

Episode 49: Kali Thorne Ladd

[00:00:00] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: It is early December in Cambridge and the Charles River has crystallized into a glimmering pane of fresh glass. Not yet strong enough to stand on, but beautiful enough to watch from the bridge above. The bridge's subtle arc encrusted in an overlay of white, a small child dawdling across with adult in hand, little joints fixed in place by the four layers of clothes on her body, a swaddle of stiff limbs. When she first sees the snow, she becomes overwhelmed with joy, slips away to chase the bits of sky, tottering a few feet before tumbling under the weight of her own elation. She rolls her small body, becoming an avalanche unto itself. Squeals of laughter growing with each rotation. I watch the woman, her mother, perhaps, dart anxiously after the rolling bundle, checking for cuts, scratches, bruises, signs of distress, but the child is still laughing. Undeterred by blood, gets back on her feet, waiting for the next slice of sky worth chasing. That's by Clint Smith from his book, *Counting Descent*.

[00:01:10] **Rafael Otto**: This is the Early Link Podcast. Thanks for tuning in. My name is Rafael Otto. You can catch us every Sunday on 99.1 FM in the Portland Metro at 4:30 PM. Tune in there when you can, or you can find us wherever you find your podcasts, including iTunes, Spotify, Amazon Music, streaming on our website at childinst.org. That was my colleague, Kali Thorne Ladd. She is the Chief Executive Officer at Children's Institute. That was a poem that she chose to read today. And I want to ask you about that, but welcome to the podcast. It's so good to have you on.

[00:01:48] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: Thank you for having me.

[00:01:49] **Rafael Otto**: Kali you've been, uh, you are the CEO here at Children's Institute. You have a long track record of working in early childhood, you're a co-founder and executive director at Kairos PDX. I'm not going to read the rest of your bio, but people can learn more about you if they like. Welcome. It's great to have you here. Tell me a little bit about that poem and why you chose to read that one today.

[00:02:13] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: Well, I think all of the work I do is because I believe in children. I believe in their brilliance, their beauty, their assertive, innate, belief in possibility that I think all of us can benefit from as adults. And I think this poem captures that well. Clint Smith is an educator, he is a black educator who is also a believer in education as a civil right, and part of the social justice movement.

And so him as author, I thought was important, but you know, I read through his book of poems. This is his first book of poems. He's written other things since, but I just found this one so beautifully encapsulated children in their natural element and their natural beauty. And this child could be any child. If we give children the chance to be themselves. We see beautiful things.

[00:03:07] **Rafael Otto**: Tie that into some of the work that you've done in the past or how you're thinking about the work here at CI.

[00:03:14] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: Well, I've devoted my career to children. Not just education, but really illuminating supporting the well-being of children, because I see so much in our society that I think is fractured and distraught. And children, I do believe are our greatest hope. Children don't come out of the womb with bias. They don't come out of the womb racists. They don't come out of the womb believing anything. But the fact that everything is possible and that they are curious and intentional in how they interact with the world. And I just think all of us would be better if we paid attention to them and learn from them.

And I think how we craft the world around them supports their development to be the leaders that we need for the future. Right now, the intentionality within educational spaces and other spaces, healthcare spaces, community spaces... we don't prioritize children, we don't prioritize their wellbeing. We don't listen to them. We don't talk to them in a way that often shows respect for what they bring and I think it's to our detriment.

[00:04:30] **Rafael Otto**: I know we've talked about being intentional about listening to kids. I know my kids have a lot of ideas about things. I'm sure yours do, too.

[00:04:38] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: Yes.

[00:04:39] **Rafael Otto**: Right.

[00:04:40] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: Very opinionated.

[00:04:41] **Rafael Otto**: And opinionated.

And there are times when I'm listening to one of my daughters talk about something and I was like, wow, I just had never thought about it exactly in that way or from the perspective of a student in fourth grade or something like that. You know? Are there some examples of what kids have shared with you that inspires you?

[00:05:03] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: There's so many things. The grace that I see children give one another, the way they care for one another and the nurturing. They don't have any preached societal pretenses that prevent them from nurturing a friend or a stranger when they seem sad. Imagine if we all interacted with one another in that way. The ability to ask questions and be curious always I see in many children, mine as well as others. And I think sometimes we get to a place where we stop asking questions and we make assumptions. And we lose that curiosity, the wonder that children carry, their ability to notice things, my children all the time. And each child is different, and each of my children are different. I have a daughter that's 13 and a son that is 10.

