

WOCAndAllies_EP86

Elaine Lou Cartas: Legacy leaders. I have my ex boss on this podcast,

Elaine Lou Cartas: Mr. Mark Daly. You were welcome. Mark was my first boss out of college in 2010. This LA girl moved to Des Moines, Iowa, and I was a field organizer. You were the campaign manager. We were working on a campaign in Iowa. And I've always known Mark to be this big shot, former communications director for Hillary Clinton, since then working with 30 members of Congress growing this digital marketing agency in LA.

Elaine Lou Cartas: So you moved to my hood with celebrities and what was beautiful as I was sharing with you before we hit record was, you were just this shining bright star to you turned 40, wanted to become a dad.

Mark Daley: It happens. it happens. I, fell in love and that's, that's what felt right.

Elaine Lou Cartas: When did you realize you wanted to become a foster parent? we both live in LA. Everyone always talks about surrogacy or private adoption. What made you want to go this route?

Mark Daley: Yeah. So we were, my husband and I met in 2015 no, I'm sorry, we got married in 2015. We met a few years earlier.

Mark Daley: Yeah. Yeah. And the first time I saw him interact with his nieces and nephews, I just knew that he should be a dad, right? And growing up gay, I really didn't think that being a dad was an option for me. I'm, older than you, as and my generation there and that, growing up in the 80s, honestly, like it wasn't really an option for us.

Mark Daley: And I grew up in an area where I didn't know any adults who were gay or openly gay at least. And so two dads driving carpool was just not a normal sight for us. But as I, met my husband and of course we were living in LA where it was much more normal and then of course marriage became legal and we were just so caught up in it, we decided let's, do this.

Mark Daley: We were actually looking at surrogacy as well. But I have three cousins who entered my family through foster care. And so it was something that I was always passionate about. So we had started to explore that as an option and then ultimately decided that we would do that, holding out that maybe we would do surrogacy at some point as well, but this was ultimately what, the right way for us.

Elaine Lou Cartas: Yeah. And since my, audience is a woman of color, BIPOC, I want to start with the bigger picture because not everyone listening to this episode Maybe not considering foster care, maybe even doesn't want kids, but knowing your background in politics, I'm not surprised that this book came out during election year, during a presidential election year, knowing you Mark can you share why it is important for us to be educated about the foster care system, how to create a better society and the problem with those aging out of the system?

Mark Daley: Yeah, there's so much there to that question, Elaine, but I'll tell you, really. Being involved with the foster care system really opened my eyes to a lot. we, you and I work together in democratic politics, right? Like we were trying to make sure everyone had access to healthcare and everyone was treated fairly and equally and so on and so forth.

Mark Daley: But the truth is there are a ton of people in our, communities and every community across this country that are falling behind. They're falling between cracks. And these are families that are struggling with mental health issues, with drug addiction. There's things like fentanyl, there's the mass incarceration issue, we have an increasing number of women who are going to jail in America, 80 percent of whom have minor

children, all of these issues, whether it's addiction, whether it's incarceration, whatever it might be, the end result is these children of these adults end up in foster care.

Mark Daley: And so this is a system that you never hear anything about unless it's terrible. And we needed to do more to lift it up. and so it being an election year, it helped. honestly, I'll just tell you, it was more about timing of when I finished writing as opposed to being super calculated and when the swivel was going to come off.

Mark Daley: I

Elaine Lou Cartas: thought, I was like, Mark knew that it was going to be a presidential election year with a higher turnout than off, off years. Okay. I do,

Mark Daley: but I hope to hear candidates talking about what they're going to do about foster care and what they're going to do to help these families that are living on the margins across our country.

Mark Daley: That's my goal.

Elaine Lou Cartas: What can we do, considering it is an election year? What are questions we can ask?

Mark Daley: I will say, first and foremost, obviously, there's a crisis level need for foster parents across the country. That being said, not everyone should foster. It's not for everybody, right? We need a lot of people, but we don't need everybody.

