

Transcript of “Water and Laughter Go A Long Way” Podcast

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- Nate Benson: Good morning, good afternoon and good evening, whenever you may be listening, and welcome to Latitude the 43 North podcast. I'm your host Nate Benson, director of content here at 43 north, and we've got a fantastic show for you this week. How do you do some good? There are many ways and good comes in all shapes and sizes. For Kate and Joe Vacanti, their calling was to help people access water. One in seven people in the world lack access to clean water and 3.5 million people die each year from waterborne illnesses. On the continent of Africa, 40 billion hours are spent each year walking to access clean sources of water.
- Nate Benson: This week on the podcast, my cohost Darren Treadway and I talk with Kate and Joe About let them LOL, their nonprofit initiative that is building water wells in Sierra Leone. To date, let them LOL has built 105 wells, bringing clean water to more than 42,000 people. Why did they choose Sierra Leone? How difficult was digging that first well and was entrepreneurship always the plan? This episode of Latitude is presented by the University of Buffalo School of Management Center for Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness. So let's get right into this week's episode with myself and Darren Treadway with let them LOL.
- Nate Benson: Darren, how are you today?
- Darren Treadway: I'm fantastic. How are you Nate?
- Nate Benson: Not bad for a rainy Friday. This is when we're recording it. It's a rainy Friday. But not too bad. How's the semester going there for you?
- Darren Treadway: Going great. Just getting ready for our conference in early May, and winding down the semester. Although good things that make for, theoretically summer in Buffalo.
- Nate Benson: Any standout students you want to plug here on the podcast? Who's really just excelling? Or who's...
- Darren Treadway: All of my students are exceptional and I hope they'll remember that when they do their ratings.
- Nate Benson: That's a very good point there. Very nice. So, we have some fantastic guests today, but I'm going to let them introduce themselves. let them LOL. Laugh out loud. Hi, guys. How are you?
- Kate Vacanti: We're great. Thanks for having us.
- Nate Benson: Give us the quick pitch of who you are and what you do.

Kate Vacanti: So we're a 501c3 charity. We started about 10 years ago. Celebrating our 10th anniversary, and very grassroots. From buffalo, based out of buffalo, and we started off drilling water wells in Sierra Leone, and we now have a school, hospital... Basically all kinds of holistic development going on over there.

Nate Benson: But even further back, who are you?

Kate Vacanti: Well, that is a question. I'm Kate Vacanti and you can introduce yourself.

Joe Vacanti: I'm Joe Vacanti.

Kate Vacanti: You know who you are.

Joe Vacanti: We are actually UB Grad's, so we are a big fan of the UB and university alumni. We graduated in Pharmacy School in 2000. my wife was a nursing student. She graduated in 2002.

Nate Benson: Perfect. How did drilling wells in Sierra Leone, of all places, how did this come about?

Kate Vacanti: You mean, I don't look like a well driller to you?

Nate Benson: I'm not stereotyping, but of the four of us at this table, I think I look like the most...

Joe Vacanti: Yeah, you're wearing a vest-

Nate Benson: A vest of plaid. I've got boots on. I would be the digger here. But how did all this come about?

Kate Vacanti: Yeah. So, Joe used to be a pharmacist. I used to be a nurse and actually when we met, we joke because some people are like, "That sounds like a bait and switch." But when we met he actually said he wanted to work with youth. So we kind of knew pharmacy was going to be a starting point and then later he was going to go and work with youth. So a little bit of a pay difference there. So I knew that going into it. I was excited about it because for me growing up some P. Youth Workers in my life were a really big impact. So anyways, as part of that, being a youth worker, we went to a conference and at the conference they had different breakouts, and one of the breakouts was called Cultured.

Kate Vacanti: And we were like, "Well, we think we're pretty up on what's happening in the world. That's interesting. Let's see what they have to say." And at that they kind of mentioned as a side note, they were talking about lots of things and they said, "Do you guys know at the time that there are a billion people without clean water and everyday 4,000 children are dying from water-related disease?" And it was that number. It was one every 20 seconds. That number of kids dying that we were like, "What?" I mean from medical backgrounds, we're like, "Clean water, such a necessity for life." And we know that there's things like cancer and challenging diseases that we need to research to find a solution, but people not having clean water and dying from that, just get them clean water. And so that was the start of us hearing about this issue and we're like, "What can we do to help change it?"

