.

Cora Neumann: [00:27:31] Yeah. So we have I mean it touches on on every system. And so that's you know finding a way to integrate issues related to politics and policy and business. And you know the kind of classic most visible sectors related to or that one think of when we think of leadership and bringing issues related to the planet and to the climate and to indigenous rights up on par with those other sectors really. You know I think that what I noticed in all of the leadership and kind of summits that I go to and conferences that I go to is - it's kind of like we have business leaders, leaders from business politics, maybe the creative arts or you know and so but but bringing, and academia, but bringing climate into that into that conversation in a more robust way I think is really really important. I've just been asked to advise on an upcoming challenge in honor of the pope and his encyclical and focus on the climate so I'm really excited about some of the opportunities that are also coming to me. I'm also inviting a group of astronauts that are focused on the future of the planet and on helping. Helping inspire the perspectives that they gain when they're up in space and they look back down on Earth and really have this aha moment around this one precious valuable home that we all share. So issues sort of know that that is what's interesting me going forward and what's next for me is these issues around around climate, around the planet as a whole, and around finding a way to bring that into the you know the narrative of politics and business. Making it a more central focus.

Kathleen Buczko: [00:29:24] Cora, I'm humbled that you chose to spend a mere 30 minutes with us today and share your vision and your passion and your ability to empower women at all levels to make a difference in our world. And so thank you.

Cora Neumann: [00:29:39] Thank you. I've loved talking with you. Thank you so much.

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