

March 2025 APS TARC Podcast Transcript

The Heroes of APS

Introduction

Andrew Capehart: Welcome to the Adult Protective Services Technical Assistance Resource Center podcast. We come to you with the goal of sharing promising practices and innovations from the adult protective services field, and to highlight what is achievable with new ideas and partnerships to help you envision what may be replicated in your program. Let's join our host, Jennifer Spoeri, APS TARC subject matter expert, and guests in conversation.

Discussion

Jennifer Spoeri: Alright, welcome to the APS TARC Podcast. Today, we're going to discuss an exciting new docuseries project, the Heroes of Adult Protection. We will speak with Joe Applebaum and Stu Maddux of the Clowder Group, a social impact film company. Joe, Stu, thank you for being here today to discuss this groundbreaking project. Before we dive into the podcast, though, Joe, can you give us a little background on how you came to become a filmmaker?

Joe Applebaum: Yeah, absolutely. And thanks so much for having us, Jennifer, it's really our pleasure. So you know, our background is in mainstream television and journalism, and I personally spent it seems like a lifetime in television in Los Angeles and doing all kinds of unscripted shows. And eventually, when Stu and I started working together, we wanted to use our experience for to create social impact on various subjects that we felt people should pay attention to in order to promote change. Sort of use our filmmaking abilities to create change, and that's how we came to HOAP.

Jennifer Spoeri: Alright. Thank you, and Stu, what was your journey?

Stu Maddux: What's my story?

Jennifer Spoeri: What's your story?

Stu Maddux: We all have a story, right? Mine was as a reporter and anchor, and then I kind of got tired of doing the same three- to five-minute, well actually, it's more like one- to two-minute stories, and wanted to work in a longer form, you know, be able to really let people feel a little bit more of what, you know, what was going on with the person we were highlighting, let them walk in their shoes a little bit more. So I worked for companies that made documentaries, and then just got to a place where I was able to kind of do all those projects that I'd always wanted to do my on my own or with Joe, we've been able to kind of delve into a lot of topics that actually, it was a great thing to be able to say, we've helped change people's lives. So, yeah, that's pretty rewarding.

Jennifer Spoeri: That's a great segue, because I was going to ask you, or, or Joe, actually, about what is the Clowder Group, the Clowder Group, and how you came to create a film about APS?

Joe Applebaum: Yeah, I'll, I'll take that. So as I said, you know, Stu and I both had different former careers, but when we, when we decided to start creating our own documentaries, you know, we were living in Los Angeles, and number of personal reasons, we moved to San Francisco, and that's where we've done the bulk of this work. And the Clowder Group, first of all, in case, for those who don't know, a clowder, and that's C, L, O, W, D, E, R, is a group of cats. And yes, we are cat lovers and have a number of cats. The Clowder Group, we, we, as I said, we take on projects that we feel light needs to be shown on. We tackled loneliness and isolation and have a documentary out about that. And we started that before COVID, actually, and that's what led us to Heroes of Adult Protection. After screening our loneliness film at the NAPSA conference, we all got together and decided that we need to inform the public what adult protective services is and clarify that and the hard work that APS workers do to promote adult protective services and try and stop abuse.

Jennifer Spoeri: I still remember the reception you got in San Diego at the NAPSA conference when you showed the clips from all the lonely people and how much it related to the work that adult protective services does, because social isolation is a huge risk factor. So that was great. Everybody was coming up to you. So there's the interest, right?

Stu Maddux: Well I thought we bombed in that.

Jennifer Spoeri: No.

Stu Maddux: You know, like, how different it feels when you're up there, you know.

Jennifer Spoeri: Yeah.

Stu Maddux: So, yeah, it was great to make a connection there between there's always, like, one film leading to the next film, right? So loneliness naturally leads to adults becoming vulnerable, right? And especially, it feels like more and more, and I think, more and more that's recognized by predators as right, as just a gateway to really take advantage of a person.