Nate Benson: And what was it about Sierra Leone? Obviously, a billion people without access to clean water, so a lot of places you could have picked from. Why Sierra Leone?

Joe Vacanti: Yeah. So the organization that we partnered with for this first well that we drilled was in... Sorry it's in Rwanda. And the organization was based out of Atlanta. So after we raised funds, delivered this check to help raise the well for the people in Rwanda, and we kind of felt, "That's great, but how do we get to Atlanta every year?" And we knew that Buffalo is one of those cities that we're the city of good neighbors. There are so many people from this community that love to come together. You see that all the time. And that's what we love. And we knew that we had a lot of friends in Buffalo who loved to get involved.

Joe Vacanti: So we figured at some point we should do something local. And an opportunity came up through some relationships that we had here that there was an organization already working in Sierra Leone. We thought that was a great way to partner. So we started partnering with them and then through partnering with them we would take trips, and my wife eventually ran into... On these trips, we would go and meet different chiefs. So before you go into a place, obviously you pay your respects and you learn about their customs and their cultures.

Joe Vacanti: And so whenever we went in to do an assessment in a village, we would meet the chief first. And my wife met one of the female chiefs one time and the lady had said, "You know, I'm a female leader, you're a female leader and there is no NGOs in my region." And so the chief basically offered us an opportunity to work in her region and offered us some land. And my wife's been working with her and it's been pretty incredible, all the development that's been happening. We just wanted to help, and we feel like Sierra Leone came to us. We didn't necessarily target it. It's clearly relationships and opportunities and we feel like God just put it in our path and we said, "Well, let's do it."

Nate Benson: Well, certainly the country need... One of the highest under five mortality rates in the world and life expectancy is only 45. One in 50 women die at child birth. This is all info I pulled from your website. And then if that's not bad enough, in 2014 they had an Ebola outbreak, so it doesn't seem like... It's one thing after another, right? They seem to not be able to get ahead.

Kate Vacanti: Yeah, definitely. And they had an 11 year civil war, so it's one of those things. They're rich in a lot of natural resources, but they've never been able to harness them for themselves. They've been pretty taken advantage of. So my one friend said early on on a trip, "It's like they're behind before they even get started." And our goal, our mission statement is that we empower those experiencing unjust suffering. Our goal is to help them get to the starting line because we believe that they have everything in them to raise themselves up out of poverty. But if you're dying from water related disease or things like Ebola or you can only eat once a day, you don't have the energy to get yourself going.

Kate Vacanti: And we've seen it over and over again. In theory, that all sounds great. And then it's like, "Is it actually gonna happen?" And we've seen where we come into a village, we're ready to put a well in and we say, "Well guys, we can't get our drilling truck here." And we leave and come back the next day, and they've taken machetes and made

themselves a road. Staying up all night, the youth and everybody coming together. And now not only does that help get the drilling rig in, but now they have access into their village to maybe get in and out to get wood out and other things that they're growing that they could actually sell.

Joe Vacanti: Yeah, I mean, one of our values is we're a community here with a community there. And there's a humility that you have to recognize that you don't walk in and you're not the savior for different people. They are an incredible people and we've gotten to know them. They are our friends. And you know, we just really believe that there are a lot of people that have so much potential, they just don't have it sometimes that first opportunity. We have a humility and the people that are involved with us know. Once you get to know people there, they are incredibly smart, they are hardworking, they want better lives for themselves.

Joe Vacanti: It's important to have humility about that and recognize that it's a greater community, not just in region but across the world. We're very connected because of the internet, so we kind of like to say there's a global community and responsibility to help our fellow people, whether they're here but also overseas. We're just thankful for the opportunity we've been given to serve, and the thing is, as we have served and worked with them, they've actually taught us so much more about life and what it means. And my wife has this statement and she came up with a couple of years ago and it was...

Kate Vacanti: Yeah, I say that, "While they live in physical poverty, they have an abundance of community and contentment." Where we'll walk into villages and we don't make any promises, even if the drill rig is right outside the village, because what can go wrong will go wrong and you don't want to get somebody's hopes up that's already in a tough spot. But we'll walk into villages, not make any promises, and we'll walk out with our arms full of chickens and produce and all kinds of stuff. And you know that for them that's a once or twice a year meal that they'll have a chicken, right?

