



GlobalPDX Podcast

Season 2 Episode 6 Transcript

With Derrick Olsen

Andrea Johnson

Hello, and welcome to the [GlobalPDX](#) podcast. As spring is blooming in our beloved State, we are cognizant of the many global crises that impact us all. We hope that this podcast provides connection, content and support to Oregon's Hub of Global Changemakers. My name is Andrea Johnson and I'm the Chair of the GlobalPDX Advisory Board, and Executive Director at Green Empowerment.

In today's *Speaking Change* Podcast I am joined by Derrick Olson. Derrick is the resident of [WorldOregon](#) where he leads their work to connect Oregon with the world. He serves on the Board of Directors for the *World Affairs Council of America* and Global Ties USA. Derrick served as a Foreign Service Officer for the US Department of State with four overseas tours, and time in Washington DC, before moving back to his home state of Oregon, a true Oregonian! Welcome Derrick.

Derrick Olsen

Thanks Andrea, and thanks so much for inviting me on the podcast.

Andrea

Yeah, my pleasure. It's exciting to have you here. I know that a lot of the topics and things going on in the world are relevant to what you guys are working on right now, so excited to share some of that with our listeners.

So maybe just to get started you could tell us a bit more about WorldOregon. What are some of your programs and how do they connect to the current world events?

Derrick

WorldOregon (which was founded in 1950 as a *World Affairs Council of Oregon*) has the mission of connecting Oregon with the world. We have three kind of major efforts in that area:

1. What we call the "Global Classroom" which is focused on students and teachers in the K-12 area



2. International Visitors Program: where we connect through the US Department of State to International visitors around the world (both youth and adult)
3. And our public programs or “Global Conversations” as we call them: where we have speakers, and art, and films, and trivia, and different ways of connecting our community with experts on issues.

Andrea

As we planned this podcast you and I had a chance to speak beforehand, so maybe you could give our listeners an example of a current or recent program that you feel like empathizes some of what you guys are focused on right now.

Derrick

A good one which brings several of these elements together is something we're partnering with the U.S. Department of State on: the *International Women of Courage*. Where the State Department is lifting up women leaders from around the world (primarily from Developing Countries) who have done amazing work in things from environment, gender equality, to entrepreneurship. And WorldOregon is one of the local partners who is partnering to highlight that work and put on a virtual webinar for our community so they can hear about that work. It is a good combination of our work with International visitors and hearing their expertise as well as bringing that knowledge in learning to the local community through a webinar. So we're doing that and it is a good example of a lot of the webinars that we do with experts both academic and from diplomacy, and also those who have lived experiences in some of the *hot issues* of our day.

Andrea

That seems like a really good example. I know that that is happening mid-April so folks might already be tuning in to that. I think your team is in the works of planning it as we're recording this podcast.

So I happen to know that you've been in your role for 6 years because we actually started very similarly and got introduced when we both joined our respective organizations. So 6 years in your role, 2 years of those with covid-19 obviously impacting your work so much that involved International visitors in live in-person events. So rather than talking about that, because that is kind of everybody's reality right now, maybe you could share: what do you see as your role from your position? What are the priorities that you guys have as an organization (beyond just the programs themselves)?



Derrick

Sure. Yeah, I mean you're right, these last couple years have been a formative experience for all the organizations that survived it. And we are very grateful that we have survived with the support of the community and our partners (both locally and nationally). But it has also been a chance to reflect on our values and our mission. And the terrible events of the pandemic, as well as the Black Lives Matter movement and the terrible police murders of black citizens, including George Floyd, really had a very strong impact on WorldOregon (as it has with many other organizations). It was a catalyst to jump into higher gear our work on Diversity, Equity & Inclusion.

And so we have spent a lot of time during the pandemic with the help of a committee of the Board that we put together, and an outside consultant, to look at "What does Diversity, Equity & Inclusion mean to the organization? How does that connect with our imperative to expand our statewide engagement (since we are the World Affairs Council of *Oregon*, not The World Affairs Council of *Portland*)". And really as the state has grown and diversified how do we reflect those changes in an ever-positive reinforcement circle of improving our programs for local and international engagement. So that has been a real area of reflection (with assistance), and then trying to pivot towards: what does that mean for the programs, for our members, and the wider public.

