



**Kerrin:** Hello, and welcome to the Untapped Philanthropy podcast. **I'm your host and Fluxx co-founder, Kerrin Mitchell.** I've spent my career exploring technology's role and amplifying impact within our social sector, and more specifically, helping funders to learn to leverage technology and data to connect and better serve our collective causes, constituents, and communities.

In this podcast series, my team and I will profile social sector leaders, public figures, philanthropists, and industry futurists to explore this fascinating intersection of funding, technology, and policy. We're here to analyze the most critical and formative topics and trends that shape philanthropy both today and tomorrow. We hope this series leaves you inspired to think and act through a more collective and visionary lens.

**This week, I'm thrilled to welcome President and CEO of Drive agency, Jesse Tolkan. Jesse, thank you so much for joining us.**

This episode is a great change for us. Oftentimes, we talk to a lot of folks on the philanthropic programmatic side, and I am loving that we get to dive into the world of policy with you and your efforts with the Drive Agency which pun intended, drives expansive change in the world through transformative social impact. And I could not be more excited to have you on. So tell us about Drive. And by the way, congrats on that new role.

**Jessy:** Well, thank you so much! Drive Agency is a new force in the world. But the work is built off the last 20 years that I have spent as a campaigner and a movement builder. Drive Agency, we like to say, is not an agency, but is in the business of driving agency, in everybody from citizens to CEOs.

I have found over the course of my career, that when we can unlock agency in individuals in civic engagement and advocacy, there is a world of possibility that's out there. And we work to help philanthropy understand the importance of what it means for everyday people and citizens to have agency in imagining and executing solutions to the world's biggest problems. At its beating heart of what drive agency is all about. We raise money and build movements on everything from climate change to women's rights to global health. I think Drive Agency is here to get in the weeds with decision-makers in philanthropy to figure out how we can be more dynamic in funding more robust strategies for change in the world.

**Kerrin:** I think it's so compelling to because when we talk about the next generation coming up, who has this incredible ability to come and say, "how do I start to think in a larger way and make an impact at a grassroots level and change the way the hearts and minds work?" It is so interesting, and I love that your career started back then as a grassroots student. So, in many ways, you're coming up through the learnings you've had over time, implementing them in, and then shaping the work of what you do today. So do you mind telling a little bit about your backstory, because I think it is one of the most compelling parts that make you so effective and so interesting in the space in terms of your approach?

**Jessy:** Yes, in fact, it's one of my favorite things to kind of reflect on – this really epic adventure, of advocacy and of movement building. I feel incredibly fortunate that at a really young age, I was able to experience firsthand the power of what happens when people come together to use their voice and their political will, and their power built together to make change.



So really, as a student at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is when I first learned and understood the title or the name of activist. I saw that there was this huge divide between young people's power as voters and how we were showing up in the political process. We had historically low numbers of direct civic participation. And yet, I am a part of one of the biggest most diverse generations in American history. And on the campus of the University of Wisconsin Madison, I found all these ways where we could flex our power as tuition payers, where we could flex our power as voters, where we could flex our power as students in a big academic system and find pathways to engaging students to show up at the voting booth and have real impact.

In fact, as a 19-year-old, I ran for the City Council, and I got elected because I did something nobody had ever done before. I asked students to participate in a municipal election. And you know, over the course of the past 20 years, those lessons I learned early on about the power of giving people an opportunity to engage in their own backyard, engage in elections, engage in issues that matter most to them, has really formed my view that there is no shortcut to building political will. And there's no shortcut to building power, to making lasting change on issues. And I've spent 20 years trying to help philanthropy understand that those are the types of strategies that will pay off massive dividends for so many years to come.

**Kerrin:** It's such an authentic way to build hearts and minds. And I think we saw even in the last election with Georgia, the ability to take things at that grassroots level, and roll them in what do they have the power to change. I think that's cool. And you brought that into the philanthropic space, that context of where it can be effective.

And how we as an industry need to look at it is something I think people are just starting to dabble more with, and to be honest, are opening their eyes up to kind of what could be. And I think that's something that we're seeing more. People are starting to look at policy approaches, instead of just saying, look, I do grantmaking, but the policy – and that you can't do grantmaking without policy change, you need to be able to buffer the two, otherwise, it doesn't stick. It doesn't last into your point; it doesn't it doesn't draw the masses forward.

So, I love that you're bringing it into the philanthropic space. And you more than anyone obviously knows that. There is a very, you know, specific part of campaigning and organizing all these things that need to kind of come together to make this happen. Can you share kind of a standout story where you targeted policy change in the philanthropic space? And kind of what are some of the types of things that you guys have been able to accomplish that Drive Agency?