Kate Vacanti: And you can't... It's very tough, but you can't not accept that. Not give them that opportunity. And so I say that while they have a physical poverty, they have an abundance of community and contentment and a lot of people in communities where we live have a material abundance but can have a poverty of community and contentment. And so we feel like what we have to learn from them in some ways is greater than what we're bringing to them. Yeah.

Darren Treadway: I think your story is amazing. And I think you've raised a lot of different topics and ideas, and I think perhaps who you are as people, what drives you value wise, is probably if I asked you, how did you get here? You'd say, "Well, it's just my values. That's what God called me to do." Right? I'm going to ask you to reflect just a little bit. When we talk about this, Joe you talked about the social networks and the social capital around you that helped you build this. Can you talk a little bit to the budding entrepreneur or the budding social activist about any kind of insights you have to how to either build or leverage social capital to create these kind of change movements?

Joe Vacanti: Yeah. I think the starting point for anyone who's interested in doing something is you have to be passionate about it regardless as if anyone's coming with you. If you have to go alone, you go in alone. Because if you're going to really change and impact culture and people, it's going to be a lot of long hours, a lot of hard work, and you're going to be

up late and you're going to get up early. But if your why for doing it and your reason for doing it, that's what's going to motivate you. So honestly, I think the starting point is actually not even looking at relationships that you have, but it's looking at who are you as a person. And for us at the time where we launched this, we had a lot of time with people, and so people knew who we were.

Joe Vacanti: I guess I would encourage the entrepreneur to say, "Who are you as a person? How do you treat people and how have you treated people? Do you just have relationships with people from what you can get from them? Or are you a person who invests in people, cares about people?" Because for us, when we first launched the organization, there are people who jumped on board, didn't even know what we were doing because they knew who we were, and the kind of people we were. I guess first look at yourself and say, "What kind of person are you? Also, what's your motivation and what's your why for doing it?" What was compelling us was we believe Jesus when he said, "Love your neighbor as yourself." And so you have to ask, "Well, who's my neighbor?"

Joe Vacanti: And so if I have a friend... You guys. I just met you guys, but Darren, if you were thirsty, I wouldn't spoke up to you and say, "Why Buddy? Let me pray for you." I'd probably give you something to drink. That's going to actually help you. And so our motivation just really flows out of his command and we believe him. That we should love our neighbors. So as far as the networks, what's cool is when you lead out, people will come to you. And I would say people come to us with gifts all the time. I remember when we first started our organization, I was doing all the accounting. So I am a type A, I am a very organized person.

Nate Benson: I wouldn't gather that.

Joe Vacanti: Well, I was a pharmacist student.

Nate Benson: Yeah, that's why.

Joe Vacanti: But I always put off goofy because that's actually fun, you know. But believe it or not, very organized person. So I was doing all the accounting, but we knew this could be long term. There was a young lady who came to us and said, "Hey, I'd like to get involved in the organization, but I don't know what I can do."

Joe Vacanti: So I was like, "Well what are you passionate about? What do you like doing?" She says, "Well, I'm an accountant." And we were just like, "Well, good. We need one of those." And another friend of ours who don't live here now but came on a trip and he's like, "Hey, what can I do? What do you like doing?" Well, he had served in the military and he knew how to actually do the GPS mapping. So we said, "Hey, you can help GPS map all our wells in Africa." And so with his partnership we were able to go over there and GPS locates.

Joe Vacanti: If you go on our website, you can actually click on and see where all our wells are. So as our organization has grown, it has been the strength of the people who have gotten involved and we just found out what are your gifts? It hasn't been us forcing relationships or forcing. So I would say that an entrepreneur, people see through enough. If you're inauthentic and you're just using someone for their gifts, people see through that. People don't want to be a part of that. So I would say, look at your friends,

look who's coming around you, ask them what they're passionate about, ask them what they're gifted in and then release them into those gifts.

