

Dr. Brandy Baxter:

00:11

Hey Rachael. It's good to see you. Good to see you too. You know, we've been doing this show for a while, and I feel like it's kind of starting to grow on me, and I think that maybe our audience, it's growing on them too. If you're watching, listening to us, make sure you subscribe to our channel so you can keep up with all of the exciting guests that we have coming up. Speaking of exciting guests, I'm really happy to introduce our next guest. And let me just share a little bit about her. Um, Lisa is an accredited financial counselor and a chartered retirement planning counselor. After 18 years serving as a Foreign Service officer with the United States Agency for International Aid, also known as USAID, Lisa became a personal finance coach and a planner in 2019. Since then, she has counseled hundreds of people on topics such as budgeting, debt, retirement, housing, paying for education, and so much more. She established her own firm, which is called Money by Lisa, LLC, which is a registered investment advisor and is domiciled in the District of Columbia. Most importantly, Lisa is a native of Philadelphia who bleeds green and looks forward to the Eagles returning to the Super Bowl next February. I feel like Lisa, as an uh Eagles fan, is right out there with my husband, who's a Cowboys fan. It's always next season. Next season. So I can't wait to hear her insights as she joins us on the show today. Welcome, Lisa.

Lisa Whitley:

01:49

Oh my gosh, you had to bring up the Cowboys. I did. I couldn't I know myself. I'm I'm I'm I'm trying to like recover from that.

Rachael DeLeon:

01:57

I love it. Well, Lisa, we have so many things we could talk about uh with you today. But one of the reasons I wanted to have you on the show was to talk about some of

the work you do in government relations. As you may know, Brandy, we have a government relations task force at AFCPE, and Lisa has chaired that task force and been a part of it for many years. And Lisa, I'm just curious, what along your career path led you to this interest in advocacy and government relations?

Lisa Whitley:

02:29

Oh, that's a great question. What I didn't anticipate. Um, you know, I mean, I think it really comes from, you know, you know, 18, really 20 years of service um, you know, as a Foreign Service officer and before that as a Peace Corps volunteer. So I've always been sort of interested in um government and uh public policy generally. So being on the government relations task force really is a way to sort of continue that interest um that I have just broadly um before in the international um perspective and now uh locally.

Rachael DeLeon:

03:07

That's great. And you're you reside in the District of Columbia too, so you're right there in the heart of it day to day, which is great.

Dr. Brandy Baxter:

03:15

So Lisa, I know we uh chatted a little bit about being a Cowboys fan, but you also have a serious aspect to the work that you're doing. You know, your career starting with the work that you did with USAID, um, to now building your own financial planning firm, what motivated you to get involved and not only in financial planning and government, but also in this financial counseling space?

Lisa Whitley:

03:40

Yeah, so actually, um, before I was a Foreign Service officer, um, going so really going back in some time here, um, I actually worked on Wall Street. I was a bond trader of all things in the 90s. So I've always had an interest in investment in financial markets and personal finance. Um, and I just sort of took that almost 20-year detour into international development. But actually, I really came from that background of, you know, having a degree in finance and being, you know, uh part of that world. So when I decided to uh go into the next chapter, it was actually kind of a natural transition for me, but I wanted to do it a different way. Um, I really wanted to be able to serve people who didn't necessarily have access um to um high-powered, high-priced uh investment advisors and and who frankly don't necessarily need that kind of engagement.

Rachael DeLeon:

04:40

Was there one moment or one thing in your career or your life that said, you know, that moved you to start your own practice?

Lisa Whitley:

04:48

You know, it's interesting. Um when I left uh USAID, I and became kind of made that pivot to financial coaching. I was actually working with an employee benefit company. Um, and that was great because that's really kind of gave me that ability to have like literally hundreds of conversations with bunches of different people in different walks of life, um, on a whole bunch of different topics. And at that time, it never even occurred to me that I was going to have my own practice. In fact, I absolutely was not going to have my own practice. I was dead set on that. Um, but you know, after a few

years, you know, I just realized I just wanted more um, a little more control, I would say. Yeah. Um, really, than I had ever had in my career, you know, coming out of government would just quite regimented. And it just seemed like a new uh way to try it out um and have a bit more flexibility. So I've really loved having that pivot um to being an entrepreneur.

Dr. Brandy Baxter:

05:49

You know, speaking of pivots, Lisa, there's a little bit of a crossover between working as a foreign officer and being in the government space, and then now serving at the state and local level, what would it look like for you to be an advocate or what does advocacy look like for you in the context of financial wellness, given your background in foreign relations?

