



## Episode Transcript

### Special Episode 1: Bootstraps or Benefits?

**Intro** Hi everyone and welcome to The Big View: Ending Poverty in Your Community. At **(Yvette Trujillo)** Circles, our mission is building community to end poverty through intentional friendships, personal transformation, and systemic change led by the people closest to the challenge. And our vision for the future is all individuals live in equitable and thriving communities where poverty no longer exists.

**Kris Alexander** Welcome to this special episode of The Big View Podcast on Bootstraps or Benefits! My name is Kris Alexander and I am the Chief Learning Officer at Circles USA, and I am joined today with Kamatara Johnson, our Executive Director. And you might remember her from Season One of The Big View podcast. So, welcome Kamatara!

**Kamatara Johnson** Thanks, Kris!

**KA** And I am so excited to be joining this podcast and joining Kamatara for these special episodes, and then also Season Two coming in 2025. So we have really exciting stuff planned today. And, and for next year. And today we're talking specifically about bootstraps or benefits. And I wanted to bring this conversation specifically to the table, because it seems like right now in our country, we are very polarized in our ideas of how to solve problems across the board. And these are kind of the two main ways that people think that we should solve poverty. And so I wanted to do a deep dive into what is bootstraps, what is benefits, and then what what's the right answer. So, that's kind of the framework in which we're going into this conversation

So first and foremost, Kamatara, would you be willing to kind of define bootstraps and benefits? What, what are we talking about when we say that?

**KJ** Sure. So in an interesting little Circles history moment, our founder, Scott Miller, wrote a book with known conservative Denise Rhodes, and it was called Bootstraps and Benefits, and what the right and left can do to work together to end poverty in the United States. And so it kind of became a phrase in, in Circles. Like: where you live, are they more a bootstrap approach or are they more a benefits approach?

And so it became a way for us to try to talk about the different approaches to ending poverty. So for the folks that are more bootstraps, it's well, you know, that individual work ethic and "pull yourself up by your bootstraps". And then of course, we get—and there's huge value to that, which I'm sure we're going to unpack.

And we get the response that naturally comes from that. Well, what if I don't have any boots? There are no straps. I have nothing to pull up on. And that's where the benefits comes in that I, I do need some support. I can't do it alone. I need the community or I need this kind of support. And then, you know, Circles try to say, well, what if we had a both/and approach?

Does it have to be either/or? How do we bring everyone to the table, the whole community, to solve this problem. So there's the bootstraps or the benefits or both.

**KA** Awesome. So just to summarize, so bootstraps is really an individual look at poverty. Like the people in poverty, it's their responsibility to get out of poverty. And the benefits approach is a communal approach of it's the community or the system's responsibility to support the people in poverty and get them out of poverty. Awesome. Yeah. And I love that—

I read that book by Scott Miller. It is really good. It had, I have, I had so many thoughts while I was reading it. It sparked so many ideas in myself. And you kind of touched on it a little bit, Kamatara, of we at Circles take this both/and approach, but what is your personal viewpoint? I'm very curious.

**KJ** As a former English teacher, I really appreciate false arguments, when we can unpack them. And one false argument that comes a lot, especially in the political or social arena, is what's called a false dilemma, where it's either this or that you only have this choice or that choice, and there's no other choice. And of course, we know there are multiple ways.

There might be infinite ways that we could figure something out when we work together to solve a really difficult problem. So saying that there's only one way to do something, it just doesn't seem accurate. It's not a holistic approach. It's not a community approach. It kind of hangs the individual out to dry. It dismisses the community that's right there, as we can lovingly support each other.

But I also don't want to dismiss the individual responsibility because, yeah, I do need to to kick in and I have to be willing to pitch in and pull my weight and do the thing. But oftentimes I can't do that by myself. So that false dilemma says it's one or the other. But when we get past that, that false argument, it's actually it's more holistic.

It's both/and. The individual accountability and the community accountability and how we can all work together to be not codependent, not dependent, not independent. Could we be interdependent so that we were all thriving? So I'm a both/and kind of girl.

