(Dan Ambrosio): Hello everyone. My name is Dan Ambrosio and today on Voices of Social Change, Dr. Tonya Renee Howard, who is a Walden alumnus, will be talking about her career journey through strategic volunteering. Dina Bergren, associate director of Walden Career Services, will be asking Tonya some questions pertaining to her volunteering experience. Tonya has a rich background in the non-profit sector and has a deep passion in volunteerism. She started her non-profit career in 2003 when she transitioned from a part-time volunteer position to a full-time volunteer coordinator role. She is currently the Director of Volunteer Services at Open Hand Atlanta. For those of you that are curious about the benefits of volunteering and how it can have a tremendous impact on your professional career, this video is for you. It is packed with useful tips and information that will help kick-start your ambitions through volunteering. Let’s hear from Tonya.

(Dina Bergren): And welcome back to the program Dr. Howard.

(Dr. Howard): Thank you.

(Dina Bergren): Dr. Howard, could you share how volunteering has helped you find your true passion and led to career advancement opportunities?

(Dr. Howard): Absolutely. So, I actually started my career in the legal profession and so while I was working at a local law firm here in Atlanta, I just decided to start volunteering at my church. And so, I joined a team of people who literally were helping our church members to identify their interests, their skills and assess their personality traits. And this was to help them
to get into a volunteer opportunity. And so in that position I actually delivered workshops that helped me to develop my very own public speaking skills. And so after 2 years of volunteering in that position, the church then realized that they actually needed a full time volunteer coordinator for their program and I, that’s when I really realized that I really loved the field of volunteer management. And so they actually hired me to create and to implement a volunteer management program and so that prompted me to leave the legal profession and then embark on a whole new career in volunteer management.

(Dina Bergren): Great! Thank you, Dr. Howard. Your volunteer experience helped you test out the waters, learn what you love to do, and led to a paid position in a new career field. While pursuing...

(Dr. Howard): It sure did.

(Dina Bergren): Absolutely. And while pursuing your doctoral degree at Walden, you also started your own business and continued to seek out volunteering roles. Could you share your experience with us?

(Dr. Howard): Sure. So Walden actually expanded my knowledge and they gave me the confidence to actually start my own consulting business, as you said, and this is to help non-profits to build a stronger volunteer program because there’s so many non-profits out there who are just, just pleading for the knowledge on how to keep volunteers which essentially makes their non-profit run. And so at the same time I took an interest in volunteering at Open Hand Atlanta whose mission is to help to prevent or manage the chronic disease through nutrition care. And so that particular volunteer experience helped me to hone in on my leadership skills as well as advocacy in health and wellness. And so I literally was hired there in 2014 as a Volunteer Services Manager and then I got promoted to an Associate Director position in 2015, and then at the top of 2016, the former Director of Volunteer Services transitioned into a new role and then her position opened up and I was promoted yet again as
the Director of Volunteer Services where I now manage, as Lisa mentioned, nearly 10,000 volunteers annually. So, once again to your point, volunteering for an organization can really help you to find paid employment and to advance a career that you so love.

(Dina Bergren): And Dr. Howard, how have your volunteer roles helped support your personal mission and commitment to social change?

(Dr. Howard): So, my personal mission is to actually become the number 1 go-to person in Atlanta for anything related to volunteer management. And so the volunteer roles that I’ve taken, it’s actually helped me to support that mission, build my reputation in the community as someone who is well-knowledged in volunteer management, and to also help local non-profits stay vibrant and alive, if you will, and so you know I’ve lectured at universities and schools in Atlanta, I’ve trained some non-profit organizations on volunteer management strategies through the Council of Volunteer Administrators, which is also a volunteer role for me, and then I recently completed a dissertation on developing generation based volunteer management practices which I hope to use as a resource for those non-profit organizations here.

(Dina Bergren): And you also have an interesting story about how you landed a University lecture position – could you share the story with us?

(Dr. Howard): Absolutely. So we actually had a volunteer, she actually was an intern, now that I think about it, but of course a volunteer at Open Hand, and she was attending a local university here and she invited me to speak as a guest lecturer. And so that actually led to additional lecturing at that particular university as well as speaking opportunities at other universities in Atlanta as well as online universities. So that was, that was networking – was just beautiful.
(Dina Bergren): And the story is also a great reminder of building connections with not only employees and supervisors, but also with volunteers since you just never know what new opportunities can potentially emerge through those connections.

(Dr. Howard): Absolutely.

(Dina Bergren): So thank you so much for sharing your experience, Dr. Howard, and as a volunteer program director, could you also share how your volunteers have used skills they’ve gained through volunteering for career advancement?

(Dr. Howard): Absolutely. So, Open Hand, most of our volunteer opportunities involve packing meals or delivering nutrition meals unless you’re specifically in an internship program in a department. But we also, within those, departments, we provide many opportunities to gain leadership and communication skills, learn more about cultural awareness, volunteers can facilitate orientations, they can train other volunteers, they come with us to work at volunteer fairs. You know one prime example, we actually have an ambassador program at Open Hand and so we recently have created this new storytelling model – it’s all about telling your story. And so one of our volunteer ambassadors, she’s actually used her passion for acting to become that spokesperson for our model. We didn’t have to look for anybody because she was already volunteering. And so that actual experience of being our spokesperson has gained her paid positions as an actress in the Atlanta community. Go figure. And so, I’d like to share just one more example at the very start of my volunteer management career. So when I was the coordinator at my church, our volunteers could actually help with events, they could connect with vendors and corporations in our local community when we would, you know, plan a large event. And so one volunteer, she actually landed a mentorship teaching opportunity that turned into a job as a director of an after school program in that community and she’s very passionate about after school programs and so that was, that link was just perfect and it was all from her volunteering for an event that we had at the church. So it was incredible.
(Dina Bergren): These are great stories, Dr. Howard, and volunteering really does make a difference and I want to thank you for your insights and for sharing the impact that volunteering has had on your own career and also on the careers of your volunteers.

(Dan Ambrosio): As we have heard from Tonya, volunteering can lead to more than what most people think. Not only is volunteering a great way to exemplify Walden’s mission for becoming social change agents, but there are also career opportunities that may evolve. In Tonya’s case, she was able to discover a career passion where she can have a greater impact on the community through social change.

I’m Dan Ambrosio with Walden Career Services and thank you so much for watching!