They notice things that I don't pay attention to, or I just don't notice maybe cause I'm too busy. Maybe because the world through my eyes misses things and I'm always grateful for the details that they notice. And I wonder sometimes, well, as they grow, will they stop noticing things? There's a value add to just noticing, and now people who are thoughtful about mindfulness and

meditation, they talk about the power of noticing. Children do that, I think, more naturally than adults.

So yeah, those are a couple examples. But there, there are many, there are many, too many to name.

[00:06:28] **Rafael Otto**: Well, let's talk a little bit about some of the changes that have been happening at CI at Children's Institute. Some of those are significant. We have a new mission and vision statement. So share those, you can read them or maybe just talk about them. Whatever you think is best.

[00:06:44] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: Well, you know, Children's Institute has a long track record of supporting early childhood in the state of Oregon. And it's really an honor to be able to build off of a foundation that I think is very solid.

Early childhood in Oregon would not be where it is if not for the Children's Institute, and the work that is often done behind the scenes and quietly to support funding coming into the state. And at least \$400 million has come into Oregon, either through the legislature or through the federal government because of Children's Institute and the advocacy and the visibility they bring to the space. The work and the pilots that have been done to show that elementary educational spaces can accommodate early childhood in a meaningful way, so that children are not just ready for kindergarten, but kindergarten is ready for children. That's a big deal. And Children's Institute has been on the forefront of that. So I just want to acknowledge that I am coming into a lot of good work and that is a blessing in and of itself.

I think that our new mission, which is to leverage research, practice, policy, and advocacy, to shift systems towards justice for families, so that all Oregon's children, prenatal to grade five have access to opportunity. It is an important mission. It highlights all elements of what Children's Institute does.

I think people think of Children's Institute as policy and advocacy without recognizing that there's a lot of practice and research work as well. And that we do need to shift systems towards justice for children. That line in particular, I love, and I think recognizing that a just society is one that educates and supports all children that the two go hand in hand and it's not an "if" but a "must."

[00:08:32] **Rafael Otto**: Yeah, yeah. I agree. It's the most powerful phrase, I think, in there. And I would love to hear a little bit more about how you're... like, down the road. What does that look like? A more just, a more equitable system for young children.

[00:08:49] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: I think it's really recognizing who our children are, where they are, what they need, listening to them, listening to the communities that they're from, recognizing that Oregon is a large and diverse state.

It's diverse culturally and ethnically it's diverse geographically. It's diverse economically. And that children learn in different ways. The ability of children, how they show up in a learning environment, varies greatly from child to child. And so it's taking in all of those elements of diversity and thinking about what does it mean to truly support their wellbeing and their ability to thrive.

What does it mean for the Latina or Latino child in Eastern Oregon, as opposed to the Latino child in Portland or the white child in Yoncalla, versus the white child in Beaverton, and so on and so forth. The child that comes over as an immigrant or a refugee. What does it mean to support them and fully see their whole selves and ensure that they're in an educational space where they can thrive?

Justice is really looking at all of those layers and being intentional in how we design our systems to support those children and their families.

[00:10:03] **Rafael Otto:** It's that question of designing systems too, is a big piece of it, too. Because when you're talking earlier about listening to kids. But that has to then translate into like, incorporating that into what, which is an evolution of our systems, how our systems are structured. Say more about that.

[00:10:21] **Kali Thorne Ladd:** Well, let me start by saying we don't... we are building a system right now.

[00:10:26] **Rafael Otto:** The Early Childhood system, right?

[00:10:28] **Kali Thorne Ladd:** Yes, we do have a K-12 system. But most people know that system was not designed for all children. And we see the outcomes, I think, exemplify what the system was designed for.

And so many children within the ecosystem of education in K-12 are not thriving because it wasn't designed for them to thrive. Many types of children, many, many children in early childhood, we don't have a system, which is where the opportunity lies. Unlike K-12 where we have to really pivot and tweak and adjust a system that was designed for something else, in early childhood we're in a very nascent phase of building a system. So we have to be mindful of what are the policies that can be integrated to ensure that we build this system with all children in mind.

And we have to recognize that children are not a monolith and nor is Oregon. And one of the things that have been really exciting and eye opening to me, and I've talked to you about this, is getting the chance to go into some of our rural areas and seeing some of the realities. And, you know, while each place is different and each child is different, there are commonalities. And I think part of system work is figuring out where are those bridges? Where are those commonalities? How do we bring children and communities together in intentional ways and

write policy that speaks to both of their needs? Recognizing that sometimes they might look the same.

