



6 no's to a 7 figure YES! with Bruce Morrow
Season 1, Episode 1

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Transcript

Speaker 1 (00:00):

Welcome to asking for good a podcast for people who want to make a difference, hear stories from seasoned nonprofit professionals and volunteers on how to begin or further a career in making the world a better place.

Katie Pooser (00:15):

Hello, I'm Katie. Pooser a career fundraiser committed to making the nonprofit sector better

Amélie Poojary (00:21):

And I'm Amélie Poojary. I work with foundations in the us and abroad to make the world a better place.

Katie Pooser (00:28):

We're thrilled to be talking today with Bruce Morrow about a key revenue source in the nonprofit sector. That's institutional giving am. You've got a background in institutional giving. Tell us what it's all about. What does it even mean? When we say institutional giving,

Amélie Poojary (00:46):

Depending on the nonprofit institutional giving can include grants from foundations, corporations, and governments. It makes up more than 20% of philanthropic dollars in the us. You've likely heard of the for and work fellow foundations. And they are examples of an institutional funder foundations can become great partners and connectors, and they make a difference not only as a funder, but also as conveners and for partners, it's particularly exciting to their develop. These kinds of relationships. Institutional fundraising also involves a fair amount of writing about organizational strategies or specific projects, which is something I personally enjoy doing in the first segment. Bruce is going to share

how it got started a nonprofit sector and an example of a corporate gift. So as we just discussed institutional giving includes foundation, government, and corporate giving, but corporate funding is usually what people think about when they think of revenue for nonprofits. In fact, a corporate giving makes a less than 5% of all philanthropic giving. Some organizations rely heavily on corporate giving while others depend exclusively on government grants and individual giving. As you'll hear in the conversation with Bruce, these gifts can be transformed. They can make big impact. And I often multiyear partnerships,

Katie Pooser (02:30):

Bruce Morrow brings over 25 years of fundraising and nonprofit experience. He's an accomplished writer with his works. Having appeared in the New York times. Welcome Bruce to asking for good, where we talk to real nonprofit Enders about their important work.

Bruce Morrow (02:50):

Oh, hi. Thanks so much for having me here.

Katie Pooser (2:51): It's great to have you now, you and I work together at a global youth development organization, and I invited you to join us today because I remember you having great insight about the way institutional giving can be leveraged to do more than just fund programs. Instead, your work was all about strategic partnership and how the funder and the nonprofit can realize the change they both wanna see in the world. Another theme I saw in your work was the idea that a no from a funder was a no for just this project or this timeline. It didn't mean no forever. You had a professional tenacity about you. That was excellent for building long term relationships. Do you consider yourself someone who landed in philanthropy or did you thoughtfully poise yourself for a career in the nonprofit sector?

Bruce Morrow (03:45):

Most and many of the things I've done in my life have been, you know, one thing leading to another. So I never thought I was going to be working in philanthropy or fundraising. I never really thought I was gonna be working for a nonprofit organization. After I received a MFA of creative writing from Columbia university. I had to make a decision about what to do with my life. And at that time I was working in a lab during research and I had just done all this stuff to get a MFA degree. So I wanted to do things that were closer to writing. And one of my professors said, why don't you just go into the literary arts, nonprofit world? And that'll get you closer to the thing you love to do, which is really how I ended up working at this organization called teachers and writers collaborative, as I was learning how to figure

out old of fundraising, foundations, grants Lois, which were letter of interest and things like that.

I also got to work with people like CK Williams and grace Paley the mine, Marcel, Marcel her co Sonya Sanchez, Robert Penske Tracy with Walter Mosley and like amazing people like Tony Morrison. So, wow. I did everything. So I did organized literary readings and I helped, you know, edit some things for the magazine. We also sometimes clean the bathrooms, you know, but I got to do some amazing, amazing things. So when this was, which was like the nineties a long, long time ago in another century I learned about the worldwide web and I was like, we need to do this and we need to make a website and we need to have computers and we need to have this. And so I got a grant from apple computers. They actually weren't giving us money, but they gave us a gazillion computers.

They gave us all this stuff to hook up to the internet, which most people didn't have at that time, all this stuff for email, which most people didn't have at this time. And I got to go to apple camp, which was this place in Marin county. And we just intensively learned about how to use the worldwide web. And then when I came back we created an e-commerce site where we could sell our books and magazines and we increased our our earned income, like by 500%. So we were selling more, sometimes we're even selling internationally. And and that was all from this, you know, project and grant from apple computers. It was kind of incredible.