Jennifer Spoeri: Yeah, they do exist. So Stu, tell us about the goals of this project. What do you hope to get out of this? Or what do you hope to do for adult protection?

Stu Maddux: I mean, I would really, first and foremost, like for professionals to feel inspired about what they do. And I think we all kind of like get jaded is not the right word, but, you know, on a day-to-day basis, we kind of forget that we're doing some, you know, you all are doing some amazing work out there. And secondly, to also let the public know that, break some of the misconceptions out there about what APS does and doesn't do. And I think what's been most interesting among many things for me is the approach, you know, let people understand the approach that APS professionals often take, which is a vulnerable person, well, you know, hey, older person, what do you want? You know, I.

Jennifer Spoeri: A novel approach, isn't it?

Stu Maddux: Yeah, yeah, it's and it's, it feels so safe when you hear that. I'm just so impressed with the work, and I want to share that with the world. And I know Joe does too.

Joe Applebaum: Absolutely. I often say when we present at conferences with, I mean, we're in the middle of the docuseries, but we were already trying to make impact by presenting excerpts, and we have a couple of the episodes finished. And I often will say that we have such great respect for all the APS workers. And clearly, they are not in it for the money. They are.

Jennifer Spoeri: You're not kidding.

Joe Applebaum: They're motivated for other reasons. And you know, we both have such great respect, especially, you know, I would also say with our own parents mine, mine have since passed, but, you know, Stu's mother is getting up there. And something else that, that delving into this, Jennifer, awakened in me was memories of my own mother, and looking back, and she was the victim of financial exploitation, and I didn't even think about it, but through her second husband, after my father passed away, and I didn't even think about it until we started making this.

Jennifer Spoeri: Yeah, it happens far too often. And financial exploitation, you all know, it's right up there with self-neglect. Those are the two most reported forms of adult maltreatment. It's horrible.

Joe Applebaum: I think also people, people want to, they want to know about the financial exploitation, that's, the public is, is extremely interested in, like, what the latest scam is out there. So financial exploitation stories are very important.

Stu Maddux: I was going to say that it's been interesting also, because I've become a caregiver for my mother and I, I see how easy it is to slip into the temptation of, you know, financial exploitation, you know.

Jennifer Spoeri: Yeah.

Stu Maddux: You know what I mean? It's like it be, you know, sometimes it's not a bad person, is somebody doing something bad, you know.

Jennifer Spoeri: Absolutely. So many times the, the perpetrator, quote, unquote, is not a bad person. It's, it's the situation, you know, it's caregiving stress. It's drug and alcohol problems or gambling problems, or just, you know, like you said, with money, it's kind of like white collar crime. Oh, I'm caring for them, so I'll just take a little extra off the top, but.

Joe Applebaum: Right, right, right. I'm buying groceries for them, and I'll get a few things for myself.

Jennifer Spoeri: Exactly.

Joe Applebaum: You know, it start, maybe starts that way, and then grows.

Jennifer Spoeri: Mm hmm, exactly. So along those lines, are you able to share some of the cases highlighted? I think Stu you had mentioned.

Stu Maddux: Yeah, yeah. This so many great stories. One that really, we were talking about financial exploitation. So a gentleman who's, I think he's getting close to 70, but he has always lived in the same home. He has a developmental disability, so his parents did the right thing. They set up a trust for him to be able to live out his life in the only home he know, he knows. That's what he really wants to do. But unfortunately, you know, the trustee that they chose, for whatever reason, began neglecting the repair of the home, and now the home is filled with mold, and this gentleman is suffering from COPD. And I think what's profound for me is the damage that financial exploitation does. Doesn't, it's not, it's not about the money. I mean, yes, it is, but it's about the trust that is broken and never get never comes back, you know? Who are you going to depend on? And this family did the right thing. I think maybe the part of the lesson may be that they would have chosen a different trustee, or multiple trustees, co-trustees, or maybe had somebody watching the trustee right?