Lisa Whitley:

06:12

Yeah. So I think because my background at USAID, uh, where that helps me in advocacy is I sort of understand how the sausage gets made. Do I understand the legislative process? I understand the regulatory process. Um, so that really helps inform um sort of, I think the what I bring to the government relations task force, which I presume is what we're talking about, we'll be talking about pretty soon. Yeah. Um, and that really um is a way for me to sort of continue my service, I would say. Yeah. Before I was serving, you know, the federal government, now I'm sort of serving a but still serving public policy.

Rachael DeLeon:

06:53

Well, and I think maybe a misconception people might have is if you don't understand all the ins and outs of how you how the sauce is just made, that there's almost a fear

around the word advocacy. And some things we talk about within our task force is advocacy is really about education, you know, and the expertise that we bring working, you know, as financial counselors or financial planners, um, those day-to-day interactions, our people are on the front lines of the things that Americans are struggling with the most. Um so what would you say to someone that's like advocacy? They hear that, they feel overwhelmed. What are some ways people can start to lean into that work?

Lisa Whitley:

07:36

Yeah, so a couple things. We one is there is so much going on right now. Um, I mean, there's always a lot going on, but there's a lot going on. And it can be very easy to just be overwhelmed and to not and to kind of shut down. So what I would want to say, you know, to AFCs is, you know, you know, still pay attention, but maybe, you know, you can't necessarily pay attention to everything. But think about what's going on in your clients' uh lives and that they're dealing with every day. And maybe there's one issue, maybe there's two issues, particular issues, and kind of adopt those issues and pay attention to just those issues um rather than the full spectrum, because that would be more than a full-time job. Um and I think in that way you can a not be overwhelmed and then be more effective.

Rachael DeLeon:

08:28

And where would you say somebody should start? You know, oftentimes what we're reading about in the news is at the federal level, these larger issues. But, you know, one of the things we always say is start local, um, start small. Uh, what would be your suggestion there in terms of local, state, federal advocacy?

Lisa Whitley:

08:48

Well, okay, so now I get to make a sort of a bit of a pitch here for the uh government relations task force advocacy toolkit. Um, if folks haven't done so already, go on to the AFC PE membership member resources. And we have an advocacy toolkit there. And there's a lot of great resources there. And one of the parts that we're really looking forward to building out um in 2026 is more resources that are very specific to state and local. Um, for example, there are organizations that work at the state level or even at the municipal level, and we want to make sure people have a way to connect to those organizations. Um, there are groups such as um National Consumer Law Center that publish information about how to advocate at a state level. Um, they have lists of state model laws in different areas that because states like to copycat off each other. Um so I would say the advocacy toolkit is a great place to start and will be even a better place to start um as we move through 2026 and build up more of these very specific state and local uh resources. Yeah.

Rachael DeLeon:

10:02

And that and the copying is not necessarily a bad thing. Sometimes it's a really good thing. You know, I know with the K through 12 education requirements over the year, I mean, years ago it was just nine states had requirements that high schoolers had to take a class before they graduated. Now I think we're up to 30. Uh don't quote me, but you know, it continues to grow. And oftentimes as states are starting to adopt new legislation, they're looking at their neighbors and they're saying, how did they do it? What worked, what didn't, and how do we do it better? Um, and so I think there's a lot to learn from states or other local uh governments that have done it right. Let's take the best of those things and continue to make progress.

Lisa Whitley:

10:46

I mean, one thing I would love to see um is AFCs, you know, dropping into um the member exchange saying, hey, in my state or in my scene, they have this program, and I think it's great. And that way somebody in another place could say has something that when they're advocating, they know what they're advocating for specifically. It's not enough to say, hey, this is a problem, but let me show you a solution. Let me show you what they're doing in the next state over or across the country. And I think that makes it much easier for policymakers to respond.

Rachael DeLeon:

11:18

Yeah. And let me show you what barriers we've run into along the way and how we've answered those questions. You know, the first time someone does anything, it can be slow and painful. And then we learn from one another and we make it easier. Um, and you know, sharing that is really critical.

Dr. Brandy Baxter:

11:35

Lisa, you talked a little bit about why it's important for AFCs to be involved in policy. And as an AFC, a lot of my work in focus is on the client. So, what would you say to the AFCs who are listening that they can think about what is it that we actually can bring to the discussion when it comes to matters of policy and decision making?

Lisa Whitley:

12:00

You know, I like to say AFCs are the subject matter experts in financial wellness. I mean, they're they're the ones talking to clients and hearing about their clients' uh struggles. So, who better to be talking to legislators or um other larger um NGOs or

advocacy organizations about the problems that they're seeing? Nobody's in a better position to have those conversations than AFC because they have the data, they have the experience. Um, and because I mean, as as you know, a lot of things that are going on in a client's life are really bigger than things they can control themselves. You know, a lot of things are kind of happening to them in the environment. Um, so I think when AFCs are advocating uh for their clients' interests, that's a service to their client. They're they're actually making, you know, they're actually improving their clients' lives by advocating uh for policies that can help them.