Everything is not different, right? As we might think, we don't spend enough time listening to one another and seeing our commonalities to even begin to craft policy and practice that speak to them. So I think there's a lot of opportunity, but that system change work requires that level of intentionality

[00:12:08] **Rafael Otto**: And it requires, I think, participation from so many different people, you know. Educators who are working in the schools, childcare providers, our parents and families, our young children, our policymakers...

[00:12:19] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: Healthcare

[00:12:20] **Rafael Otto**: Healthcare sector also. That's a lot of people to bring to the table.

[00:12:24] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: Yeah. And so what does it mean to set a table with all these different actors recognizing we share this ecosystem around children? How do we ensure that the system is designed to bring people to the table? How do we invite? I mean, the Early Learning Council now has the head of DHS, the head of OHA, several players who weren't at the table because they were early childhood professionals. But when you think about the experience of a young child, well, they're intersecting with a lot of other systems beyond a preschool or a childcare center. So how are we inviting them now? The council, the infrastructure of the policy body that oversees this sector has representation from all these other places.

That is shifting the system towards justice. Recognizing that we can't support kids if we only have childcare providers at the table. We need people from DHS. We need people from housing. We need people from healthcare. So...

[00:13:21] **Rafael Otto**: I mean, that's it, you know, cross-sector partnerships. Sure, that can be a little bit of a wonky way to describe it. But we need everybody working on this and, to me, it ties into this question of what our values are as a, as a society.

How do all of these different entities and agencies and departments value children? How can they show up to better value children? But there's also a reflection of what that means in terms of our values as an organization. And so that's an exciting piece of something that is new for Children's Institute. A set of values that we can talk about. And one of them... let's start with "connectedness" because that ties into, I think, what you're talking about.

[00:13:59] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: Yeah, I love our core values and am excited to see how our core values drive all of our work. I think core values are essential to any organization and moving it forward. "Connectedness" is this idea that we believe children develop and grow in connected

communities. And we, as Children's Institute, will work to build bridges and deepen our relationships with, and in families, communities, and systems to support early learning practices. I mean, this is just a fact. Children do develop and grow in connected communities. It is our belief, but I would also suggest that science and research support this belief. And so where it's not pie in the sky, and we have to work and build the bridges to communities where children exist.

I've talked a lot in my past work about this idea of belonging and the idea that children thrive when they know they belong and that they're cared for, and the neuroscience supports this. Thinking and feeling are intermingled in our brain. And so how we feel impacts how we think. And so how we feel also impacts how we learn and our ability to learn. The one protective factor that has the biggest impact on children who are experiencing stress is this idea of love and belonging, caring, connectedness. Nothing matters more to a child.

And we know we're going to experience stress. We've learned about the ACEs that exist. Toxic stress and beyond ACEs, there have been additional work by, like, Dr. Burke Harris that talks about racism and how that has impacted children. And when you look at our society right now and what's happening, there's no question. Again, emerging out of pandemic, wildfires, like children and families are experiencing stress. But that trauma it shifts to resiliency when children are in caring and connected communities. So connectedness is essential to children thriving. Also essential to children learning. And so if we don't start there, we're going to have a very hard time reaching our goals.

[00:15:54] **Rafael Otto**: Okay. How about the next one?

[00:15:56] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: "Innovation." We will be bold and think creatively and take risks to ensure we are doing all we can to help children thrive. And I think the early learning sector needs a boost of innovation. And what's been interesting as I've traveled throughout the state, there are so many great ideas percolating, and sometimes being implemented in communities. So how do we maximize that innovation.? People closest to children have a lot of knowledge and wisdom. And how do we leverage that to improve the system overall? How do we share best practices from some of our small communities?

I was in the community of Medford, where I met with women that started a Grandmas-To-Go program, which is incredible with grandmas holding babies, because that's a benefit to the grandma and it's a benefit to the baby. And it's a benefit to young moms who may not have family around, and may not have the supports that they need to support their child in that way, right? We all know that it takes a village to raise a child and that's true for every family.

And so I'm now trying to connect the women from Grandmas-To-Go to funders and other people, because those are the innovations that have a net benefit on the system.

[00:17:08] **Rafael Otto**: And that they've come right out of the family experience, out of community. And so that's where I know we've talked about this before. But It's this idea that

sometimes when we're talking about system change or policy change, it feels like a very top-down approach and it can be, and it has been from time to time. I think there's a lot of examples about that. But what we're really trying to get at with this idea of connectedness and what you're talking about is that the ideas, they need to come from community. Community needs to be involved in that process. And like, that's I think one example that you're talking about right there is this innovation, this idea, but more of that will help our systems move toward justice.

