



Pete La Raus Q & A

Pete La Raus is the chief operating officer of Whole Child International, an organization that specializes in improving the relationship between child and caregiver worldwide. Whole Child is currently working in El Salvador but is planning to expand to India.

What does Whole Child International do?

“The mission of Whole Child is to elevate the quality of care for children worldwide and what that means is we work with vulnerable children: children who are in trouble with the law, children who are in child-protection systems, and children in residential care. There's evidence to demonstrate that the quality of care improves cognitive social emotional development so if you make no other changes to a child's environment, just improve the quality of the relationship between the caregiver and the child, they will have improved cognitive social emotional development. We also apply that that same concept to early childhood care and development, so in the United States that would be nursery school or daycare centers, typically for younger children. However, our spectrum of programming goes from ages 0-18.”

What are your goals for Whole Child? Future goals?

“Right now, Whole Child is working in El Salvador so one of the main goals is to be able to continue our programming. Childcare has become a little bit wrapped up in the political situation, we wish that it existed independent of politics. Our short-term goal is to continue to implement our services and improved quality of life and quality of care for children at a national level in El Salvador. Our long-term goal is to expand into other parts of the world. We are currently trying to expand into India. India is a lot bigger than El Salvador, so it represents a different set of challenges. We have some tools that we've developed, and we use them to co-create in coordination and in collaboration with the host country governments. Finalizing some of these tools and making them context or country specific in El Salvador and in India is one of our medium-term goals.”

What projects are you working on right now?

“We're currently implementing a USAID (US Agency for International Development) funded project in El Salvador. We've had to adapt our project. There's an element called responsive parenting that we normally do with face to face interaction. It's a lot of training, a lot of capacity building. With COVID we've had to move to an online approach, so we've shifted our methodology to what we call a high frequency, low intensity approach. Being able to work with the government and with parents at scale, we found that doing it online but doing it regularly, in 15 to 30 minute increments, is much more useful than having an 8 hour online training course. Our short-term goal is to make sure that we can continue to provide the content and provide the trainings immediately that we were planning on doing.”



What is your connection to GlobalPDX?

“A lot of the staff at Whole Child work remotely, me being one of those people. I’ve been coming to Portland for 20 years. My family lives here or lives in Pacific Northwest. I recently moved to Portland and I thought it would be a great opportunity. I wanted to be part of the international community and I wanted Whole Child to be part of the international community. To put things in perspective, my boss is based out of United Kingdom, we’ve got some people in Los Angeles, at some point we had people in New York. In order to be present, to be visible, we want to be part of the thought leaders, the decision makers, the movers and the shakers in the international community wherever our staff are and that’s how GlobalPDX came into the picture.”

How has your move to Portland impacted your work with Whole Child?

“I’d say the hardest part has been the time difference because I talk to my boss who’s in the UK. There’s an 8 hour time difference. I think it’s good to have people on both coasts of the United States. Whole Child has never really been in the Pacific Northwest, so I think it’s an opportunity for us to be more visible and for people to understand what we’re doing. I also think that a lot of work that we do internationally is relevant for what we do in the United States. So, talking to local NGOs that might not work internationally is also an opportunity. If you’re in someplace like New York or D.C. it’s very easy to get caught up in purely international. But I think there’s a nice mix of local and international NGOs in the Pacific Northwest and Portland.”

What is your impression of Portland during this strange time?

“The first thought that comes to mind is very active, there’s a lot of activism here. Portland is in the news pretty much every day and not just in the local newspapers, but in the national news now. I am encouraged by the activism. I think people are very passionate. I think that’s something that can be harnessed and channeled and leveraged in a positive way, but I also recognize that there’s a lot of competing priorities. So, it’s also trying to channel people’s activism and their passions positively for sustainable change.”

What advice do you have for our community during this time of crisis?

“I think passion is good, I think it really demonstrates commitment. It’s very easy to be for something or against something but then affecting the changes that you want to see and making them sustainable and making them fair and just is a lot harder work. I would advocate for thinking through all the changes that everybody wants to see, such as racial and gender equity. I support these changes. I’d also try and focus on what the result actually looks like, to try and go beyond slogans and identify concrete results that we are trying to achieve.”



How can people get involved with Whole Child?

“I want to do away with a bit of a myth. Historically a lot of people have traveled overseas and they want to go to orphanages and they want to help babies and it's always with the greatest of intentions. The problem is what we have seen through research is that when you have a lot of people coming in and out of a child's life it is actually a little bit destabilizing. When you have multiple caregivers coming in, it's hard for a child to create emotional attachments to people. So I think one of the most important things we would ask people to do even before they consider looking at Whole Child is making sure that the relationships they have with their children and the children in their community is a positive one, that their kids are getting the attention that they need and the support that they need at their homes. Then we can start talking about what to do with Whole Child. Development and happiness and well-being starts at home, which is not to say that people shouldn't help other children but let's look at home first.”

How do you think global change can be amplified through a strong community?

“I'm sure you're familiar with the phrase ‘think globally, act locally.’ I think that is a very powerful slogan. Global change is done by no single person. No single organization is going to change the world. I think what's really important is focusing on the good things in your community and the things that you want to change in your community. Working at a local level, working through partnerships, working through alliances, working through coalitions, that is how you create social change. When you start modeling the behavior that you want to see, when you start consistently giving the message that you want people to hear, and then following through with it and demonstrating those things that you want to see in other people. You have to bring that to scale within your own community and then replicate that community by community by community. I've spent 20 years working internationally and I've found that the most effective way to create change on a national scale is to have consistent change at local scale first and it brings inertia and momentum. That is what I would advocate for.”

Any last comments about Whole Child?

“Whole Child is not trying to be a huge organization, it's trying to be a small agile organization that can go in and provide technical support to governments and to caregivers and to decision makers and really adapt the tools and methodologies to be most appropriate for the context that those governments are working in. We don't want to do direct implementation, Whole Child is not about doing the caregiving, it's about teaching people how do you do caregiving, how do you make informed decisions, how do you develop appropriate laws and policies that are going to be child friendly. A lot of times there's people who know about childcare or who know about laws, but they don't necessarily know where those two intersect. One of the things that we really like to do is say ‘these are the laws that you already have, which look good on paper but this is what happens when you actually implement them. So let's go back and reevaluate what those laws mean and what it means to implement that in this context.’ It's really about facilitating and co



creating and helping those decision makers and caregivers. It's not about doing the work ourselves. We don't want to have a large footprint and we're trying to avoid that.”

To find out more about Whole Child visit their website www.wholechild.org or check them out on Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook @wearewholechild.