Darren Treadway: That's awesome. Through those networks you developed, you said you took those to Sierra Leone, you built there by the same strategy, right? Coming and saying, "I want to help." And them giving back to you, that kind of reciprocity we see in relationships. Through that you met... Kate, I'm going to tell everyone who I'm talking to because they can't see me talk. You met a female chief. We're coming up on a conference in inclusion here in May and we have Barb Stegman, who's also a social entrepreneur, speaking.

Darren Treadway: I'm going to ask you a question about female leadership challenges, and I've never been to Sierra Leone, you've had an opportunity to interact with a female chief there. Do you see similarities in the challenges? Or is it more difficult there? Or more difficult here kind of?

Kate Vacanti: Yeah, I would say I actually think it's a lot of the same. I think a lot of it depends on you as a female leader, being able to kind of rise above that. We happened upon her by accident. In a country of Sierra Leone, they have these paramount chiefs, so they have a democracy, but also still the old chieftom system, and the chiefs speak into the politics and are really involved. And so out of about 20 paramount chiefs, there probably is a little bit more. So they're kind of like governors of a region. I think at the time there were only two who are women, so we just happen, by luck or whatever you want to say that it is, something bigger than that too, to end up with one of these chiefs who approached us and saw what we were trying to do and gave us this land.

Kate Vacanti: And you know, it was just kind of one of those, you know, head nod, kind of like, wink things. Like he said, you know, "You're a female leader. I am. We kind of get each, so let's do something here together." And so I would just say that some of it is breaking down people's perceptions. What I've learned is that you just have to... You can't do things based on your background or if you're male or female or where you come from. You just have to say, "Okay, I have these opportunities in front of me. I know how I'm wired, I know how to bring people together. I'm just going to do it."

Kate Vacanti: And you really have to learn, not in a disrespectful way, but if somebody, male or female... Because a lot of times other women have a problem with women leaders just as much as sometimes men might have a problem with women leaders. And so what's been very helpful is there's every day, thousands of kids dying from not having clean water. And so you just focus on that and you're like, "We're going after this. You want to judge if I should be doing it or not doing it, we're going to do it. You want to join us, join us." So that has really helped.

Kate Vacanti: I don't know, I'd like to think if I was in some kind of other industry and had leadership desires and qualities that I could have risen up, but I'm not sure. I think because of it being within this, because I didn't step into this thing - I need to lead something - it was kind of kicking and screaming a little bit. But I think because of the issue that we're doing, that just helps to create such a focus and you just say, "Well, I'm going to have to get over it, and everybody else is going to have to get over it because we're going to go after this because there's kids dying and is not okay?"

Nate Benson: You know, startups experience difficulties across the board when getting off the ground. And even established companies, when they're trying to do business in countries that maybe aren't as established as doing business here in New York state, there's logistic nightmares. How, as a startup organization have you been able to overcome some of the challenges logistically? What are those problems logistically from the business side of things or just trying to get boots or trucks on the ground?

Kate Vacanti: Yeah. How many hours do we...

Nate Benson: Yeah, right?

Kate Vacanti: Yeah. Again, we were like, "We want to fund one well a year." That was our goal. So this thing literally exploded pretty quick, because on my first trip I came across a little boy who was dying from water related disease and we were going to film the drilling of our first well. So we accidentally filmed this experience of meeting this little boy. All of a sudden the statistics became a person and we brought that back, and then next year 15 wells were funded. And then all of a sudden we're going back and seeing the wells and finding kids who are street kids. And now we need to do a children's home. Now we need to educate these kids. Now this chief is giving us 30 acres of land. And it just was like this onion and so many layers.

Kate Vacanti: And in each one of those steps we faced nightmares that made us want to want to say, "We need to stop." But again, like I said before, I think that just focusing on, it doesn't matter if it's not for profit work, as long as, like Joe said earlier, it's something that you're passionate about. If you keep that as your center and your anchor, you're going to face each problem as it comes and we don't know everything. So we search for people, who's doing something, who's doing it better, who's already gone before us in this, and share the problem that we're having.

Kate Vacanti: Look for advice, be humble to say, "Don't be afraid of making a mistake," because we faced a lot of that too. Where best intentions, and if you can admit, "Okay, that was really dumb." Okay, let's laugh about it and let's figure out how to not do that again, and let's apologize where we need to apologize and move forward. I would say we've just faced the problems as we've come. I mean, I could detail them out to... The most dramatic I would say, is we were facing some challenges with the quality of our wells being drilled, and some of that was in the equipment of the company that we were hiring to drill.