**KA** Awesome. I, personally—you didn't ask, but I'm going to tell you anyway.

**KJ** Yes!

**KA** I have historically been a benefit kind of person myself. Very much, it's the community's responsibility to take care of the community. And it's been really fascinating, over the last year working with Circles, doing curriculum development, learning so much about poverty and the poverty eradication arena and all of that, really, looking at the impact and, support that that sort of bootstraps or individual responsibility, brings to the table and how important it really is to have that both/and, and to look at how can the community support the person who is also supporting themselves and also supporting the community as well, because they're a part of the community, right? So it's not, I over here, I'm helping you over there do this thing that you need to do, but we're a community together, and we're all going to support ourselves and one another together to better our community. And it's been this really kind of beautiful evolution within myself of, of seeing, how giving responsibility to, an individual who's experiencing poverty can be incredibly supportive and empowering in a way that allows them to, be in control of their own experience even as the community supports them.

**KJ** Right. The autonomy, the sense of worth, the sense of, "I can do this, I do matter, I can contribute," is a new experience for a lot of folks who are experiencing poverty.

**KA** Absolutely. So let's, now that we've kind of defined it and we, we both know where we're at personally, let's talk a little bit. Not, I don't want to get too deeply into this just because I'm not I'm not trying to start anything, but let's talk just a little bit about the current political climate. So, we are talking right now and y'all will be listening to this, in mid-December 2024.

We just had a pretty, major. Well, we had major election...

**KJ** Interesting election.

**KA** I wanted to say explosive. We had an election season that just felt really challenging. I feel like most people, regardless of your political views, would say that the election season was intense. And so let's talk a little about the current political climate, and the challenges that are kind of coming up with this sort of either/or mentality, this, paradox thinking is what I often call it, or this false dilemma.

As Kamatara said, how is how is all of this affecting. What's going on?

**KJ** Right. It's a, it's a tricky situation to be in as one administration goes out and another comes in that seem like exact opposites. And so it's like a pendulum swing where, okay, one group came in and they did x, y, z and p, d, q. And now this next group comes in and they dismantle x, y z and p, d, q.

And they do a, b, c. And then it's swinging back and forth. And then you feel like well, we're not getting anywhere. We're just doing two steps forward, one step back or one step to the left and the one step to the right. And you don't get anywhere. And one of

the the interesting shifts for me, is that in the past, I may have been kind of insular in my thinking or who I surround myself with and being like, well, I just want to be with like minded people who think the way I do and want to do this work the way I want to do it.

And I learned from our former board member, Christy Vines, and she's the president of the Ideos Institute that, you know, if we're only with like minded people, then we're not being fully inclusive and we are never going to make for a practice. We're just going to keep having those pendulum swings as opposed to if we have a more inclusive table, right wing, left wing, you know, all the religions, all the classes, all the political persuasions and expressions of being, then we find that middle together where we can make progress together instead of just swinging back and forth.

So I, it is difficult. It is a difficult moment for a lot of people, for the people who feel like they won, for the people who feel they lost and for all the people in the middle. It can feel difficult, but it doesn't change the work we need to do. We're still bringing people into the circle. We're still finding the common ground.

Poverty still exists and it doesn't matter how you approach it, whether it's from the bootstrap or the benefit, you know, mindset, we've got work to do. So I hope that we can remain steadfast, remain connected, and not dismiss people who may have very different ideas than than ours, because in the end, we want the same things. Curious how you're feeling about that.

**KA** Yeah, well, I really love several of the things you said in the way that you said it. Like I think, a lot of us, I've heard I've heard a lot of people talking about, you know, the end was going to happen in either direction. Right. And now that something has happened, the end is here and all is lost kind of mentality.

And I'm sure that if it had gone the other direction, it would have been all is lost. Right? This idea that, the people in political office—Yes, absolutely, it makes a difference—And, I love what you said. We have work to do. And honestly, regardless of what the outcome of the elections had been, we would have had work to do.

**KJ** Right.

**KA** And so if we can set down our, our win-lose mindset of either I, we won this election or we lost this election, if we can set that down and say we all want the same thing, we all want to reduce, end, eradicate, support, whatever, however you want to call it, poverty. Then we can actually get somewhere, but it's not until we stop looking at everything that's happening in this country as a win-lose situation that we're going to be able to actually sit down at the same table and say, no, actually, none of that matters.

