



Zebra Your Edge Podcast

Host:

- **Therese Van Ryne, Senior Director of External Communications at Zebra**

Guest:

- **Kristen Daniels, Executive Director, Bernie's Book Bank**

Transcript

00:00:00:00 - 00:00:33:19

Therese

Thank you all for tuning in to the Your Edge podcast. I'm Therese Van Ryne, Senior Director of External Communication at Zebra Technologies, and my guest today is from an organization that's near and dear to all of our hearts: Bernie's Book Bank. Kristen Daniels has joined Bernie's as its Executive Director, and I know she has big plans for the organization. So, I thought it would be good for her to share those plans with you because it's so important that we all do our part to increase childhood literacy.

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Therese

Thanks for being here, Kristen.

00:00:35:18 - 00:00:39:06

Kristen

Oh, thanks for having me, Therese. I'm so happy to be speaking with you today.

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Therese

Absolutely. You know, Zebra's been working with Bernie's Book Bank for many years, and I personally authored a book called Zippy's Special Gift a few years ago in an effort to help raise funds for Bernie. All proceeds from the book sales go to buying more books for your team to distribute. But what's been interesting is that as I've talked about Bernie's, and Zebra has supported Bernie's in other ways, people from other regions of the world have asked why we're investing so much time and money in supporting what they consider to be a hyper local organization.

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Therese

Some may even say, "Bernie's only distributes books in the Chicagoland area. Why are you pushing for global support?" Well, from my perspective, the reason why everyone should be rallying behind Bernie's, donating books or money, volunteering time, even buying and gifting the "Zippy's Special Gift" book, is because there are global consequences to local literacy challenges. The books being distributed to children in Chicago today might just be what leads to the next big idea to benefit the world.

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Therese

So whether you work for a company in India or France or Brazil, or you just need someone to solve for a problem you're having in Japan or Australia or even South Africa, the books that Bernie's is distributing today might just give you what you need in the future. And that's why literacy, though enabled locally through organizations like Bernie's, requires global action by you, me and our families, friends and colleagues.

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Therese

Would you agree, Kristen?

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Kristen

Therese, you said it perfectly. It's an issue that we're dealing with currently at a very local level, but it does have a grand global impact. So, Bernie's is an organization that supplies free, new and gently used books to children currently in the Chicagoland area, but 300,000 children a year. I mean, we know that those kids will have an impact far outside of the neighborhoods where they currently live and attend school as well.

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Kristen

So, it is a small piece of the puzzle, but it's an incremental step for us. So it starts in and around Chicago, and our vision and our founder's vision is far grander, and we'll be expanding soon. So, you're so right: A local a local drive right now, but a global impact.

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Therese

So, with that in mind, I know the vision of your leadership team is to extend the reach of Bernie's Book Bank beyond Chicagoland. Can you share more about that ambition?

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Kristen

Yeah, absolutely. And at this point, it's kind of a dual purpose mission. So if you don't mind, I'll backpedal just enough to say that I am relatively new to my role. But it was created with two things in mind: to have a super focused individual and team in and around the Chicagoland area to finish the work that was started 14 years ago, but also to free up the time of both our CEO and our founders so that they could take a stronger look at what national expansion would look like.

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Kristen

Their vision includes Bernie's Book Bank being in all major metropolitan areas, and we've got great partners in businesses like Zebra and others that are helping us to identify the cities that have the greatest need, where those supports would be, and how we can expand in an efficient and effective manner. So it started here and grows by the day.

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Therese

That's amazing. And I would imagine your current focus is rebuilding the book bank after the recent storm damage, right?

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Kristen

It is. Book banking, I'm learning, is not a dull business. Mother Nature threw us a bit of a wrench earlier this fall. Again, as you can imagine, water and paper products don't particularly mix. We are blessed to have an incredible team here in our facility that helped to manage some of the issues before it became too far spread. But we did.

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Kristen

We had a storm hit the building earlier this fall. We lost tens of thousands of books. The corner of the roof pulled up in what was a kind of a freak microburst is what we are being told. And we are we're blessed to have insurance to cover a lot of it. We are incredibly blessed to have a team that was able to respond swiftly and keep the damage from getting much worse.

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Kristen

But we did miss some of our best friends here for a while. We are a small but mighty team at the facility. There's about 35 of us that work here at any given point, but the volunteer numbers that we get any given day or any given week, that workforce is ten fold. And so after the storm, we did have to close our volunteers for a while to be able to manage what was going on inside the building.