Rachael DeLeon:

13:07

Yeah, that's great. You're right. It's a oftentimes it's about it, you know, there might be individual behaviors, but then oftentimes it's about the system, quoting Michael Thomas from a couple of years ago at Symposium. But I think AFCs are closest to some of those systems and can see some of those, the patterns that are happening. Um what would you say, kind of looking ahead, what are some areas, you know, thinking through some of the discussions we've had in government relations task force, where are some areas you think AFCs could make some immediate impact?

Lisa Whitley:

13:44

Well, I mean, I think affordability is obviously on everybody's mind. And that encompasses like a huge, huge range of issues. So I I would sort of break it down. So, you know, right now, I guess this month, for whatever reason, my favorite thing is to talk about utilities because one of the things we're seeing in a lot of places are big increases in utility um bills for a lot of reasons. This is a great issue to get involved in at the state and local level. Um, because what we're seeing in a couple places in in Illinois and DC, there are others where um local governments are making it easier for people to access um assistance for utility bills. And then, of course, that and if people are

interested in the federal level, uh right now there's a lot of discussion about cutting funding for LIHEAP, which is uh energy assistance. Um, so that's an issue that I think people can really sort of grasp onto right now. Um, there's another, if again, there's another issue coming up uh regarding community uh development financial institutions, CDFIs, which have a big role um in supporting low and middle income uh households to access banking services. So there's a bipartisan bill right now called the Afford Act that's looking to support CDFI. So that's a great place to plug in right now. Um and then I would just say that whole um I think the other two things that are really on people's mind are uh privacy issues and consumer protection issues. Um and again, a lot of this is really at the state level where states are actually engaging on this. Um, so I think that's another uh great area as well.

Dr. Brandy Baxter:

15:33

So thinking practically, I appreciate you know the the different areas that you mentioned, and and you're right, these are topics that we are all hearing our clients talk about, and they're also on our minds as we're experiencing them as well. But practically, what would be like the steps that I would take? So I'm interested, I'm passionate, I'm excited about these topics, and how do I go about finding where to go, who to talk to? What would you recommend for someone who wants to get involved in being more of an advocate around the matters of financial wellness?

Lisa Whitley:

16:08

You know, I think a good very, very first step um is, and this is gonna sound like a commercial again, but the advocacy toolkit, because there's actually a part of that toolkit where it's just like a list of newsletters that you can subscribe to. Some are very general um on the financial wellness topic, some are quite specific to a particular issue

area. That's a great place just to start to be up to date from credible sources about what's going on in a in a particular area. So I think that's actually a good first step.

Rachael DeLeon:

16:43

Yeah. And I think you touched on it a little bit earlier. I think, you know, we talk about this a lot, even around money and like the shame of talking about money. And anytime you're new to a certain area, and in this case, advocacy, you know, just doing something and just taking that first step, signing up for the newsletter, and then being vulnerable enough to share, like in our connected community or in your LinkedIn community, an issue you're seeing and ask the questions. How do I start? What do I do? What have you seen? What have you done? You know, I think we learn from one another. And oftentimes we put something out there and we're planning a seed that's helping move things forward instead of, you know, I think it's all very easy to feel so overwhelmed that it leads to inaction versus one small step. Lisa, anything else as we think through, you know, the work, any examples you want to share around, have you seen some work in the community where you've seen like some examples of where people have come together to move policy forward?

Lisa Whitley:

17:48

You know, there was, I'm trying to remember, there was a there was a really good example um in Texas, actually. Um, so this is not a personal example. This is really from a nonprofit, you know, a local nonprofit in Texas that was very concerned about it it a sort of a quirk in Texas law uh that made it difficult for widows to hold on to um their home after they became widowed. Um and it the group this is not a great example, and you may have to cut it out. I was like, you know, I remember details, you know. But it it was really an example where this local nonprofit, you know, was able to um advocate um on this particular issue and get changes in uh the way uh Texas

administers their property tax to make it easier for widows to hold onto their home. And uh the reason I bring up this particular example though is that sort of going back to what AFCs can do, sometimes it's not just one, sometimes your voice alone is enough. And what can be very important is linking into a very local level NGO because they need to hear stories and adding your story to that local NGO, then they can go and do the advocacy work. Sometimes being an advocate doesn't necessarily mean that you're the one writing the letter to the congressperson, you're not the one going to the hearing. You're an advocate when you are connecting the story you heard to an organization that can then take that forward.

Rachael DeLeon:

19:29

I love that. And I think that's where AFCs can play an important role. Like they may not have a background in government like you have, or that overlap, but where do we find the right places to plug in the real life cases or the trends that we're seeing to help make change and move things forward?