**Jessy:** I'll tell a story that predates Drive Agency and continues in the Drive Agency moment. I am proud to have been a part of the climate change movement and working in the climate change sector for many years now. And just a couple of days ago we had a release of the IPCC report, which was scary and terrifying, and a call to arms around the world that we got to push harder than ever to enact strong policy change on climate. But an example of where philanthropy has such a powerful role to play here really starts about six and a half years ago, and I was proud to work together with the IKEA Foundation.

**Kerrin:** Yes, they are a client of Fluxx. So, there you go, we have a nice little connect.



**Jessy:** There you go. I have spent wonderful, beautiful hours filling out IKEA Foundation applications where these ideas came to life on the page and the IKEA Foundation saw prior to the Paris climate negotiations. Almost six years ago now we needed unprecedented leadership, from the business sector, from governments around the world, if there was any chance that the world was going to come together in Paris to sign the historic agreement to put our global path to addressing climate change on the right trajectory.

And what we proposed to the IKEA Foundation is we are going to need to build a movement. And we are going to need to create the conditions that allow decision-makers and key countries around the world that allow decision-makers in businesses to have the support in the space to go further and do more than they've ever done ever before. And how we do that it's not just calling up heads of government, the heads of businesses, and saying that this is the moment it's showing them that their citizens and that their customers are expressing that this is a mandate right.

And that means going above and beyond the base of supporters that have always cared about climate change. It meant going deep in India and Brazil, and East Africa across Europe and identifying new constituencies, could we get the faith community to speak out loud about the need for bold action on climate change? Could we reach senior citizens about the importance of leaving a planet healthy enough to be able to sustain a healthy and vibrant life for their grandchildren? Could we go out there and make the business case that young consumers want to frequent the brands that are willing to take strong climate action? Well, for IKEA Foundation and for any philanthropy building a movement like that, it be scary business, so to speak.

You're going to go out, you're going to test hypotheses and messages about how to engage new audiences to be able to build the conditions for a huge political moment. That's like nothing we've ever seen before. And we said, yeah, IKEA Foundation, that's what we want to do. We want to experiment, and we want to form hypotheses. And then we want to share everything we've learned with absolutely everybody in the sector so that people can learn from what we did.

So, we can show whether there's a correlation between new voices and new audiences, and we can move the dial on policy. And we're thankful to the IKEA Foundation for their willingness to invest in this model of a climate lab. This enabled us along with the incredible folks at Purpose, my former company to develop expertise in the work of campaigning.

And what's so incredible is not only were we a small part of helping a historic agreement take place in Paris, that has catapulted the world towards some of the most aggressive solutions to climate change we've ever seen in history; but we're a part of that model of philanthropy, being willing to invest in movement building, invest in reaching new audiences. And yes, we believe in investing in the scary business of experimentation, has set a whole new standard of other philanthropies coming to the table and saying, you know what, we're not going to be able to get transformative change if we're not willing to push the limits if we're not willing to experiment. And it's been fun to work with everybody from the Gates Foundation to Robert Wood Johnson Foundation to others around the world to replicate that model and other issues.



**Kerrin:** And when you talk about the replication and this idea of taking something like the climate lab and giving it structural ways to get into either regional affiliate groups or whatever it be, I think that's just so powerful. And to be honest this grassroots structure of movements I think is absolutely the way I envision philanthropy in the next five years. I would hope we would meet and open groups and invite people in but also keep groups that need to have sort of a closed structure to be able to share information and move forward.

Anyway, all of this though, this idea of putting forward these structures and these changes kind of hinge on our ability to execute on policy, campaigns, and fundraising.

Philanthropy hinges on two soft skills to do that, which is influencing and obviously telling a good story that elicits a response and convinces people to act. So, when you're thinking of replicating this model moving forward, how do you create these compelling events, this sense of urgency and collective mindset to help funders and philanthropists see themselves as stakeholders in activist work?

**Jessy:** I think it's an excellent question. And I think a lot about the architecture of change. And related to the architecture of change, I think about the architecture of movements, because I believe movements and public will are so important in ultimately affecting long-term change. And the truth is that movements are born out of moments. And moments are these things that happen day in and day out in people's lives.

They are the events that are unfolding such as natural disasters, pandemics, economic conditions. All of this is about being able to meet people in the moment that they're at, with the emotions they're feeling. And giving them an opportunity to do something with that. This is an art form that requires a degree of speed and a degree of readiness.