The reality is we just need to get to work. And that was going to be the reality no matter what.

**KJ** Yes.

We can do this together. If we don't try to do this together, we'll never get it together.

**KA** Yeah. That pendulum swing is rough and we see it all over the place, right? Like the pendulum swing back and forth. That, that is what we do, you know? We we, Oh, gosh, I can't even. I know for myself, like, I'll exercise hardcore for, like, a couple weeks and then, like, I'll do nothing. Like finding that moderate middle...

**KJ** Yes.

**KA** ...can be so challenging in any area of of your life. And we're by no means saying that you have to be a moderate person or that you your political views have to be moderate. Rather, communally. Right? It's it's this community coming together as a nation. We need to figure out how to find moderation so that we can work together and move forward.

**KJ** And the common ground, because everybody wins when individuals and families are thriving. We want workers to keep working and advancing and contributing to the community and all the wonderful things that happen when people can leave poverty behind permanently. But then we do have to have some hard conversations about the system and about benefits, or we do have to have some hard conversations with individuals that may not be ready, able, or willing to contribute in the ways that they they would to be thriving.

So we need it. Again, it's that both/and, it's the bootstraps and the benefits. And if there was some way to get past the pendulum swing or the divisiveness or the either/or thinking, I think we would move, community by community, family by family, just so much further. And then collectively, as a nation, coming together, even, even in hard times.

**KA** Exactly. Well, and I love what you said a minute ago when you were talking about your viewpoint of: if one or the other would have worked, it would have worked by now.

**KJ** We would have done it by now.

**KA** Yeah. If we could have done it the ways that we've tried to do it, we would have already done it.

**KJ** Right.

**KA** So obviously, this pendulum swing back and forth is not working. It's not going to be the answer. It's never going to be the answer. Neither, no one person, viewpoint, political party, has the answer to this. So we're going to have to figure out how to come together. Yes.

And, I just got excited about something that hopefully will come up in this, in this next question. So, you know, we are clear that it is a both/and, that we're going to have to figure out how to work together and come together. So what is this both/and approach

going to take? How do we move out of that pendulum swing? How do we sit down at the same table? How do we solve some of these big issues? Maybe, maybe we could popcorn this.

**KJ** Yes.

**KA** So do you want to share one? And then I'll share one and then... Because I think we probably both have a lot of ideas on this.

**KJ** Just what you're doing right now, Kris, I think is the very first step of how we live into the both/and. And what you just did was asked a whole bunch of questions and that's that curiosity. Could I, how can I approach the situation with curiosity instead of locking down and saying, well, I know all the answers, or this is the way it's going to be. To enter in with an open mind.

Curiosity and asking questions is a fantastic way to start to get to know people. Who is in the community, what are the positions? Who is our ally here? Where might we work together? Like all those kind of questions, who knows about this? Who should be at the table? Just curiosity and asking questions. It's a fantastic way to start.

**KA** Yeah, absolutely. I always say that curiosity is our superpower. And my oh my goodness, I can't remember who said it right now, but, an amazing, activist said the question that she's constantly asking herself is, what am I missing? What am I missing in this situation? And what am I missing, like what do I need to be successful?

But also like, what am I unaware of? What do you know that I don't know? What am I overlooking? Like, just what am I missing? And she's like, I just constantly ask this question. And I think that that's such a profound question to ask because no one of us has all the perspectives. We only have our own.

**KJ** Exactly. And then coming together as a community for those community driven solutions, you know, you might have something that I never would have thought of. So, yeah, with all due humility, having curiosity and an open mind, I love that. What am I missing? All right. What else do you think, Kris?

**KA** Yeah. Well, so going right along with that curiosity is then a willingness to listen. And we can ask all the questions we want. But if we don't wait to hear what the other person says, then you know, it's, we're not going to get very far very quickly. And I know it can be really challenging to stop talking, and to listen to somebody else, especially if it's around a subject that we feel very passionate about and a lot of us feel very passionate about poverty and poverty eradication and how to handle these challenges in our society.