Mark Daley: And I think people should, go in, do the, if they're thinking about it, do their research, do their homework, talk to other foster parents, see what it's like and then figure out if it's right for them. That, the other thing that we can all do is if you have time to give, we need mentors. We need COPSAs, which are Court Appointed Special Advocates.

Mark Daley: These are people who volunteer their time, they get training, they go into the court and they become the spokesperson for a child or sibling set, maybe, that are in foster care in the courts to make sure that they're getting what they want. And the judges are listening to their voices. The other thing that we can do, honestly, is if you don't have much time, it's that every one of us is getting mail in our You know, at our doors or getting phone calls or watching TV ads or getting asked for a vote by people knocking on our doors or their staff.

Mark Daley: This is a time to ask them, Hey, I want to learn more about what they're doing about foster care. when you have this one issue that is really the backstop of every other challenge faced by people in our society, there's something we could all do and that is lift up this issue.

Elaine Lou Cartas: It's interesting because even before we had this interview, I was doing Muay Thai and I was talking to one of my friends who.

Elaine Lou Cartas: Who, she's also gay as well, her and her fiancé are talking about it. I told her about your book, obviously.

Mark Daley: Great.

Elaine Lou Cartas: And, as people talk about the trauma that kids go through, even, once they get adopted from birth.

Mark Daley: Yeah.

Elaine Lou Cartas: How did you navigate that? I know you had to go through your own training process as well.

Elaine Lou Cartas: How did you prepare for that with you being a dad? You

Mark Daley: know, it's, interesting, right? the very nature of adoption means. Adoption has to begin with a loss. So before, before one family can be formed, another family has to end. And that's really the hard truth for anybody looking to private, go through private adoption or foster care.

Mark Daley: So these images of this giant celebration that I had in my head, were not really as rosy as I had, conjured them up to be. That being said, they give you significant training on the front end and there's tons of, books and other things available to you to work with.

Mark Daley: And, for us we, started fostering with young, kids. So three months old and 13 months old, we had two brothers that were given to us. And And it was a little bit different dealing with little children as opposed to older kids or teenagers. And I think that's just really about being informed.

Mark Daley: The other thing that they have is that, I think this is like the most important thing a foster parent can do is to be an advocate for their child. And so for us, it was like, what access do we have to therapists, to behavioral health specialists, both for us and for the child. obviously for the child, but for us as well, to be able to know if we're not, if they're only with them an hour a week, if we're not supporting them.

Mark Daley: the lessons that they're being taught or the tools they're being taught to help manage different things that come up, then, it's not really gonna stick with it, they're not gonna stick with it.

Elaine Lou Cartas: Yeah. That

Mark Daley: was some of the things that we had. there's so many resources out there, especially for us here in Los Angeles, there's more therapists than there are CVS, so it's, easy to find one and the county pays for them for you.

Mark Daley: They make it really, it's, user friendly responsible.

Elaine Lou Cartas: I think you'll appreciate this also. I was talking to a friend and she has two teenage daughters and one of her teenage daughters went up to her and said, Mom, I need to go to therapy. And obviously she's all for it, but as a parent, you're worried like what is happening?

Elaine Lou Cartas: And she's Oh, of course. But if you feel comfortable, can you share why you want to go to therapy? It's all my friends are going, so I want to go to therapy too, Mom. that's the type of peer pressure that, that we need in this world. I'll do it.

Mark Daley: Hey, it's much better than something, being bullied on Instagram, right?

Mark Daley: just take it that way. It's, that's a good thing, right?

Elaine Lou Cartas: Yeah. I'll

Mark Daley: take it.

Elaine Lou Cartas: And I'm just warning for our listeners, there's a spoiler alert, but one of the things that when I was going through your book that you learn is you're not guaranteed the child, a child that may stay at your home. And I know that didn't initially happen.

Elaine Lou Cartas: How did You navigate that and what do you want to share with our listeners who might be interested in foster care?