The pace at which philanthropy tends to work, I think that's completely fair and correct. So I agree with you. The world in the world is unfolding, especially today, in in such rapid, rapid ways, and we're consuming information. And we're, we're having reactions to things. And sometimes they're seconds or minutes or days or even weeks when we can capture the public's attention, and channel that attention into something that looks like a mandate and support for change. And these models creating the ability to see a natural disaster happened in Europe, like European flooding, or forest fires in California one day, and be able to work with grassroots partners to bring that issue to life in the form of social content within days that enables everyday Americans to say, I'm terrified by this, I absolutely want to see my government and corporations take action so that we don't have to live in this state of fear.

That's what I would describe as riding these waves of what's happening in the world and translating that into action, which enables us to give decision-makers and policymakers the push they need to act. So how do you do that? If you're a grantmaker maybe you give out grants twice a year, right? Right now, can't give out money at the speed at which events are unfolding in the world. I think that's where we must start looking at building an infrastructure giving organizations and grassroots partners and stakeholders, the resources with the flexibility to react to moments that they're able to grab the surfboard and ride that wave that turns it into a real movement moment for change.



**Kerrin:** And I think that's a good point, because it's actually twofold. It's that and it's also reforming our processes. Because if we're not able to react to the very things that we say we're supporting in philanthropy, and I speak of this as a grant technology solution, that ability to move quickly, impedes our ability to help with everything, whether it's disaster relief or COVID.

So, it's a process discussion; and I think that there is a groundswell occurring right now on the foundation side to say, how can we start removing some of these barriers to getting things done quicker? So, it's a combination of that and making it more open and having general operating instead of, you know, isolating it down to restricted funds. So, I'm absolutely with you on that, too.

**Jessy:** I agree 100%. And I know it can be a scary proposition as a grantmaker to go to the board and say we've given out these grants. And I'm going to exaggerate a bit, right, but we've given out these grants, and I cannot tell you precisely what we will get out on the other end of the grants, right, that that just seems like a totally implausible way to go.

But we have to kind of reshape that thinking in order to then also reshape process, which is we're investing in the mosaic of actors and players that have access to the constituencies of individuals to be in discourse with to be in conversation with to mobilize in the right moments, to be able to seize the most effective opportunities for change, and to be in an open dialogue, not like you're not going to hear what happened with this grant until I submit a grant report.

To be in really active dialogue about what's happening. I mean, I often talk to my friends about my WhatsApp conversations with donors and program officers across the world, because I want them to jump when I see a moment. You know, what we're seeing during the social listening we're doing right now is that the release of the IPCC climate report on Monday, is causing a lot of fear and a lot of anxiety. So, what we want to do is connect that fear and the anxiety and convert anxiety into will for policy and business solutions. This is how we're going to make that happen. And being in that dialogue with philanthropy is awesome, because then philanthropy gets to come back and say, hey, I've got these six other grantees that I think will really benefit from participating in that activity. Could you call them up and get them involved?

**Kerrin:** I think that's interesting and answers my earlier point – how do you create a compelling event? The point is that compelling events are already here. But it's the idea about how do we create either a mechanism for philanthropists to take action, offer a visibility into movements, or even just help them to align to like-minded people so that they can start thinking differently. So, I think that's a very important thing that you pointed out. So, let's talk about the coordination around these compelling events, I mean, obviously, we have this amalgam of activist nonprofits, corporate, private, millions of donors, all those good things coming in.

You mentioned WhatsApp, it's super interesting. What are the ways you look at this collaboration? Again, if you had a magic wand, how would you start looking at collaboration in a more real-time responsive way?



**Jessy:** I think one of the silver linings of the pandemic moment that we're all living through, is that our networks are leaning into a whole set of tools and technologies that are making us better collaborators than we've ever been before. We might be more distributed, but I think we're putting our heads together in smarter, more efficient, and more effective ways than ever before.

Something that I love seeing happening right now. There's a big discussion in the United States right now about what does it mean to build back better? In fact, it's not just American conversation, it's a global conversation. How are we building our care infrastructure, our economy, and life for workers? How are we investing in climate solutions, and healthcare?

And some of the really cool ways that I see networks collaborating, is on Slack channels that might include 30, or 40 different nonprofit or grassroots advocacy organizations that are out there testing content, and messages to see how are Americans in different parts of the country and world reacting to different messages about building back better, what resonates? Where is their hope?