Andrea

That's a really nice way to share how you can take a movement and actually use it to do some real work, and getting paid support, and getting your organization involved. I think my impression of a World Affairs Council is not necessarily that it has been the most *accessible* everybody (historically). So it's great to hear that you guys are kind of focusing on that and making those programs represent the Oregon Community, as well as the international Affairs piece of it.

Derrick

Yes, absolutely. A couple years ago when we rebranded to doing business as "WorldOregon", part of that emphasis was really trying to better reach out to the Oregon of the 21st century (and not the Oregon when it was founded). So we're retaining our strong history in connection with members and what we have done in a positive way, but also trying to pivot and change. That was, I think, a necessary adaptation that helped us be prepared better for the more intensive work that we're now doing related to Diversity, Equity, & Inclusion. And how can we make sure that we are not seen as an elitist, or you



know “clubby organization”, but rather one that is open to all. Where we're trying to make the vast majority of our programs free or low-cost, and really to borrow the public radio approach to things: if people are able to help fund our programs that's wonderful. That's fantastic. And if you're not, that's okay because the generosity of your neighbors and Foundations and companies in the area make most of our programs then free (or low-cost) for you. So I think the shift to virtual has helped underline that approach.

Andrea

That's really great. I think it also sounds kind of like a less traditional approach to International Affairs. Do you see that shift happening on a national scale as well? I know that you're really active with the World Affairs Councils of America as well.

Derrick

That's a good question. I think there will always be a place for a senior official reflecting back (whether it was their Memoirs or their experiences) as I grow older, thinking of myself as a senior official looking back, you know there's always an important place for that. And, at the same time, we have really tried to shift so we have more and more speakers (which is the higher profile events), for those that are actively making change now. So rather than sharing “War Stories”, it's talking about the work they're doing as a policy maker, as an activist, as a journalist, and we mix that in with those reflecting upon their roles over time. And I think it can both Value the Heritage of the organization and those who have done amazing things in the field of international affairs, and bring in more people who have unique lived experiences. Who are maybe not just an academic expert on a topic but have lived in that country (or maybe our part of the diaspora community). And so I think it's a richer weaving of that, I've seen a lot of that reflected in our sister World Affairs Councils around the US and especially in the local level. In Washington DC it often tends to be more traditional speakers (you might imagine). And so the National Organization working with local councils has been working very hard to diversify and to expand who is the speaker for a program. Because I think it's critical if we are to connect with and reflect the communities we serve.

Andrea

So you are talking quite a bit about speakers, is this part of the upcoming speaker series? Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?



Derrick

Yeah, sure. So one of the things we are known for (probably the most prominent public engagement) is the International Speaker Series which was founded by our former president of Berkeley who now of course is the Junior Senator from Oregon. And so 22 years ago he founded the International Speaker Series and ever since then it has been a premier place to gather with world leaders that have ranged from Hillary Clinton, to the Dalai Lama, to Nikole Hannah-Jones. And it's mostly done in person (like everything else, adapted for virtual this year) it kicking off probably about the time that this podcast be released, with Soledad O'Brien the journalist, and will include engagement in a number of topics including

- Looking at tribal sovereignty
- And the idea of international with the US with many nations within it (which is why I think she topic but see the Northwest)
- And looking some at the terrible Russian invasion of Ukraine with expert Fiona Hill that many people know of.
 - She will be talking about it from a policy perspective.
 - Also we have a photo journalist talking about it with some of the images that she has taken (both in Ukraine and other tragic war zones around the world).

So it's a chance for us to really engage with a broad community, to invite in students, and you know really bring some of the leading thinkers into people's living rooms.

Andrea

You brought up the invasion of Ukraine and I feel like it is probably top-of-mind for all of our listeners as an ongoing conflict. How do you see the mission of WorldOregon fitting into those types of global issues? How does your role within the Oregon community emphasize the importance of it, bring attention to it, etc.?

Derrick

Right, it's a good question. Especially since I think it's important for me to realize as someone who grew up in the Cold War that as a frame of reference (even though I'm not saying or a new Cold War) but it gives you a frame of reference for Russian aggression. For many in our community (especially the young ones) they don't have that frame of reference. So I think part of it is also helping to bring experts or working with the local Ukrainian American communities to be able to highlight things that people may not have



the context for, because it's been so many years since the wall fell. And the overall approach to the East-West standoff in Eastern Europe.