And so we have to be willing to stop talking. And I love what you always say, the acronym W.A.I.T. — Why Am I Talking? And in some ways, I feel like that's harsh, because it's not that we should never be talking, right. But then in other ways, it's just

a really... I asked myself like, why am I talking? Is is what I'm saying contributing to a generative sort of conversation, or am I just talking to be heard?

Or because I'm uncomfortable with the silence? Like what, what is my why? And is my why in alignment with where I'm trying to head, which is curiosity and listening, right?

**KJ** I'd also like to challenge, how that listening goes. Am I only listening for the answer I want to hear?

**KA** Oh, yeah.

**KJ** Or am I open to, am I truly open to listening deeply to whatever is being said to receive it? Even if I don't agree with it. That I'm not just listening so I can make my next response, and then I'm going to pounce and do the thing.

Like I'm already thinking about what I'm going to say before I've even... that doesn't work. Like listening... I may have an agenda, but can I, can I put myself on a low simmer and really be open to what I'm hearing? So that way I am really listening, not just hearing. And it's also interesting to think about to whom am I listening?

Who is at the table? Who is talking? So when I am quiet, yes, I need to listen more than I talk. That's why they say they give you two ears and one mouth. Right?

**KA** [laughs] Yep.

**KJ** Let's listen more than we talk. But can I listen to people with the lived experience? Who is closest to the challenge? Who is at this table, that might not be present, that would have the most informed, experiences to share? And how can, is there any way to set up that listening to be really supportive for the people who are sharing? So it's a free sharing. It's not like "Objection, council is leading the witness." No, no, no. Like really free supportive listening for people to be seen and heard.

So so listening goes really deep in that way.

**KA** Yeah. And I really I just want to say it again because you just said it so beautifully and I'm going to like, nail it in even a little deeper because I think this is my favorite thing that Circles does. And that's listening to the people that are closest to the challenge, listening to the people who are having the lived experience of poverty or whatever challenge you're working on. That we're listening to those people and that, like I said, that is my favorite thing. I think. I don't know, I have so many, but this, this approach that Circles takes, that everything is Circle Leader—which is what we call, the people experiencing poverty in our communities who are working to leave poverty. We call them Circle Leaders.

We, we put Circle Leaders and their leadership and thoughts and ideas and perspectives and opinions and solutions at the forefront of everything. And honestly, I think that that is so profound and such a huge part, that is missing, honestly, from both

sides, the bootstraps and the benefits side. I think that we all have lots of ideas about what other people need to do, but unless we take time to listen to what those people are saying they need and that are, you know, that they are seeing, then we're not actually supporting.

**KJ** Right? And I can make up anything that I think, even if I'm a person who has experienced poverty, I can say, "I think this would be the best way." But without getting input from other people who have also experienced poverty or even input from the policymaker who will say, well, I hear what you're saying and the way the system works right now is this.

So to do that, we would have to do this. Oh, so it's like there's perspectives to be gained on all all the sides of it, which is like having that fully inclusive table, that that dialogue, listening, asking questions and curiosity is an imperative. And I'm going to push us a little further and suggest that another way to take that both/and approach is being willing to to see the different sides of it, not just my side. That I could try something new, you know, to let go again of that false argument of, well, this is the way we've always done it.

Well, clearly. Yeah. It's not, it's not working. Or we would have solved this by now. So can I make the space for grace? Can I just just be gracious in the moment and hear what needs to be said? Because maybe there's a little piece of gold in something I would have just dismissed otherwise.

**KA** Yeah.

**KJ** Or if I think I know the answers, then I'm not going to hear something other than what I think. So again, opening up to to hold a space for something more nuanced, which is why that both/and approach is so, so rich. We might be missing something if we're not able to hear something different or listen to the opposite, or to try something new. Or could I release some of my old ways of thinking or doing that just, just don't work anymore. And things are changing so fast in the economic landscape, the way things are right now, that the things that I grew up with, they don't even apply anymore. So I need to learn new ways of engaging in this very rugged economy. So, so just letting go of what I think I know or how I think it should be, or what I think it should look like, and being open to different sides or views, opinions, solutions is so powerful.