Mark Daley: Sure. for us, going in that the goal of foster care is a regulation, right? the, no one should ever be taking someone else's child away deliberately, right?

Mark Daley: It's you have to give them a time to work through whatever their challenges are, whether it's addiction, mental health, Blah, blah, blah, right? And over a period of time, the biological parents or caregivers are given time to, and services to, to try to remedy whatever it is that they were facing.

Mark Daley: And in California, it's about a 55 percent reunification rate. 55 percent of the kids who enter foster care reunify back with their biological parents, which is a, good rate. it's, it's a high rate. Obviously, they'd like it to be higher. and but for us, we knew that there were percentages of kids that then need to be adopted by loving caregivers, right? And that's what we wanted. We had heard stories of a baby's born in the hospital, mom steps outside to smoke a cigarette, doesn't return, and that was what we wanted. A child who'd been abandoned or a child who just needed parents who, could be there.

Mark Daley: So we had planned on that, but of course planning and reality don't always align. And we got a call for two boys that were three months and 13 months old. And then, when we asked a list of questions, it sounded like it was something that they probably weren't going to be able to go back from.

Mark Daley: the parents are dealing with a significant number of issues. And so we said yes. And then, they stayed with us for about 16 months before ultimately they were sent home. And, the hardest part for us was not necessarily the giving of your heart and knowing that it might get broken.

Mark Daley: that was a, that's what these kids need, right? Like they need to know they're loved and they're worthy of love. And so if you're not willing to give your heart, then don't do this. But it was more the fear that if they went home, would they be safe? And ultimately in our case, and to keep spoiling this for you we, didn't think that they were going to be.

Mark Daley: And we felt, like we weren't being heard. When we kept voicing that and ultimately what happened was, over about two years later, they re entered care with due to some abuse on behalf of the parents. So it was really a shame but that was, the end of our story there.

Mark Daley: We actually, but we did, as after a year after the boys left our care, we had found that we were about to start the surrogacy process again and got a call that they were siblings, three children. Who were not going to be reunified with their biological parents for whatever reason.

Mark Daley: And so we went out and, learned more about them, found out, met them and, it was side sealed and delivered at that point. they moved in and we proceeded to adoption.

Elaine Lou Cartas: Yeah. I know, not surprised using all of your experience working in political campaigns to doing marketing and communications.

Elaine Lou Cartas: You've what helps to date 10, 000 families. Explore the foster care system.

Mark Daley: Yeah. So what that means is I work with when I started doing my, my, when I started becoming a foster parent, I was helping with nonprofit. So we got this idea to like, what they do on recruitment. And I was like, this is weird.

Mark Daley: You're, you're going to like events, and it just seemed like that's really productive for really inexpensively. We could run some ads online. And so we started doing that. It worked out to be a really successful model. And today we've actually, we've helped bring in, it actually goes to about 15, 000 families that have just been acquired.

Mark Daley: That doesn't mean they're all of a sorta. That would be entirely misleading statement. But it is, these are people that are thinking about it, or have thought about it, or just wanted war information and of course, some people it's not right for. And, ultimately, it's something that we find people think about for a long period of time.

Mark Daley: It's usually somewhere between 18 and 24 months that they're like, maybe I could do this until, all right, I'm ready, let's go,

Elaine Lou Cartas: So going back to what you just said right now, and even in the beginning of the conversation, you shared not everybody should be a foster care parent. For what qualifications or check marks would you suggest or recommend in terms of people who can be a foster care parent?

Elaine Lou Cartas: And what should they also prepare for, warnings as well?

Mark Daley: I say, look, I think there's a certain set of criteria, that's required, right? And not running into all that, but just to say from a mentally, what does it take question, I think that in the book I do this sort of very comically because I'm much more, Of a high strung person than my husband is who like teaches meditation and is an actor and is very chill, and so for, the two of us, it's, complete opposites in the way that we approach this.