I was putting together some remarks for another event the other day and what occurred to me was: if we seek to grow peaceful global cooperation and discussion (not agreement on every issue but being able to peacefully discuss our differences) then dictatorship, hate (whether its domestic or International) is a very big threat to that. So we came out with a very strong statement about it (backed by our committee of our board) really to empathise how this is a threat, and there's so many terrible conflicts, unfortunately, in the world, but because of the nuclear standoff is even more critical. And that makes it more important to call out *why this is wrong* and why organizations like ours, and other Community Partners who are doing *citizen diplomacy* and people-to-people exchanges. Why it is so important to have those peaceful exchanges (and disagreements) and it is really antithetical everything that President Putin has done.

Andrea

Yeah it is pretty devastating to watch. And one of the things I have thought about quite a bit recently as just being able to throw myself into Green Empowerment work, and work with GlobalPDX allows me to focus on those small ways that I can have some positive impacts. So I imagine that by creating those spaces for discussion and and education it similarly like WorldOregon it might be a small piece but it is an *important piece* of building awareness and hopefully a more peaceful Global Community.

Derrick

Absolutely and I think we (on this issue and other issues like Global poverty, or the fight against climate change, houselessness) is combining our ability convene experts and have discussions, and have people to people exchanges with with International Leaders, with other nonprofits (like Green Empowerment) that are doing direct service work to communities in crisis. Whether that's locally in your community, through Habitat for Humanity, the work Green Empowerment does overseas, or a whole host of other ones, we always encourage people who come to our programs to look for a way to engage with us: through volunteer, through donations. Because I believe that there is both the short-term impact that nonprofits are working on to combat these problems, as well as the long-term discussion and the relationships, and the background that form that. You can't neglect one or the other. And so I see that as a hand in hand, and so we always encourage folks to not only engage with the World Affairs Council in their Community, but also whatever local charity that is helping people in need, be that in the US or overseas.



Andrea

I would emphasize for some of our listeners that might be GlobalPDX members (or folks like me working in international development), its really worth staying up-to-date on the WorldOregon activities could there have been opportunities for Green Empowerment over the years to really connect with some of your International visitors. I've got to participate in some really insightful conversations, share resources/lessons learned. And I do think it creates a great opportunity to make that connection for those of us who are actually supporting this work abroad.

So one thing I think would be interesting for our listeners to hear about: you mentioned your age a few times, but focusing on your career path might be an interesting perspective. You are the leader of WorldOregon, but how much your time in the Foreign Service, and doing tours overseas, but also being an Oregonian, like how does that kind of shape you as the leader of WorldOregon now?

Derrick

It's a good question and I mentioned my age sort of jokingly, but as a white male in a position of leadership who is middle-aged, I think I have two very cognizant of the advantages and privileges that affords me. And then how do I use my role to help you know as with our work on Diversity, Equity & Inclusion to listen to others who have more experience and knowledge in that area. How do I partner with groups who can expand what we do? How can I draw on my experiences as someone who grew up here, and went out of state in the 80's for college, and then work, and then came back to a much more diverse and economically engaged-with-the-world Oregon than when I grew up? And so I try to bring my perspective to that and then connect with all those who have incredible expertise that I don't have (whether that's on our team, on staff, on our board, or out in Community organizations). When I was talking this morning to some Oregon State High School Model UN students about how you know the Revolutionary is really of the Oregon economy into see you know the critical nature of advanced manufacturing and semiconductors in the Oregon economy and what that means for international trade & investment. Much was not there when I grew up here in the seventies.

And I think kind of like the cold war discussion, its something is not necessarily... for folks to grew up post-that change in our International connections and economy they may not realize it or take it for granted. The fact that we are the smallest metro area (Portland that is) to have a nonstop flight to both Asia and Europe... most people don't realize that, and that's not by accident. It's by a lot of hard work from Partners in the community, and the Port of Portland, and Delta Airlines, and others to make sure that that happens. And so I think it's an intentional approach (as I was saying to the students): why being aware of



global issues and not only want to share what we've done (all the things that are special about Oregon), but also what we can learn from other cultures and try to balance that off. So that is the approach that I try to take, you know we don't always hit the mark, but that is what I try to bring so that my experience can be the benefit of those who come to one of our programs.