Katie Pooser (06:28):

That sounds incredible. And the idea that you got to join into a corporate training as a nonprofit leader, I think is also a testament to what we see when we think about philanthropy being more than just a check or money.

Bruce Morrow (06:47):

Oh yeah. Oh, that's that's for sure. I mean, all donors, I think, you know, they have their own mission and their own guidelines and their own focus and really finding that alignment between the nonprofit and the donor is so key. And hopefully, you know, that relationship is about that, sharing that sharing of both your missions and making that alignment,

Katie Pooser (07:12):

This dovetails nicely into my next line of questioning. And that's really about direct fundraising asks. I'd love to hear about a memorable gift.

Bruce Morrow (07:22):

I've done so many different kinds of grants. Anything from, you know, you know, small thousand dollars grants that come every year after year, and you're just sorting them along to, you know, seven and eight figure grants. And, and that, that really does take a whole group effort. So, you know, I recently worked on seven figure grants from a large pharmaceutical company foundation. And we had to, you know, pitch the idea, create the concept papers, send the LOI and do it over, over and over and over again because when, you know, we're talking seven figures, it does take a lot to create a seven figure project, a seven figure program that really, really demands that much money go to the effort. So when we did this grant recently, I did about seven different concepts. And I don't mean just me. I mean, the CEO, the chief development officer, the program, people, we all were putting our heads together and <laugh> six times they said no.

So it was like, okay, but they always left the door open for us to come back, which was so great, cuz they could see how the, with their feedback, the program was developing and we were aligning. So that really that alignment, which I was talking about earlier is what's really, really key. And so with that feedback, we did come up with something that looked like, you know, this is a 6 million project and it's a multi-year project and it's going to go and it's going to start here and have a timeline. There is a logic model with outcomes and there's all those different parts of a proposal that are very, very solid and logical all the way down to the evaluation and showing your success of your program. And when you get a grant like that, it's sort of, if the organization, you know, it's 10 million or, you know, 20 million, 6 million grant is like transformative for that organization, you might have to hire new people. You might have to look at your organizational chart in a different way and and figure out, is there a better way to do this work, especially if it's gonna help you expand nationally. So that transformative grant you know, everybody wants to get them and have them like, oh yes, I, you know, pulled in a eight figure grant. But it is a big task to take on.

Bruce Morrow (09:55):

I like that you stayed the course, you said, they said no six different times, but on the seventh time they said, yes. And I wanna hear about what it was like as you were receiving feedback from the foundation and then working internally, were you activating different departments within a nonprofit organization? Were you in direct contact with different areas of work or departments at the corporate level?

Bruce Morrow (10:24):

All of the above, I would say. So being over, you know, depending on the size of your organization, you know, anything over a million dollars definitely has to involve the CEO president executive director because it is going to really come into the bottom line of your budget. And so we work with getting feedback from the funder and then coming back to

the office and having a deep brief and figuring out what were they trying to say? What did they mean? And so funny, cuz you could be in that kind of meeting. And each person has a D current point of view. And my job as the fundraiser, the grant writer is to take all those different scenarios that each person had and to figure out what exactly is going to change this proposal and make it better. So th that, that is just, it's like a very open ended organic process, but then you get those concepts down. You don't wanna spend too much time like trying to write it, but getting it down into a concept or an outline that you can share with people and say, am I heading in the right direction, give feedback. And so, you know, that's what I will do, like almost on a weekly basis, you know, because this will take, you know potentially, you know, seven months, eight months a year to get this you know, seven figure grant,

Katie Pooser (11:47):

One element of this grant that I don't know that we've covered yet, is that the final proposal included the stewardship of the funding for the previous years being included in the impact that this grant would ultimately have. And I think that's genius. And was it feedback from the corporation or was it your bright idea? Where did you get that idea to include the previous funding and what the company has already done as part of the story of this ask,

Bruce Morrow (12:21):

When I'm looking for that alignment with the mission of the donor, the foundation, the pharmaceutical company, it really is more than just going to their website. Looking at the language they're using is really looking at what kind of system they're created and then how can we become enmeshed in that system. So if we, we already had a grant from them and it, and it always looks great. If you can build upon some past work that you've done and then say, this is gonna transform that work into this way, you've already funded this and it's been so successful. It would be great if we could take that to the next level and then take that to the next level,

Katie Pooser (13:06):

Right. Those currently existing partnerships. How do you strengthen those instead of trying to go out and find new partners all the time?