Mark Daley: He's, he also has, two plus decades of sobriety, which really helps him look at the world in this one day at a time. Mentality, where I, on the other hand wanted nothing but a glass of wine at the end of the night, every night, only at a distance. That's

Elaine Lou Cartas: the

Mark Daley: Mark Daly I

Elaine Lou Cartas: remember.

Mark Daley: Yeah, it was just, it was one of those, it was very stressful and I didn't, we didn't know if they were saying or going and I wanted certainty and I couldn't get certainty and if you're a person that doesn't deal well with the unknown, then it's probably not right for you, And then there's obviously it's like you need to have, bedrooms and, whatever else, things like that are available, but there's no like real discrimination against people, you can, you don't have to be married, you can be single things like that.

Elaine Lou Cartas: I think what I'm hearing is knowing that there are things out of your control.

Mark Daley: Yes.

Elaine Lou Cartas: And things will shift and change.

Mark Daley: Yes.

Elaine Lou Cartas: Yeah. That's

Mark Daley: exactly what you're hearing. And that's, and that is a lot of the book. It's this roller coaster ride of are they staying? Are they going? If they go, are they going to be okay?

Mark Daley: Is this guy going to jump off a cliff from his own anxiety? this just how does this all pan out? and there's a lot of look, we were just first time foster parents. We were first time parents. And while Jason was definitely like a baby whisperer. I was 40 years old and, had changed some diapers, but I didn't know what to do when they were having tantrums or melting down, Yeah, It was a learning curve.

Elaine Lou Cartas: Why did you want to call this book safe? Why was that important to you? And the message you wanted to bring out to your readers?

Mark Daley: it's funny, actually, my editor came up with the name because the original name that I had was Protection, and I thought about it from this multiple, I would say double entendre, but it's probably more like this idea of like child protection, like protecting yourself and your heart in this situation and this whole idea of like, how do we protect all of the children in our community?

Mark Daley: But ultimately also it had like weird connotations around, safe sex or like other things like that, that were like, maybe this isn't the right title, plus safe as. one syllable and it rolls off your tongue much easier. And so she, my editor recommended that and I loved it. I was like, that's, great. But the whole point behind it for me is at the end of the day, a parent's responsibility is to keep their child safe. It was never with, the boys that went home to their, biological parents. It was never a question of when their parents provide what we can provide. That's not fair.

Mark Daley: We, we come from a place of privilege. We, have been gifted so many things in our lives that they have never had. It was never an us versus them, but there is this minimum standard of, safety, of care that needs to be provided and that's really difficult to, for families to meet sometimes.

Elaine Lou Cartas: Yeah.

Elaine Lou Cartas: Taking your ego out of it.

Mark Daley: Yeah.

Elaine Lou Cartas: And I know that there is an opportunity for you to adopt them back, but also their other siblings. Can you what Yeah.

Mark Daley: Yeah. Fair that. So After we had so the boys had reunified and we waited, just over a year or so to figure out what we were going to do and at this point we're just getting older, and, then we, found out about Amy, Eddie and Josh, our three kids, and so they, we, met them and they moved in and we were moving towards our adoption where they were been with us for about 10 months and we got a call from the county that the boys and a now younger sister who had been born were, had entered foster care, and would we consider taking them in, a foster placement, not an adoption placement, but in a foster placement meaning that they could also be reunified again, also meaning that we would now have six children.

Mark Daley: And these are kids that had been through a lot. They had now been abused, where, they had been removed from their parents again. They certainly wouldn't remember us because they were so little when they

left, and, and a lot of time had passed. there was a lot to consider, and it was a really painful, difficult decision that ultimately we thought, we have to protect the three children that we have.

Mark Daley: And, and, pray that, the system would find another set of loving, caring foster parents who could keep them safe and could care for them and help them during this really difficult time.