Andrea

A super interesting perspective, and I appreciate you acknowledging some of the privilege in your experiences and how you can use that for good, right? And for *learning*.

Derrick

And to reach out when you need help! Contracting with a consultant on strategic planning, or on Diversity Equity & Inclusion, asking Board Members who have different experiences for what is missing. Working with groups not only like GlobalPDX (which has been a fabulous way to connect with the community working on International relief and development), but also groups like *Partners In Diversity* that help with looking to expand the diversification of staff and board and programming. I've just found that, and other groups like *Nonprofit Association Oregon* very helpful to provide different perspectives. It doesn't mean you have to say *you can't be a leader*, in some areas. In some areas *WorldOregon* is a leader, *and* we are also happy to partner and play a background role with other groups in the community if that's more appropriate depending on the program. I mean we're partnering with a half-dozen different groups right now on some programs recognizing genocide (which has sadly occurred in many countries internationally) and looking back, and programs about cultural erasure, and that's again one where we partner with a whole bunch of other communities and sometimes we're helping a moderate, sometimes we're in the background, because really through partnership I think we can lift up those issues more for the community.

Andrea

For those who know Green Empowerment, that resonates and is near and dear to my heart as well. That belief that we're stronger together and having authentic Partnerships can really advance a more Equitable world and in the case of *WorldOregon* that's helping our state be better connected to the world.

So with all these activities coming up, what are ways that people could get more involved with *WorldOregon* (besides just attending your programs)? Are there other ways to get engaged?



Derrick

Sure! Just about at the time when this podcast will probably be coming out, on April 28th, we're having our annual fundraiser *World Quest*. Not only is this a chance for people to support the organization through donations, more importantly is a chance for us to report out and share what's going on. So we are going to have a short video from one of our *young leaders in action*, a High School alumni who is going on now to graduate from college and working in media and stayed engaged with us; talking about how her work with us helped in her growth. And it's a chance for our Board to connect with the community, and really tell some stories.

While I would never say anything positive about the pandemic, the bright side of the virtual means as we're able to connect with a lot more people. So we will put these out virtually and really it's almost like an audio-visual annual report of: what's going on with the organization, and how people might be able to get back involved by hosting International visitors, or engaging with youth, for coming to our programs as WorldOregon and many other organizations make that transition back to in-person. So I'm looking forward to that, it's always a great way to connect with our community and to really let them know how they've helped us survive and thrive during the pandemic.

Andrea

That's great. So that's World Quest on April 28th and I am assuming people can go to worldoregon.org to learn more.

Derrick

That's right and it would be great to see people there. We try to meet the community where they're at, and hopefully the community members can find what interests them about the work we do and again in partnership with all these great local Partners from GlobalPDX to others in any Community.

Andrea

Last question I have for you: many of our listeners are probably feeling similar to me right now that the world feels like it's just in crisis, after crisis. COVID, the recent climate report, Russian invasion of Ukraine, all these things that we've kind of highlighted today talking to our own political struggles here in the US. WorldOregon really touches all of these in some ways. And so how do you stay motivated and do you have any optimism to offer?



Derrick

It is challenging, and I would say talking with young people, students, is a great way. We owe the Next Generation so much and there's some great things Our Generation has done, in some we are failing them (particularly on climate change). And so we don't have the luxury to get burned out, or tired, because these issues are just critical. If you ever talk to a young person (I'm thinking high school to college age) it is incredible their openness. Sure they're frustrated about the state of things in the world, but they also have that optimism, that sense that they can achieve something still that maybe another generation couldn't. And again their sheer acceptance of the diversity of the human race and it's just their engagement with that. It is so affirming. And I think it gives one motivation that we, before we hand off that torch to the Next Generation, we do everything we can to make things in a better place. And so I think whenever you feel burned out, interact with the kids and youth, and it'll recharge your batteries. And you'll see: this is why we're doing what we're doing. So I just try to remember that. Whether it's high schoolers here locally or high schoolers from Iraq that are coming this summer to engage here, either way it helps to really just remind you why we do what we do.

Andrea

That is awesome, what a nice message to share with our audience. Thank you so much Derrick for joining me today, and thank you for being a Global Changemaker.

Derrick

Thanks so much Andrea, and I really appreciate the opportunity to be here, and all the listeners, and I wish you the best. And let's hope for positive peaceful change in our world!

Andrea

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