Bruce Morrow (13:15):

Oh yes. You know, to have a partnership you know, is much more than just one grant, much more than just one year grant, but that collaboration and that relationship is definitely something to build on. So stewardship is always so important planned into my proposal for this funder and was planned in that we were gonna already have, I think it was calls meetings every two weeks. Because you know, it's a very big grant. We wanna

make sure that we're you know, on target, they wanna make sure we are on target and there's all these other things that can come up. So then we become advisors to them and they become advisors to us as we're both growing and doing this project together,

Katie Pooser (14:01):

I wanna dig into the moment of the ask. And you mentioned that it's a team effort, the CEO of your nonprofit organization was part of this. What role did that person play? They took the lead. You said, what does that look like when the CEO is the lead,

Bruce Morrow (14:18):

The CEO, meaning the lead is that they're really their primary relationship is at the C-suite level. I would say they are having a conversation that might be about the field at hand. And then from there, they're slowly coming to some consensus about some idea concept. And it's really important that that CEO is also sending that information back down to everybody else in the organization, especially the person working on the grant or the proposal or the, the donation strategy and so that they can start incorporating all of what they're learning into a new concept or a new request, or the getting to the ask. There is time that you have to build into getting to the ask. It doesn't happen immediate right. You have to, you know, guide them to almost that point when the, the funder goes, oh, isn't this a great idea?

And you're like, oh, that's exactly what we had in mind. <Laugh> and that becomes the ask that's right. But if you're having the CEO who is a good CEO, they will definitely delegate and making sure that all the people who have the certain kinds of strengths bring those strengths to that ask. Right. So if I'm the concept per person that writes and creates the, the, what would you say sort of like the foundation of the project or the scaffolding, the project in a certain way, that's really part of what I'm doing. And I know what happened before, and I know where we wanna go and all that stuff. And the there's the, the program lead, you know, who is the expert, the subject matter expert who is very, very important because then they know all of the intricacies of that, that subject that you might be trying address that. So everybody's sort of working together, whether it's a call or in a meeting putting together that presentation you know, making sure that you cover the, the 50,000 feet view of everything down to the some of the details. And then just getting to that appointment where that point, where you can find the alignment,

Katie Pooser (16:35):

The alignment with the nonprofit and the corporate funder.

Bruce Morrow (16:39):

Yes, exactly. That's really, that's the place where you want to go. And and of course it's oftentimes in some way on a foundation's website that could, you know, sometimes that's off behind, you know, it's, it, it always needs to be updated. So it might be a little behind, but you're really looking at how they actually conceptualize their giving and their interest and their guidelines.

Katie Pooser (17:06):

That's a great point that the website may not be up to date, or you may not be reading the website as the foundation sees it. Well, one point that you brought up about the fundraiser, being the person, building the scaffolding to create the ask makes me think that you probably spend a little bit of time coaching the other members of the nonprofit team, whether it be the CEO or the subject matter expert. Can you speak a little to what it looks like when you have to coach or dare I say, manage up

Bruce Morrow (17:46):

<Laugh> oh, oh yes. There's managing up. That is a very interesting thing to be aware of probably in almost any position when you're starting out, you know, as you're, you're the entry level person, the, the most difficult thing to really realize what you're doing and how to do it and make sure you're doing it well, it is to manage up so that you can manage expectations about, you know, what's going to happen. So you can get ahead of, of, of everything and say, oh, we need to prepare for this. If we're going to do a specific grant, we always have preliminary meetings where we discuss the, we have pre-meetings directly before the call. We have pre-meetings before we put that together, the presentation. And so that I'm always guiding, scheduling all of that into the whole development of the grant proposal.

And then after any meeting, you always have having a debrief and, and getting everybody's take on. What's been said, because lots of people see things differently and you can go, oh, this person got this, this person got that. And then putting that together, and I would send notes afterwards saying, this is what I got from this meeting and everybody's input on, on this and where do we need to go? That really, really is important. So that managing up is a lot about managing expectations and scheduling in enough time with the CEO or the manager above you to make sure that everything, all the, all the points are being, being met to get to that deadline for the, for the proposal being submitted for the ask that's being made.