[00:17:48] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: Yeah, and I think Children's Institute is in a unique position as a bridge- builder between community and policymakers and legislators, and we have been engaged with community for a long time. And I think we have real authentic relationship with community members. But we also have real authentic relationship with policy makers and legislators and lawmakers. Not everyone from community either wants to talk to a lawmaker or feels comfortable talking.

And so Children's Institute can either provide the pathway for them to talk directly, or be a bridge to share the information on their behalf. That is exciting that we have this privilege of being able to be in that space, and I do believe that when we honor community. "Honor" as another one of our core values. We are able to create the change that we seek. Doing it absent community voice and input, I think, we fail. And I think, unfortunately, I think that is part of what ill the K-12 system.

[00:18:49] **Rafael Otto**: So we have connectedness, innovation, honor. Talk about "equity."

[00:18:54] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: Okay.

[00:18:54] **Rafael Otto**: And it's a very-

[00:18:55] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: Can I say one more thing about honor though?

[00:18:56] **Rafael Otto**: Sure. Yeah.

[00:18:57] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: The way we talk about honor is also about honoring children and I just think that's so important, it's what I was talking about earlier. We see children as complete people and value their contributions in the world, and we center their humanity and respect their dignity and self-determination and uplift community wisdom and voice and I just... it's so powerful. It's so powerful. So, well, equity is the foundation of all the work that we do.

We can not have a just society if it's inequitable. And we have huge inequities right now between who has access to opportunity and who doesn't. And we see this cut across racial lines. We see it cut across geographic lines, and of course, socioeconomic lines which are the through-line, honestly, across race and geography.

Socioeconomic status is a piece that really divides those who have access and those who don't. Now, socioeconomics aside because of racism, and I would say bias against like rural communities, there are still barriers, even when you have economic status, because people perceive certain things about you.

And I can say this as a black woman, people will make assumptions that have nothing to do with truth based on the color of my skin. They don't know anything about my economic status. And unfortunately that's true of many peoples. True of people who don't speak English as a first language. It's true of people that are from another country in general and come to the United States.

So I think there's a lot of work to be done, to reach our equity goal. But the fact that it's a value, and that we center it across all of our work is fundamental to the change that we want to create and the mission and vision that we've outlined.

[00:20:41] **Rafael Otto**: Yeah. I agree with that. How does that look in terms of a strategy? When we talk about a shifting system in early childhood and if we're doing that with equity like part of the purpose is to advance equity in everything that we do. What's an example of what that would look like for Oregon?

[00:21:00] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: So I think equity, very tangibly, is something that we could examine when it comes to literacy. If you look at literacy outcomes, the data is very clear that children are not reading at grade level. Particularly children of color across all ethnicities.

Less than 50% of children are not testing at third grade reading level. This was pre- pandemic. That's half of children in Oregon are not at the third grade reading level and it rises to 70% and above when you look at children of color. That is a huge issue. It's also very high for children that are low socioeconomic status. It's also a high percentage, not at third grade reading level, who have different learning abilities or disabilities.

We have not figured out how to ensure that our children can read and third grade reading is seen as an indicator to success in everything later on.

[00:21:56] **Rafael Otto**: When you put it that way, it's like...

[00:21:57] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: So I would say we have a crisis when it comes to literacy, and we have not prioritized ensuring that every child has access to teachers who know how to teach reading. And it's become this political controversy over, should we mandate teachers to learn... as the science of reading has come up as a methodology around teaching teachers how to teach reading. It's not a curriculum, which is a misnomer. People have assumed, oh, it's for-profits trying to introduce curriculum. No, it's actually a methodology to teach that is science-based. Based on how children learn and how the brain functions, so that educators know how to teach children how to read.

Now we recognize other things develop the desire to read and the love of reading. And so it's not enough to just teach teachers how to teach reading. You need to do that. And the science of reading and this approach has been used specifically for children who have dyslexia and other barriers to learning like the majority do. Children who are dyslexic can learn how to read.

[00:23:04] **Rafael Otto:** Yeah.

[00:23:05] **Kali Thorne Ladd:** But we need to be intentional in how we teach them. And most teachers don't know how to teach them in that way. People talk about targeted universalism. In this case, if we learn how the science of reading and how to teach teachers how to teach reading, everyone benefits. It supports children with dyslexia. It supports children of color. It supports children that speak English as a second language. I think it is important that we don't stop there because it does impact that Black child, when they have literature that looks like them and represents their family. It matters for any child that they see themselves in what they're reading.