Dr. Brandy Baxter:

19:49

Yeah, that's great. Um, Lisa, it has really been a delight chatting with you and learning all about the importance of being an advocate and how we can get involved with our state and local governments to really elevate the stories of our clients and to impact change in our communities. But one of the things we love to do here at Real Money, Real Experts uh podcast is we like to ask our audience to contribute to our bank of knowledge. So, Lisa, what would you share with our audience as your two cents that you like to add?

Lisa Whitley:

20:24

Oh, my two cents that I'd like to add to contribute to your bank of knowledge, that this how to get started is something we've really, as a government relations task force, we really want to make sure uh that we're giving people the resources to get started. And I do think visiting the advocacy toolkit is just a great way to get started, to see what some of the issues are uh that we're tracking and just a way to engage on whatever level you're ready to engage at, whether it's signing up for a newsletter or even going further and learning about the federal rulemaking process. It's all there.

Rachael DeLeon:

20:59

Yeah, uh the government relations task force also writes an article every quarter for the standard newsletter as well. So, you know, for people who want to keep on top of some of the issues that are happening, but I just would be remiss not to give a shout out. I think this toolkit is something, it's a really good representation of what can be built when community members like you, Lisa, and the others that are part of this group come together, see gaps and opportunities, and build something that helps the larger community. So it's living, it's breathing. Um, you know, we have people that are continuing to look at it and say, what can we add? How do we continue to make it better? And then how do we continue to have these conversations? So we're making sure as these opportunities come out um to lend our voices that the community knows and is able to lend those. So kudos to uh Lisa and the others who are part of the task force. It's a it's been a labor of love and it continues to be something. Um, we all care deeply about.

Dr. Brandy Baxter:

22:02

Excellent. Thanks, Lisa.

Lisa Whitley:

22:05

Well, thanks for having me.

Rachael DeLeon:

22:06

Obviously, you can find Lisa through our member community. She's very active on our message board, sharing things that come up. But where else if people want to connect with you? Where would you tell them to connect with you?

Lisa Whitley:

22:18

Yeah, well, you can connect with me on Facebook. Money by Lisa is my firm. And then I'm also um, that's also my website, moneybylisa.com. And I've got a blog, which I you can sign up for, which I think is kind of fun. Uh, and also on LinkedIn.

Rachael DeLeon:

22:34

Fantastic. Well, we'll put all this in the show notes so people can track you down and see what's new. And I encourage you, if you hear the show, to join us in the member community and and start the conversation. We hope we planted a seed today.

Dr. Brandy Baxter:

22:48

Thanks, guys.

Rachael DeLeon:

22:49

Yeah, thanks for joining us, Lisa.

Dr. Brandy Baxter:

22:51

You know, Rachael, it's always a privilege when we get a chance to not only connect with our members, but to hear what they are passionate about. Talking with Lisa, I never would have really considered myself an advocate for financial wellness, but she made it sound so easy. Just simply sharing the story of my clients with an organization that can then elevate that story and couple it with others to really impact change in my community. This was a really good, a good episode for me to learn from.

Rachael DeLeon:

23:20

Yeah, and I think we're all feeling that way right now. There is so much going on in the world, and how do we, one person, make an impact? And this group has really put together just some unique resources to lean in, and it's just one small step. You know, one thing, one issue that's passionate to you. You don't have to solve them all today, but when we use our voices, and we won't, but when we use our voices in the power of community, I think that's where we're gonna make long-lasting impact. And that's something that's really special about AFCPE is that we are a group of really diverse voices. We see it at the symposium every year. Oftentimes it's around programs that reach across the aisle, but it goes for these things too. You know, you meet people from other states, other communities, and you start to feel less alone and you start to see gaps and opportunities where you can learn from one another.

Dr. Brandy Baxter:

24:17

Yeah. And she she made me chuckle when she was like, Oh, I don't want to do a shameless plug for the government task force or the advocacy toolkit. And I'm thinking, no, this is the community where you totally can make that plug for the shameless plug we embraced here.

Rachael DeLeon:

24:32

So yeah, it's a tool, it's a resource that adds value, and it's free. So absolutely. Yeah, it's great for everyone. Well, Brandy, this was so much fun. Um looking forward to future conversations next week. And for everyone that's listening today, um, connect with Lisa on LinkedIn, check out the toolkit, lend your voice to our community, and let's see what kind of impact we can make together. The opinions of our podcast guests are their own, which means that their stories, views, or lived experiences may differ from yours or mine. We encourage you to tune in to Real Money, Real Experts with open curiosity. Why? Because it's oftentimes in the conversations where viewpoints or stories differ from our own that we learn the most.