Katie Pooser (19:38):

Great, great, one last question in this area that we're speaking about, this was a corporate foundation ask that you're speaking about, and it's so interesting, and I really appreciate

the transformative nature of the final gift. I'd like to go into the difference between independent or family foundations and corporate foundations and what your experience is in working with those types of organizations. And is there any difference, or is there a stark contrast?

Bruce Morrow (20:22):

The funny part is it's all of the above <laugh> <laugh> I wish I had one clear answer for everything, but I don't, it is really all of the above. So you have a private foundation and, you know, this is a, a private institution foundation that has its own management structure, its own guidelines and things, and that becomes so very, very clear. And then on the other end of the spectrum, you have that individual, whether they're doing it out of their home or whether they have a family office or whether they have a family foundation which could be similar to the family office that sort of helps the them and supports them as they're doing their giving. So the point is, is at, at the point when the people on the board become less family and becomes more from the field that you become more of an institutional private foundation, I think that's the, the inflection point is, is that, that family office, family foundation oftentimes it's the makeup of the board. If there's outside specialists that are become part of the board, then it's becoming more institutionalized and becoming more of a, of a, of a private foundation.

Katie Pooser (21:46):

That's an excellent observation about the inflection point. We've heard from Bruce about the beginning of his career in the nonprofit sector, all the way to a recent seven figure successful fundraising ask. Now let's take a minute to go over some of the big takeaways that we're hearing from the interview so far.

Amélie Poojary (22:05):

I loved Bruce just description of the group effort. It takes to get to the, ask the importance of communicating with the donor, but also internally about where there is alignment and how these efforts take time and persistence. We'll speak more about stewardship in over areas of fundraising going forward as well.

Katie Pooser (22:27):

You regularly coordinate several internal departments for fundraising asks. Bruce mentioned the importance of aligning the mission of the funder and the mission of the nonprofit. What does that look like in the work that you do?

Amélie Poojary (22:42):

Yes, that's a great point. We spend a lot of time making sure development staff understand and are able to articulate the work we do. And in parallel, it's extremely

important to ensure program staff understand the donor's priorities and how we can best partner together. We won't change our mission to fit in exactly with donors wishes, but these conversations with funders can be both very informative for the work we do and give us an opportunity to present our work in a way that is appealing to specific donors. Now, Katie, what resonated with you in this first segment

Katie Pooser (23:25):

For me, I was reminded that there are some real advantages to starting your career at a small or nonprofit, the opportunities to grow yourself professionally and to learn from real experts abound. When the staff is smaller, you get to take on more responsibility faster. The key though is to be thoughtful about what the organization needs and offer to fill the gaps.

Amélie Poojary (23:51):

Yes, and even in larger nonprofits taking initiative will help you advance your career in this second and final segment, Bruce will share advice for those of you looking to break into this sector, aside from giving a advice, he will be answering questions from real job seekers.

Katie Pooser (24:12):

Bruce, I'd like to ask you two questions from real job seekers, those who have never had any nonprofit experience, but are looking for their first job in this sector. The first question is because I have no nonprofit experience. How can I choose references?

Bruce Morrow (24:32):

I think that if you're just graduating from college or you have little experience in the professional world, I think it's important to find how can you take the skills that you do learned and translate them to what you'll be doing on the job? So looking at that job description and really seeing, oh, I've done this and this and this in this school, and I've taken this class. So I would translate into this and that professor <laugh> that taught that class is the one should ask for a reference your major advisor at your college of university your supervisor you know, if you had an internship would definitely be one of the things you would want to do. I went to for undergraduate, I went to Rochester Institute of technology and a big part was you you sent a semester working at a for-profit in your field and you get all this experience and that is definitely the person that you want to be one of your references. And then if you have, I, I think if you have some kind of volunteer experience that you've done in some way, and they could be a reference. And so I also highly recommend you volunteer. It's really very important. You're going into a nonprofit business and you should understand what it's like to be a volunteer or to have volunteers to work with.

Katie Pooser (26:02):

That's great. I also think about when references come into play in the hiring process, in my experience, the references aren't seen or called until they're considering you for the position or the offers already extended. Is that what you've experienced too?