Elaine Lou Cartas: Ultimately, you chose a safety for them and for both sets of kids, the kids that I hope

Mark Daley: Yeah. That's, what I, that's what I tell myself, Mark, is there any other last words, tips, or advice you could give our listeners for Two, two groups of people, two targets, I'm thinking about like direct mail, right? When we would write the list for it. So one, one group where they're considering foster care and the other group where they are educating themselves about this.

Mark Daley: I would say, honestly, not to plug the book too much here, but, part of the reason I read the book, initially I said, I'm going to write a policy book. I'm going to tell everyone what needs to happen. And I quickly learned. I don't know the answer to that. our, our, foster parent class trainer said to us in the earlier, she said, if a book was ever written on foster care, it would be called, it depends because every case is different.

Mark Daley: Every foster parent is different. Every biological parent, every social worker, every judge, every child, every situation is different. So it depends. We don't know what's going to happen. And there's no like tea leaves that gives the answer as soon as a kid enters care. And in that case, it's I, so when I wrote the book, it was like, I'm gonna, I'm going to give a very big overview of the foster care system with a lot of stats and data and other things, but I'm going to do it in a way in which it isn't tormenting someone and it doesn't feel like they're reading a textbook from their college class, right?

Mark Daley: So it was sharing our story in a really vulnerable and raw, from a, from a really vulnerable and raw place. And the book, I, hope, and, I've, the best part of writing a book like this is the feedback you get from readers, like the strangers that are hitting me up on Instagram sending me emails just reaching out saying, some of them, like I've given them vocabulary that they didn't know, or that they needed, that have gone through similar situations or, are currently in similar situations. so I really, I, it's been so rewarding on that end. But for folks that, folks that are thinking about it, I'm like, it's, one of those things. I hope that we need people to do it. And I hope there are good people out there that are willing to do it. But I also, just, it's one of those things where it's I think people need to think long and hard about it too, because it impacts everything you do.

Mark Daley: and your family, if you have young children at home and they become bonded with the other kids and they reunify, like what happens, what does this mean? there's. So many different scenarios out there at play. I love it. just knowing you for what, two decades, I think?

Mark Daley: Let's not say we're that old, but we're good.

Elaine Lou Cartas: It's been a long time. You're older than me, Mark. So I'm just aging you out, not me.

Mark Daley: Thank you. Thank you.

Elaine Lou Cartas: But knowing you for two decades, the career that you've had, even before I met you to everything that's led you up to this point to, I'm not even saying the career, but even just being a dad has just helped you.

Elaine Lou Cartas: And so thank you for all the work you do and I, whatever you feel safe sharing, but why don't I would love for you to share how it looks like being a full time dad now with your kids. How does the mornings look and the evenings? Are they still crazy and chaotic?

Mark Daley: Oh yeah, my, my children are 11. So I spent this weekend bouncing around.

Mark Daley: mostly I spent 8 hours in Anaheim at a, dance competition. Which was awesome. But it was, Yeah, selfless

Elaine Lou Cartas: parenting in general to our audience. 8 hours in a dance competition, what else?

Mark Daley: Oh, then I, then we went over to Arcadia for a soccer game. it's just what it is.

Mark Daley: it's a lot of fun. And by the way, we don't live near either one of those places. So it's just, it, that is what it is. It's, it's, a lot of fun though. it really is. There's so much energy and magic around us that, the stuff you learn about human beings and yourself and joy is things that I never thought I would ever experience or could not have even imagined experiencing.

Mark Daley: it's so much fun.

Elaine Lou Cartas: Parenting looks so great on you, Mark.

Mark Daley: I appreciate that. Thank you.

Elaine Lou Cartas: If people want to find you message you because they resonated with this how can they contact you?

Mark Daley: I have a website. It's markdaily. us. And that is the best way to reach me, but also if you are interested in becoming a foster parent, I have a site called thefosterparent.

Mark Daley: com, which helps people in anywhere in the country connect with local agencies about learning more and how they become a foster parent.

Elaine Lou Cartas: Thank you, Mark. Thanks for all you do. Thank you.

Mark Daley: I so appreciate it.