I put a bunch of content and ads in the world last week about what it means to invest in a clean energy economy so that we have clean air to breathe. And I did that in a bunch of places, and I shared the content on Slack. And I shared all the metrics of how it's working. So that 30 or 40, other organizations around the country get to build off that. What I think is exciting is that we're sharing how our strategies and activity is working and it's leveraging philanthropic dollars and investment, hopefully, in a better way than we've ever seen before. So that in real-time every philanthropic dollar spent on a strategy can be shared with other organizations so that we're improving, and we're pivoting to new strategies in real-time.

And to kind of eliminate this idea that it's about my organization performing better than another organization. I mean, Drive Agency is in the collaboration business, right? We're here to bring unlikely actors together to build more power and influence than could ever be built without that collaboration. And I think philanthropy encouraging that is, is awesome. And I also think that kind of the advocacy and campaigning sector is kind of showing, by example, the power of collaboration on overdrive.

**Kerrin:** I think the other thing that oftentimes we look at for foundations is data. There are no common data models or structures in place, so grantees must want to do five data pieces to share data amongst 10 different funders. But when you can do cross-funder analysis, you can start to engage grantees in a different way.

You know, perfection is not going to help anyone. But I think that as technologists we need to examine data. How do we look at API structures, integrated models? How do we take the cross-section of information we have from our donors and connect it to our grantmaking beyond just the typical ways of saying, here's the payment amount? How do we look at that through DEI?

So, I am hearing from my side of the equation, that same interest in saying what can we really do, and it's nice to be a thought partner in that discussion. I think technology has a seat at the table to help enable these pieces. And then the policy part. That's where hearts and minds are coming to play. So, it's nice that all of us have a footing right now to be able



to move things forward alongside some of the more academic conversations that typically take place.

So, I'm with you there. Tell me does philanthropy struggle sometimes to pick up the pace? What do you do when you run into those challenges? And where do you think there are perhaps opportunities to course correct?

**Jessy:** You know, this is something that I've spent a lot of time thinking about and talking to individual donors and philanthropists with. You know, I guess I should preface all of this by saying that I have been so fortunate in 20 years of work to engage with hundreds of millions of dollars of philanthropic resources that have contributed to transformative change in the world and would not have been possible without those dollars. So, it's easy to complain. And it's easy to say what's wrong.

And, you know, we're so grateful for the resources that are out there. The irony for me is that if you think about where the source of wealth came from, for most of our philanthropies, and foundations to be able to exist, it came through the success of all different kinds of enterprise in business. And this is interesting because there is no successful businessperson in the world that will tell you, the way they successfully built their business was by making sure that everything they tried worked, and was successful, right?

Businesses are built through so much trial and error, through failure, followed by success, followed by a lot of failure and character building. And so it's interesting to try to understand and follow the through-line of when you take, dollars that were achieved in successful business practice, where there had to be risk and experimentation and failure. And now those dollars are parked inside of philanthropy. And there's kind of a new mentality that is said in which is, every dollar that gets spent through that philanthropy, we must show it created impact in the world, we have to be successful, these dollars are so precious, right? But just like in business, the solutions to these complex problems we're trying to address in the world, it's never going to be a sure bet.

**Kerrin:** Right? And it's always going to be a complex answer that we need to hit on for many different levels.

**Jessy:** Yeah, it's always going to be a complex answer. And it's going to require so much pivoting along the way. I think the slowness comes from a desire to spend those dollars as effectively as possible to make the best bets to hope for the largest chance of success humanly possible. And those are all wonderful characteristics. But I actually think there is a much bigger risk in moving slow, missing moments, failing fast, and being able to learn from those mistakes and pivot in our strategies to be able to advance solutions to these complex problems.

And, you know, I was afforded over the course of this past year to do a lot of work responding to this completely surreal moment of COVID and misinformation in the world. And we have so benefited from the philanthropies who said, you know, go experiment, test, let's see what, what people react to, let's see how we can bring communities together, let's see how we can forge new partnerships because it's only in the doing that the learnings come to life.



**Kerrin:** I would agree with you for the third time on this. But the idea of risk aversion is, I think, the hardest thing that gets in people's way. And I was having this discussion this morning with a partner at a complimentary technology platform. We were talking about how with VCs, for example, they're investing or private equity guys, they come in and invest, and they'll take the big bet, they'll take the risk.

And it must be a balance of big and small. And I think oftentimes, it is easy for, you know, our space to kind of rely on what they know, and relationships are critical. But there are some things about big impact makers that in the same way that a startup would come in and have innovative ways of approaching and tackling issues that need to be brought forward and having a space to your point to explore that.