Kate Vacanti: It had limited capacity because Sierra Leon has a dry season, so you can drill to a certain depth three quarters of the year, but if you don't drill on the dry season or drill deep enough, then the wells will go dry for a couple of months. That's really terrible because now people then used to drinking clean water and they're going back to the stream, which is even worse than just drinking from the stream all the time.

Kate Vacanti: So through convoluted things that don't make sense, we ended up getting a million dollar drill rig donated to us that can reach further depths so that we can hit two aquifers, they're called, so that the wells will never go dry. Sounds wonderful. We get it shipped over there, it's en route and next thing we know Ebola hit Sierra Leon. Now the CDC, everybody shutting it down. You can't go in. Well, we didn't have any well drillers of our own. We had identified somebody, but we needed to bring a drilling consultant in

to help train the guys on this particular million dollar rig that we didn't want to break. Well, so now he can't go in because of Ebola.

Kate Vacanti: Now this drill rig is sitting on our campus. Finally towards the end of Ebola, I say to our board and to some people, I say, "Look, there's more people dying from not having clean water than are dying from Ebola. We have to go. We have to get this going." And the CDC had gotten a little bit more flexible about letting people in. I knew if I said I would go, the drilling consultant would come with us. So we decided to do that. We're excited. We're finally, after all these years of challenges of wells not being the quality we want them to be, despite best efforts, we're going to do it.

Kate Vacanti: Turn the machine on, day one, it starts on fire because what happened? Rats got inside of it while it was sitting, right? Why wouldn't they? And they built a nest. Next thing we know I look over and one of our mechanics is dumping water on the machine. And I'm like, "I'm not mechanically inclined, but I don't think you want to be putting water on an engine." And it was just literally thing after thing after thing. And we were there for almost two weeks, and I wish it was a happy story to say that we drilled that well but it didn't happen. They finally drilled, it was crooked, couldn't get the pipes down.

Kate Vacanti: Then they disconnected the drill bet the wrong way. Next thing you know the drill bit falls down into a 100 foot hole, that's only eight inches wide, so there's no way you're getting that out. And I mean, it was nightmare, after nightmare, after nightmare. And I have to come home and tell this donor who gave us this million dollar drill rig, because I felt like we owed it to him, "Just a reminder, we told you we weren't well drillers. That's why we brought this consultant in, and we made a mess of things."

Kate Vacanti: He literally laughed at us and I said, "Thank you very much." Because he had done a startup business himself, he's like, "Well, that was a good lesson and we're just going to keep going and try again." So that's kind of a story that explains how we've kind of persevered through each and every one of the many of those challenges.

Joe Vacanti: Yeah. On a practical level for people listening, there are two, I think, decisions you have to make and it starts with making up your mind. You've got to make up your mind, you've got to say, "Why am I doing this?" And for us the compelling why has been, there are many people in the world today that are experiencing unjust suffering. And all you got to do is personalize it. And you imagine that that's your friend, that someone you... A parent, someone you know and you think if that was them and they were over there, no matter how difficult it is, I'm getting up and I'm doing this.

Joe Vacanti: So the first thing is you have to have a compelling why, otherwise it's going to be tough. You will always have problems and then critics. And so what you do have to do is make up your mind about how am I going to deal with critics? Because they're going to come. In advance, you have to recognize you can't control what other people think, and you can't waste emotional energy trying to answer all your critics. And a quote that my wife and I, we have hanging in our office at home, it's by Theodore Roosevelt.

Joe Vacanti: I'm sure you've heard it before, but he says "It's not the critic who counts nor the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who's actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes

short again and again because there is no effort without error and shortcoming. Who does actually strive to do the deeds. Who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends himself in a worthy cause, who at best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement and who at the worst, if he fails at least fails while daring greatly so that his place shall never be with the cold and timid souls who neither know victory or defeat."

Nate Benson: I can't follow that one up, so that's on you Darren.

Darren Treadway: Thanks.