And so ensuring that we have community-based solutions that incorporate culturally- specific books, books that represent different family compositions, books that are in different languages, that is also important. So an equity approach recognizes that we need to know how to teach children how to read. And we need community-based solutions on incorporating culture and community and that process of reading, so that children don't only know how to read, but they love reading. Because children always come back to what they love. People, humans go back to what they love. And you can teach someone how to do a thing, but they won't continue to do that thing unless they enjoy doing it.

And so the two are complimentary. And that's the area where, when we're looking at it with an equity lens, we can make a difference.

There's also the piece of it, where it's so important for kids to have the place to learn. A place that they feel connected to, and a sense of belonging with teachers who value them. And, to get into a little bit more of the wonkier side of things, like we need to expand facilities, like we need the physical spaces and the buildings and classroom in place, so that we can have an early childhood system.

Yes, we have a crisis when it comes to facilities. We don't have enough spaces for children to learn and particularly young children. And the crisis looks different in different parts of our state. In the urban areas, we were seeing a particular issue with child care rentals and people being kicked out of their rentals, and not being able, with no notice, that are running childcare facilities and a dearth of options to rent a space from.

In some of our rural areas, the distance between childcare and a family can be 30, 40, 50 miles. And there's not the populated, um, options. We need literally places that are closer in proximity. They're not gonna look the same as what we'll see in our urban areas. But in both cases, we

don't have place for children to learn in that they know, as you said, that they belong and they see themselves and they feel valued.

But we literally physically need more spaces. And this is an area where I can see the business community across Oregon stepping up and helping address this issue. And I have been touched and moved by how business and the public sector have come together to support what we're seeing with some of our houses population and come up with creative solutions.

We've also seen this with the crisis of the wildfires and how we were able to create space for people. We can do the same for early childhood facilities and we can be creative and innovative. We can change some of the regulatory barriers to ensure that every child has a place to learn that is in proximity to where they live and not 50 miles away.

[00:26:31] **Rafael Otto**: Right. Also important. We have one more value.

[00:26:36] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: "Learning." Yes.

We embrace multiple ways of knowing and pursue growth and learning through research and our connections with each other, and with the children and families that we serve, and the communities that we operate in. I think this value is about having a posture of humility and not assuming that we know it all, that we have all the answers.

We are a learning organization, which means we are constantly having to listen and adjust and recognize there are things we know and there's a lot that we don't know. And so we have to approach our work with humility and with the willingness to listen and understand and look to community as experts, recognizing that there is so much that community knows. We have a tendency, particularly I think in policy and research organizations, to assume the institutions have all the knowledge. And, you know, I attended some of these elite institutions and there is a lot of knowledge there. But that knowledge does not supersede the knowledge that exists from those closest to the work through those closest to the lived experience.

And it's interesting in early childhood research and larger education research, we're finding that some of the research studies that we hung our hats on were not accurate. And we did not make valid inferences based on those studies and now it's coming to light. "Oh! They only talk to really privileged kids in this really high income community and yet we put so much behind that." If we had really taken a posture of learning, we would have gotten inputs that I think would have informed some of the policies that we made and would be better for children.

[00:28:10] **Rafael Otto**: What else do you want people to know about Children's Institute and the path that we're on?

[00:28:16] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: Children's Institute is dedicated to, I would say, changing the game for Oregon and helping Oregon be a place that every child born here will learn and thrive. It is not that way right now, but I do believe that we can get there. I think that there is so much

brilliance that exists within our communities. So much dedication to children. And I think despite our division, Oregonians, when put in the same space with one another can see the humanity of one another. And I think there is hope in that. I think Children's Institute is catalytic to that happening, and I think that the future is bright for early childhood with Children's Institute in the mix.

We are ready to learn. We are going to honor children and lift up children and lift up community in every way we can. We're going to amplify the messages that maybe you've not heard before, because they're buried in a small community. Or they're buried in a cultural community that the majority and the mainstream doesn't interact with, and we're going to shine a light on them.

And I think we know that when you highlight the ideas of a diverse group of people, some of the best solutions come from that. And we've seen that over time in history across sectors. Children's Institute is focused on doing that. You're going to hear more from children.

And as we started this broadcast with, children have so much to teach us. And as we begin to share their voice and our learnings from them, we will be better as a society. So I am excited about where Children's Institute is headed. We have a great team here, dedicated staff. Equity is not just a moniker. It's very popular right now to talk about equity and social change, but this is something that people experience internally. That this is something that they are dedicated to at their soul level. And I think as a result, the work will be meaningful.

[00:30:08] **Rafael Otto**: So good talking with you, Kali. It's been great. Let's do it again sometime.

[00:30:12] **Kali Thorne Ladd**: I'm sure, I'm sure we will, Rafael. Thanks for giving me the time to talk.