Get closer to some of those trends and potentially large impact players that may be small in the space. You know, it's something I really hope that we as a technology platform, especially at Fluxx can start to bring light to. And my hope is as we start to share data through whatever it is, whether it's grantee collectors, funder collectives, that those sort of, you know, those nuggets come into a place where they can be picked up and brought in. So, I'm actually excited about where technology can assist with some of this, to be able to show the impact data and then broadcast that through based on funder and collective. So yeah, I'm hoping to have a, an amplification role for sure.

**Jessy:** I think the amplification role of technology and platforms like Fluxx and others can play such a critical role and is so essential. Something that I talk a lot about is the fact that philanthropy is also limited by the partners it knows and the partners that can see. They're the established players who know how to get access to philanthropy who have the capacity to fill out a Fluxx application. And yet, those visible actors are one relatively small slice of the ecosystem of players that are required to deliver on the impact and change that we want to see in the world.

And, you know, I think there are, you know, 10, or 15, layers deeper of partners, right? Adjacent issue partners and different kinds of organizations, we wouldn't think as the typical grantee that when brought in, allow kind of unusual new solutions to exist. And so, you know, if philanthropy finds the way to work with new partners, how do we take that work, and make it visible to the rest of the philanthropic network out there, so that we are growing and investing in building a much bigger pool of applicants and participants for the change making that we're trying to affect in the world? And there's no question that, that technology platforms and technology tools have a critical role to play in that.

**Kerrin:** I was talking with one of our funders about this. And they had mentioned that exact thing where their foundation has a specific risk threshold that's a lot lower than perhaps others. And what he would do is simply get the information and then forward it over to another Foundation saying, "hey, I love these guys, my board will never approve this. So, you guys need to fund them because they are spectacular."

And that's what they look at and say, that's something we can do. Like those are just some short-term things. So, I would love to see technology step into that. So, I love it, you're





supportive of that I'm going to come to bug you about it once I get my brain together on this with the product.

So, let's kind of fast forward here. What does this look like, going forward? What do we have this kind of future of philanthropy influence policy? What does this look like for you? What's your vision for how we respond to the moment that we're in today? And we'll be in for the foreseeable future, but where do we need to be headed tomorrow?

**Jessy:** That is a really fun question. You know, I think there are so many lessons for us to take from these last 18 months that are unlike any 18 months any of us have ever lived through before. You know, some of those lessons are of the resilience and dynamism have the power of advocacy and the power of campaigners to be able to continue to move forward during difficult conditions.

Also, I think, you know, we should give props to the foundations and philanthropies out there who were willing to pivot and say, sometimes we've got to ditch our tried-and-true strategic established plans. And we've got to make more dollars available quicker because the moments are unfolding in front of us. I think my fear is that these new ways of working, deeper and better collaboration amongst advocacy partners and funders, perhaps increased risk appetite from funders to be willing to say we got to get money to the frontlines on these biggest issues as quickly as possible. I don't want any of that to go away.

I think that the ability to experiment more, the willingness to put more control, and more experimental power in the hands of advocacy actors that we've seen during the pandemic is essential. And if anything, we should turn that up. We should put that in overdrive as we look ahead. I also think that philanthropy will forever be organized I know in various topic areas and issue areas. I hope that this year has taught us just how intersectional so many different issues are right? That we can't have a conversation about building a more just and equitable world. We can't have a conversation about including more diversity, equity, and inclusion in our organizations and combating climate change. In a healthier society, we can't have those conversations in isolation from one another.

So, I'm really looking forward to program officers within philanthropies, organizations, across issues, and across disciplines, figuring out where they can come together in collaboration to kind of form those unlikely partnerships for change.

**Kerrin:** So, let's end this podcast on a rapid-fire note. I'm going to run through a series of short, quick questions, and I encourage you to respond with the very first thing that comes to your mind. Does that sound good? Living or deceased, name a person in history who you would like to sit down and have a meal with?

**Jessy:** Oh, that's a good one. I would have to say Harriet Tubman.

**Kerrin:** What do you think are the most important trending topics being discussed in philanthropy today?

**Jessy:** Diversity, equity, and inclusion! And we need to address the climate crisis and come out on the other end with a clean and just energy future.



**Kerrin:** If you could snap your fingers and instantly fix one of the world's most pervasive problems, which one would it be and why?

**Jessy:** Misinformation. If we could just get real information to our beautiful fellow citizens of the world, we'd be able to make much better solutions and decisions.

**Kerrin:** Jesse, thank you so much for joining the podcast today and sharing more about yourself your work.