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Kristen

But the response has been fantastic. People came back in droves when they were able to help. Our team was planned well enough in advance that we didn't miss distributions partners, volunteers, donors, publishers reached out and helped us replenish in a quicker manner than maybe we would have been allowed to otherwise. So it was eventful certainly, and it was at the start of the school year, which - you know, our team would certainly agree that we're busy all times of year -

00:05:32:09 - 00:05:46:05

Kristen

but at the beginning of the school year, you want to make sure you're starting off on the right foot. These kids and their teachers, their families, their principals, they count on us. And so I'm really proud to report that we did not miss one day, we did not miss one distribution to the schools and the children that need it most.

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Kristen

But it was it was eventful around here for a while.

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Therese

I bear Well, congratulations on that. It shows the teamwork and collaboration you have in place. That's incredible. Thank you. We want our listeners to know that we're still selling the book Zippy Special Gift on Amazon and all the money made from the profit of that book continues to go to Bernie to help in your rebuilding effort and other activities will include the link with this podcast episode so people can check it out.

00:06:15:28 - 00:06:21:08

Therese

But if they've already bought a book or want to contribute to the book bank in other ways, how best can people help you?

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Kristen

Certainly. Well, it's kind of a three fold approach, and to be honest, it's one of the things that I love talking about most when it comes to Bernie's. There's just really easy entry points. I've yet to find anyone that can't get behind the mission of literacy, supporting children's education initiatives, equal access. But you can join us as a donor.

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Kristen

You can join us as a volunteer. Come spend 90 minutes or 2 hours with our team if you're in and around the Chicagoland area. You can also follow us on social media and share our messages, learn more about us on our website, and certainly by donating books, whether they be gently used or otherwise, is great. I think one of my favorite stories is the first time that I met the Zebra team, knowing full well the reputation and the partnership that you guys have had with us in the past.

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Kristen

I got to come to Zebra Kids Day, and I got to see you read the book and I got to see the children's response to it. And it's great. It's fun. It's relatable, it's energetic. And frankly, it's something we think that that all kids should have access to. So thank you guys for being the kind of partners that you are.

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Kristen

You walk the walk and you talk the talk.

00:07:24:21 - 00:07:41:23

Therese

Well, thank you. It's our pleasure. I know you have a background in fundraising and you've spent most of your career working in education and with nonprofits. So have you found it easier or harder to rally support for Bernie's than, say, the YMCA or USA Swimming Foundation where you've served before?

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Kristen

Thanks for asking. It's a great question. I feel uniquely well-qualified to be a part of the team here because of that background in fundraising. But to be real honest, it's what I touched on: I have yet to find anyone that can't get behind the mission of the work that we're doing. And to me, it's the perfect storm. You get to invite people to participate

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Kristen

at a modest level. We give children eight quality books a year. We can source, process and distribute those books for about \$2 a piece. So for a \$16 gift, you can have an immediate impact in the life of a child. And I think that that that discussion is really compelling. Part of the work that I'm most proud of is that we can talk directly about the partnerships that we have in the areas where we all live and work.

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Kristen

So that's important to me. Our work has a global impact, but on a local level, you know where those dollars are going. We've got 1,200 partner schools that we work with. Again, those 300,000 children, we give away 2.5 million books every year. But we are blessed to have partners like you and others that help take our work to a national and a global level.

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Kristen

So to have that kind of power behind a really relatable mission, it just it feels too good to be true.

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Therese

I love it. During the height of the pandemic, it seemed like education was the center of every conversation, and there was immense societal passion to support children to ensure they don't fall behind. Have you found that attention on this issue, that the activism we saw in support of children's learning, has started to wane? Or do you feel it's been sustained?

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Therese

Has the pandemic been a wake up call and now people truly understand the importance of giving children access to books, access to educators, and the space to imagine and learn?

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Kristen

To be honest, I think that passion has only been amplified in the last couple of years, and I think it drew attention to an issue that maybe we hadn't put a lot of thought into or we took advantage of. Some of the strongest relationships that I've forged since coming on board are with educators, the principals and the teachers.

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Kristen

And they can say first hand they saw a difference in their children when they weren't together in person, when they weren't able to share the resources that they had in their classroom. And these weren't necessarily kids that could rely on books being in their home that they could feed off of either for education or entertainment purposes during that time.