Bruce Morrow (26:24):

Oh, yes. Yeah, getting to the references is one of the last things you do. And by the time you got in there, you're pretty, you know, if you've gone through one interview, two interviews, three interviews, sometimes there nowadays it's five or six interviews. If you get to the six interview, <laugh>, you should have your references ready and available. And a lot of times I don't think I've ever put references actually on my resume. I might put them in the cover letter if they requested them. So if you've gone through one interview, two interviews, three, sometimes five or six nowadays, especially when you're gonna be working remote people, don't meet you face to face. It sometimes takes a lot more of interviewing interactions with you to get your responses. They will then ask for your references because references is that extra step. That then means that you're gonna call this person. And at that point, you wanna tell them, yes, I am very interested in hiring this candidate. They've, you know, used you as a reference. You don't want to overuse that reference and you have to schedule it. And so for that person, it's also a lot of work to organize schedule and figure out, you know, how to do this reference part. So they're not gonna do that until they're pretty much assured that they're interested as you as being a person that will be working

Katie Pooser (27:46):

With them. Thank you. Here's another question from a recent graduate, what's the most important problem in the world to solve?

Bruce Morrow (27:56):

I'm usually trying to be very strength based and thinking about the positives, but I'm also thinking, you know, what has a very large to impact? I think humans, <laugh> humans in general, how can humans not impact the world? Right? So like how can humans not create pollution that causes climate change? How can humans not, you know, create inequality? So there's some people that have, and some people do not that's and how, you know, humans be learn to just be kind to each other, no matter what, no matter what they look like, that's pretty much the biggest problem in the world that needs to be solved. Hopefully there's some philosophy behind it that I don't know.

Katie Pooser (28:38):

<Laugh> thank you. That was a, a succinct answer for a difficult question. <Laugh> okay. You'll keep up with the hard questions and move on to the idea of humans and how do you see diversity, equity and inclusion as part of your daily work at the organization you're with currently, or as part of your volunteer work,

Bruce Morrow (29:03):

There's diversity, equity and inclusion. It's like the big phrase for today. There's so many different corporations and foundations now that are showing their commitment to it, doing a huge hundred million dollar investments in diversity racial equality and social justice. But I would just say it's nothing new. And I mean like diversity, isn't new equity and inclusion, isn't new, and I'm really, really happy that people are talking about it. I'm really happy and pleased that large corporations are making public commitments to DEI and are now actually putting that money to work and using it. I think that's the difference from what's really happened in the past is like, you'd be like, oh, this thing has happened. And now we made this big commitment. They say something that happens, but you haven't seen it. And think now I'm already seeing changes in culture, corporate culture, corporate giving foundation giving based on the things that have happened in 2020, whether it's the pandemic or the racial injustice marches against joint Floyd and all the other crazy social political things that happened during 2020.

Katie Pooser (30:30):

It has been a while here. <Laugh>,

Bruce Morrow (30:32):

<Laugh>, it's been incredible. So, I mean, it, it's all kind of part of the Zig and the zag of what happens, right? So sometimes things jump forward and of things are back, but, you know, the diversity thing has gone back. So I, you know, I remember multiculturalism as being like a really big, big, big, you know, thing that all corporations were funding or women in the workplace and making sure that women got maternity leave was a big thing. You know, the civil rights act was a big thing, brown versus bordered women getting the right to vote, you know, and now we're at this point in time where we're looking we've got marriage equality. And so there's marriage equality, whether LGBTQ or not, because we're all humans, right. And now there's the equality act, which is that you have equal rights, no matter know where you are, no matter what state you are that covers you as a human and as an American citizen for where you live, where you work, how you practice your religion and how you receive your healthcare. And it's just a really, really important. And right now, you know, that's something that needs to be passed. And I think that even corporations of foundations are showing a lot of commitment to that and advocacy and policy changes.