**KA** Yeah. Well and going right along and I know we're we're almost out of time already. The conversation is so rich. But to go along with that, I think this this paradox thinking, that false dilemma that you were talking about at the beginning, I talk a lot about it, developing a paradox mindset. So really working to become comfortable with discomfort and working to expand your perspective, to hold multiple "conflicting", ideas at once, to really hold the paradox, is really going to be supportive. Because when we can do that, then when somebody brings in an idea that's different from ours, and we're working to release that release the "this is the way we've always done it", or



“this is the right way to do it”, or “I’m right and your wrong”. That we’ll be able to easily, more easily—it’s not easy work, but more easily—take a deep breath, release those old beliefs because Kamatara, I agree with you. I’m, I’m even a generation below you and the stuff that I this stuff that I grew up with...

I just knocked my binder off my desk. I got overzealous.

**KJ** Just with passion. Yes.

**KA** Doesn't even...

**KJ** Apply.

**KA** Like, make sense anymore, you know? Right. Like the the money rules that I had in my 20s, a 20 year old would be like, that's that won't work, right? Or even or how to get a job or anything, you know? It's, it is so obsolete so quickly. And so you're right, we have to be willing to just set down what we think we know and listen to all of the other things that we don't know.

**KJ** Right. And seeing that there's perhaps no one right answer. There are diverse perspectives that maybe could get woven together into something like, what is the next step in the evolution of family and the evolution of the economy of this community? Like what does thriving look like now in this moment going forward? And we can't get to that without being able to hold a meaningful dialogue, a generative dialogue, where I don't know all the answers, but we can make meaning together, even if it's hard.

We're going to generate something by discussing. And I love that Circles creates a safe place for a diverse group of people to come together across the community, to have those hard conversations, to problem solve, to share the lived experience, to rally around this common cause. And it can be so generative when we learn how to ask good questions and be curious and listen to each other and get into a generative dialogue.

**KA** Yeah, yeah. And so it's that it's that exponential, right? Like one plus one doesn't equal two because it's an exponential experience that we're having. And to kind of go along with that generative dialogue and then wrap up... You know, as you were talking about that and about how the mindsets that we had even 15 years ago are obsolete, that means that we're working towards a future that we are not going to recognize in another 15 years.

And so none of us, literally not a single individual on the planet, has the answers for a 15 year, five years, next year, down the road future. Because we are moving so quickly and things are becoming so obsolete that we have to open ourselves up, we have to live from this curiosity and to listen to everybody's perspectives.

**KJ** And we get to practice that in Circles, which I love. So we're not only working to end poverty, that's where we're building community. We get to practice being in community together. And I hope that as each of our beautiful chapters across the nation practice this, that it, you know, could this spread? Like there's never been a greater time in the United States, or at least it feels this way, where we need to come together more. That we need we need to practice bootstraps and benefits.

We need to practice being together and finding community driven solutions together and listening to each other and finding that common ground and not dismissing each other or thinking we know everything... Like, those times are over. That is not going to work anymore. So I love that we get to practice this new way of being and head in new directions together with with the bootstraps and benefits approach.

**KA** Yes. And I love the *practice*. We're not gonna get it right all the time. We're gonna make mistakes. We're going to get rigid. We're going to have to apologize a lot. We're going to, you know, as my friend says, "It's a practice, not a perfect."

Kamatara: Yes.

Kris: So it's okay. And and you're right, it's all about that building community and just continuing to work on it together and and that bootstraps and benefits, like you said, I just want to reiterate, it's not an either/or.

It is a both/and. We're going to need every solution that we've ever heard of, plus a few that we haven't yet imagined, to get to where we're all trying to go together.

**KJ** Yes. And every person, every voice, every heart, every mind matters.

**KA** Yes, I love that. Well, we're going to end on that note. Everyone matters. Thank you so much for joining me, Kamatara. If you want more information, feel free to go to [circlesusa.org](http://circlesusa.org) and we will be back next month with our special episode on: What is effective systems change? How to do effective systems change. For now, thank you for joining us!