Nate Benson: All right. I think there's been a number of words and things you've used to describe yourselves and your endeavor. You've used the word humility quite often, you've used the word passion. I think the idea of servitude or service is inherent in what you're trying to do. Trying to help other people around the world. All of those are echoes of things like servant leadership, that we talked about now. Shared leadership, as you talk about the humility to give to other people and let them do what they're good at. I'm going to ask you a question. All of those are kind of based on the idea of some sort of spiritual undertaking, and...

Nate Benson: To what degree or in what ways is your faith, I know you have another job, but to what degree does your faith inform you about the way you lead?

Joe Vacanti: Yeah. I think everything about what we do stems directly from our faith. And so my wife and I, I'm a pastor and we don't hide that from people. People know that about me. Just look at my social media and my stuff, and you know right away. It actually is the genesis of who we are. Who you believe in or who you... Everyone has a source they pull back to and they look at, so whatever that role model is... For us, it's Jesus. We look at his model and we literally try to follow his ways. That really for us is the inspiration. When you think about the words you said, service, humility, love, giving, I mean those are all things that...

Joe Vacanti: And even if you aren't a religious person, but you know of what Jesus did, you would have labeled those things of him as a person. And so honestly our faith and our faith in him is the genesis for who we are and why we do what we do.

Nate Benson: Scaling something like this, all businesses have the scale. What's the methodology in which you guys want to scale? Like you said, you wanted to start out by just building one well per year. You built 15. Obviously, scale is inherent in what you're trying to do, so how do you manage that? Especially like I said earlier, in a country that is struggling with development? If they don't have a road to get into the village, you're not going to be able to get a truck in. What are some of the challenges been from a scaling standpoint and what have you learned that maybe other startups or entrepreneurs would learn from?

Kate Vacanti: Yeah. I think that the biggest challenge in scaling is finding the right people because we want to find the right people, find people that are better than us at a certain task. I know you start off, you're doing everything, right? You're the accountant, which he's really good at, but you know you're doing everything and that's not sustainable long haul as it grows. On this side of the ocean, it's been a little bit easier to find people that

come in and we can fit them with what their talents are. Over there, the challenge has been, first of all, we're about five hours from the capital, so there's only two major cities there.

Kate Vacanti: And then there's smaller ones after that. So we're in an incredibly remote area. In a country where only about 1% of the population has the opportunity for higher education, to find highly qualified people is a challenge, then to find people that are willing to come down that maybe have gotten out of the nitty gritty, difficult village life. Now you're educated, and you don't want to go back and live there. That's been a challenge too. So we've had to do things like staff housing and educating their children for free, and some different programs like that to make it appealing and not even appealing in a way like they're like holding out on wanting to help their people but just provide them the most basic facilities, so that they can be comfortable to come and serve their own people.

Kate Vacanti: But I will say, a couple of years ago something shifted and we started getting tons of applicants and people that wanted to come and leave city life down, not only for this steady job, which we're able to provide, but because they're passionate about their own people. You can feel frustrated at first. Like, "Where are the people that are passionate for their own people?" They're there. You just have to find them and provide them the basic facilities and then you see them take it off from there. And we find out by accident that some of our teachers, because we have homes for kids that are orphans, and then we find out that some of our teachers have noticed that the kids in their classroom don't have parents.

Kate Vacanti: And so next thing they're taking them in and using 100% of their salary to you take care of these kids, on top of being teachers at our school and educating. Or we'll be there on a weekend and be like, "What's all that noise at the school? School's not going on right now." And they're like, "Oh yeah, we know. But some of these kids are still behind. They've been out of school for years. The teachers are volunteering on the weekends to be there all day." I think the biggest challenge in scaling is the right people.

Kate Vacanti: And if you're patient enough, if you don't get knocked down by the bad people that you find on both sides, because people will come around that have bad motives regardless of what country or where you're operating. But if you can persevere through that, you know that whole thing, the cream does rise to the top and you find those people, and you unleash them into what their passion is, then they will attract more people like them.

Nate Benson: As we wrap up, the one question I haven't asked yet, that I'm always fascinated by these answers, how did you come up with the name?

Kate Vacanti: You want to share that one? Since you're the voice of it.

Joe Vacanti: I'll have to just bring it up. You can edit this later, right?

Nate Benson: Sure.