Katie Pooser (31:52):

Excellent. Well, let's wrap up with some freestyle advice. The premise of our come together has everything to do with helping those who want to be a part of the nonprofit sector, understand the sector better and jump into it in an informed way. As we want to welcome more people into the nonprofit sector, which advice would you give to someone starting their career as a fresh out of undergraduate or graduate work, or someone who is transitioning from the private sector into the nonprofit sector,

Bruce Morrow (32:33):

You spend a huge part of your life going through transition. So a lot of it is planning for that transition then, you know, going through it and then understanding what it takes to get past that transition. And so if you're, you know, changing from a for-profit to a nonprofit, it is probably more than likely you're doing it. It because you are finding or have found something that you're passionate about. That's just so important if you're graduating from college and you know, going at your job, you know, and, you know, I, I remember having a, a choice between working for a large petrochemical conglomerate corporation or coming to New York city to study the RNA of mice and liver disease. And I chose the RNA mice and liver disease versus the oil company that ended up, you know, polluting most of the golf coast or something.

So finding something that you're really, really passionate about is so important. So I was so passionate about stem. That was, you know, that was a no-brainer for me to go to do the research on liver disease. And then the other thing I would say is find mentors, find a mentor, find the mentors that would support at you. And sometimes you might not even know they're your mentors, or sometimes you actively consciously selected them as being your mentor. Sometimes they might not know it, or you might not know it, but really find those people that you can look up to. You can see how they've led their life what they've done. And, and, and <affirmative>, and be accepting of that. I think that's really the most important thing. So when I was starting in about fundraising at teachers and writers collaborative in New York city the person that was leaving that position mentored me, and he did it for that three months, but, you know, really for that next year, I was always calling emailing when I was at teachers and writers.

The executive director was a very huge mentor of mine, and we did so many things besides, you know, getting grants from apple computers. You know, I remember once having drinks on the top of, of the New York times building and just being like, wow, this is kind of amazing. Or, you know, the first time I met, you know, a big very well known philanthropist from Rockefeller family, he's like, wow, that's just like an amazing moment. But those people mentored me. One of my big mentors was John morning. He is, I think

from Cleveland he is African and American. He has been, or was on the board of big foundation, which is how I first met him. But he was also on the board of Brooklyn, CATA music and all these different things. And I just, you know, loved seeing him learning from him, having any opportunity. I can hang out to him if I'm gonna change a job, I usually call him or talk to him. I might not even tell him what I'm doing, but it's just like this moment of a connection with somebody that I can, you know get feedback from when necessary, you know, what your parents do for you or should be doing.

Katie Pooser (35:57):

That's great. That's great. I think that finding a mentor can help you articulate your passion too. You know, we all wanna do good by the world, but sometimes we need a little guidance to understand what we can do. That is good. Yeah.

Bruce Morrow (36:16):

So yes,

Katie Pooser (36:17):

Indeed. Well, Bruce, I appreciate your time and sharing so many wise thoughts about your experience. We are grateful that you're our first guest on asking for good and thank you for being here.

Bruce Morrow (36:33):

Oh, thank you so much. I really enjoyed the experience. I love the, the work and the idea of this podcast, and I think it will be helpful for everyone and it, I really appreciate it.

Katie Pooser (36:46):

Welcome back Amélie. Before we do our final wrap up, let's go over this last segment in which Bruce shared advice to new job seekers and those that are transitioning into the sector, what did to find true in your experience?

Amélie Poojary (37:01):

I agree. mentorship is so important in this field. Bruce mentioned how it helped him at the beginning of his career, but also as he moved up, it is not easy work and work conditions can also be tough. So having experienced professionals guide you along the way is essential. I think also career path can be so diverse from the type of fundraising you do to the kind of roles you have and the size of organizations you work for. So getting over perspectives can help you identify what might work best for you.

Katie Pooser (37:39):

You're right. Career paths in this sector can take many forms when you're transitioning into the nonprofit sector. If you can identify your personal mission or passion, it will be easier for you to identify the best jobs for you in a multi-decade career. You'll likely have to return to your personal mission or passion to provide motivation to you. Your conversations with a mentor can help you articulate your personal mission.

Amélie Poojary (38:09):

We are grateful. Bruce shared the story of his career path, and many lessons is learned along the way. He told us about a fundraising act that involved a real group effort and six, no. Before the yes, he gave job seekers solid advice for entering the sector. Thank you so much to Bruce for being our very first guest. We look forward to you tuning in again, as we talk to real fundraisers about real asks and get their career advice.

Speaker 5 (38:43):

Thank you for joining us on asking for good. Find us wherever you get your podcasts. And please tell a friend take care.