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Kristen

So in my mind, it really drove home the importance of the work that we do. And I know that it's not just us that continues to feel just as strongly about what needs to be provided for kids moving forward. And it almost sounds cliché sometimes, but the children are our future leaders and our future teachers...our future parents and politicians and purchasers.

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Kristen

Everything we're doing now will have a great impact two decades from now. It's just it's not it's not time to rest easy. And certainly others feel the same way.

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Therese

Mm. I love to give and receive books as gifts, but in the age of technology, I feel like it's more common for devices to be gifted or requested in situations where you might not just be able to convince someone that books still hold value. What's the best next thing? How do we still support children's literacy or even adult literacy?

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Therese

Could the addition of subtitles to multimedia content, to videos, for example, help improve literacy or the gifting of audiobooks where someone could read along?

00:11:02:02 - 00:11:23:14

Kristen

Hey, we can certainly get behind any of that. And in a perfect world, in a perfect storm, a child or student would have access to all of that. It's not necessarily the case. I think some of the grandest part of our work and the studies that we know most frequently come up are the younger that a child reads or gets read to, the more becomes an integral part of their being.

00:11:23:16 - 00:11:46:19

Kristen

And so Bernie's provides books to children ages birth through sixth grade. And when we have those donations of gently used books or publisher donations, other things that we have access to, we partner with clinics, we partner with hospitals, we get them into parents' and families' and caregivers' hands early. So that's something that those babies grow up with and can keep with them.

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Kristen

We would hope that that instills a love of reading - again, whether it's for academic purposes or entertainment or just an escape. I think there's something about holding a book in your hands and envisioning yourself in those pages right? That's just a little different than seeing it on a screen. I can't imagine that that's an antiquated way of thinking.

00:12:06:09 - 00:12:20:19

Kristen

But we do talk a lot about it. People say, "Wouldn't it be easier to give devices and they can pre-populated?" And, you know, it dives deeper into not everyone has the same access and tools to keep those things up. You can't argue with the power of books.

00:12:20:22 - 00:12:46:23

Therese

Right. Absolutely agree. While you and the team are doing an exceptional job at distributing books throughout the Chicagoland community and beyond, even locally, you can only reach so many people each day. So how can our community of listeners organically support your mission in their communities? If someone wants to ensure books are available to children or can they do besides donating to a library or taking a child to a library to explore?

00:12:46:26 - 00:13:16:28

Kristen

Those are two really great sources, and I appreciate you asking. We continue to have a waitlist in and around the Chicagoland area, so the need for gently used books is always there. The need for volunteers is always there. I always like telling this story... One of my first experiences here, other than meeting the founder and hearing the passionate side of it, was coming in and being a volunteer on the floor. And our production center team - I call them "directors of first impressions, right? -

00:13:16:29 - 00:13:37:03

Kristen

they welcome people in and you realize that you're part of a movement so much bigger than yourself. So if you're local, we would always invite you in to volunteer or for a tour. If you are in another area and you are interested in possibly bringing a Bernie's Book

Bank to your town, I would ask you to reach out to anyone on our leadership team, and we're certainly collecting all of the data.

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Kristen

So we know what our road map looks like. But identifying local champions across the country will be critically important to expanding our work as well. So we like to think there's something for everyone. And the more people that know about the mission of Bernie's Book Bank, the work that we do and how we'd like to expand, I think the sooner and stronger we'll be as a team.

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Therese

100%. I just read a story in your newsletter today where you reflected with a young man, I think, by the name of Ray, who was a senior in high school. Right? And he talked about the impact that your books had on his childhood and his journey to where he is today. And it really moved me. So thank you so much for for all the hard work you and your team are doing and for being here with us today.

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Therese

It has been wonderful getting to know you and we wish you and the entire Bernie's Book Bank team continued success.

00:14:26:00 - 00:14:38:21

Kristen

Thank you. Thank you for having me join you today. And thank you for the continued partnership. It's a relationship I learned about early, but your faith in our mission and our work is unparalleled.

00:14:38:23 - 00:14:58:28

Therese

Thank you so much, Kristen. And thank you to all our listeners for tuning in. If you'd like to hear more from inspiring women like Kristen, visit the Your Edge blog and browse our extensive library of podcasts and written interviews. Until then, I'm Therese Van Ryne, signing off until next time.



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