Kate Vacanti: He's like, "Oh yeah, we [inaudible 00:30:48]."

Joe Vacanti: I got to get something ready because my phone's off. Okay.

Kate Vacanti: Are you going to warn them?

Joe Vacanti: No.

Darren Treadway: Warn them?

Nate Benson: Oh, boy.

Darren Treadway: Put it as a trigger warning. Okay.

Joe Vacanti: Yes. So, how we came up with the name was... What was one we recognized, you don't give people dignity, you just affirm it. And we learned that from somewhere. Someone. So I have not take credit for that. I don't remember who said it though. But that's true. These are real people. They're smart people. And so that's why the word let them was important, because it was... They can pull themselves out if they have the opportunity. You know, if you're in a prison cell and you've got chains on your legs, chains on your arm, someone's holding you back. They can't do much. But maybe it's just you have a key in your hand that someone's given you, and say, "Hey, you're a fellow man. I'm going to unlock one of your chains." And they actually can get themselves out.

Joe Vacanti: So the idea of let them was, these are great people. They just need this first opportunity. For us, it was clean water. They can't even live and survive, and even get out of whatever they're trying to get out of, unless they have the basic need. So that was the let them, and the laugh out loud basically came from, once again finding people's gifts. So I was actually born with a really weird laugh and my laugh made friends and it made enemies. You either liked my laugh in high school or you hated it. And so working with youth, one of the kids one day said, "Oh man, if I can get your laugh on a ringtone, I would get it." And I was like, "Really?" And so we talked about it and we thought, we work with youth and they actually do want to help and be a part of solving the world's problems, but they don't have money, but they can raise awareness.

Joe Vacanti: So we thought if we can get my laugh on a ringtone and then kids can download it. And the idea was people would download this ringtone. You can still download it right now. You'll have to actually go on the iTunes store and download it. It's still available. And you put my ringtone on your phone. And then when your phone goes off, literally if you guys do this, people will look at you and go, "What is that noise?" And then it gives you an opportunity, empowers you to tell the story. I'm just going to play the ringtone.

Speaker 5: Laugh out loud.

Joe Vacanti: And so that's kind of how we came up with it. It was basically use what you got and that's what I was born with. So, we just used it and that's my kids on the back end of that saying laugh out loud. So that's kind of how we spread the word and spread the awareness. It still works today. My phone still goes off at places that people go, "What is that?" And it's like, "Well, let me tell you what it is." So it's an opportunity to actually pass on the story. That's kind of how we came up with the name with let them laugh out loud.

Nate Benson: That's fantastic. That's a great starter story. For those who want to assist, participate, and learn more, get involved, how can they do that?

Kate Vacanti: Well they can go to our website, letthemlol.com, but then we also felt early on that this needed to be personal. So, Sierra Leone is about 3,000 miles away. So how do we connect this community here with a community there? So we actually opened a volunteer center up in Clarence, and people can come in and pack meals that go to the kids in Sierra Leone. We also give those out locally. We've partnered with the food bank and some other organizations working with refugees. Every Thursday from nine in the morning until seven at night, and Saturdays nine to one, people don't have to sign up, they can just drop in, see what's going on there.

Kate Vacanti: We do clothing drives that obviously the summer clothes go to Sierra Leone. Winter clothes go locally. And it's a great way for families, people, we've had sorority groups, different kind of groups come in, businesses will come in as team building to pack meals. We've got videos and pictures and stuff from Sierra Leone in the background.

Nate Benson: Well, Kate, Joe, thank you very much for joining us on the podcast. Congratulations on everything you're doing. I think it's fantastic work. Darren, good luck wrapping up your semester and we'll catch you up down the road, huh?

Darren Treadway: Soon. Yeah.

Nate Benson: Cool. Thanks guys.

Kate Vacanti: Thank you.

Joe Vacanti: Thank you.

Nate Benson: I want to thank Joe and Kate for joining me on the podcast this week along with Darren Treadway as my co-host for this episode of Latitude that was presented by the University of Buffalo School of Management Center for Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness. Make sure you check out all of the episodes of Latitude on your favorite podcasting app and head on over to Apple Podcasts and leave a five star review. For 43 North, I'm Nate Benson and we'll see you with the next one.