Jennifer Spoeri: Yeah.

Stu Maddux: But yes, you know, you try to do the right thing, and sometimes it just doesn't work out.

Jennifer Spoeri: You're bringing up a really good point, because the mortality rate increases with adults that are abused, neglected, and exploited. So people immediately think, Oh, it's just the abuse, but financial exploitation also is associated with increased mortality rates. So, you know, it hurts their psyche.

Stu Maddux: And we want to, we want to show people that so they know, so they raise their ability to identify and understand the different forms of abuse. And I think one of the misconceptions is that you automatically think of abuse as physical and it's much more complicated than that. As you all know, we certainly are no experts. We're learning from you all. So thank you for your patience with us.

Joe Applebaum: You know, I think, I think a couple of other things with the story Stu mentioned is the completely valid that his parents did not choose somebody who, I mean, they didn't pick a bad person, right? But I mean this guy, he, he got his hands on the victim's Social Security as well, and he went away, unfortunately scot free, or virtually scot free, and left local APS office to sort things out with this individual. And it really is heartbreaking.

Jennifer Spoeri: I saw that, but the last NAPSA conference, and it was, it was heartbreaking because he only, he not only neglected the home, he also wasn't paying utilities and things like that, if my memory serves.

Joe Applebaum: Yeah, that's correct. But I think what you know HOAP, Heroes of Adult Protection, ultimately, the heroes really are those who are the survivors, right? And he's a, he's a wonderful example of that. But also, it is never just one hero, right? I think we had a very wise person who will remain nameless, who will probably hear this and tell us, you know, it's got to be heroes plural if you're going to

do this. And these folks came together as a multidisciplinary team, plus their hearts, all their hearts were in it as, as compassionate, empathetic human beings who just went to bat for this guy. And it takes a village, you know?

Jennifer Spoeri: Our village in APS, oftentimes, is the multidisciplinary teams. And that's, again, you know, the plural heroes, because several of the stories, you know, don't it's not just APS workers. They need the financial, they need the medical, the legal. You know, it takes a lot. It takes a team, a village. So very true. So shifting gears a little bit here. I understand that you're also doing a recruitment and retention video, which has always been, you know, top of everybody's minds in APS, especially administrators and directors, and this goes nicely with a recruitment and retention survey that the National APS Training Center did. So can you tell us a little bit about the video and what your plans are for that?

Stu Maddux: Well, we're going to take basically the best, most inspiring moments and inspire people from the series, and hopefully inspire people to want to join this profession or an allied field, to help victims become survivors. And the study dovetails nicely into that. We'll be looking at that ourselves to, to figure out what, you know, points we want to make sure to visualize. And I guess you'd say story-ize, so that it becomes, you know, emotion, there's emotion behind the, the answers in that survey, you know that that's revealed, and it'll be available to, I guess it'll be available Joe, am I talking out of turn? It'll be available to everyone, right?

Joe Applebaum: The, the video? Absolutely. And you know, it's not just recruitment, like we were saying before, that the retention is, is just so key. So hopefully this will encourage people to stay within APS. Or, you know, if you know, maybe more resources or will be devoted towards APS to help them stay at APS.

Jennifer Spoeri: Absolutely, because you know that experience, cumulative experience, cumulative time in APS, is so powerful because you get a good veteran out there, and they, they know how to, to make magic happen and how to speak.

Stu Maddux: You know that that's interesting, Jennifer, because you, we have noticed kind of an intergenerational transference in APS, which is just really amazing. And I'm it goes both ways, but I mean, you have to kind of walk this this job for a while, don't you, and have to pass that along.

Jennifer Spoeri: I always said APS workers need to know a lot about a lot, because you're dealing with people and their lives and their families, and it's, it's an incredible profession, but, you know, that time served, so to speak, is really important. So what else can we talk about? I would love to know what, what has surprised you along the way here, when you really started digging into adult protection, what surprises came to you?

Joe Applebaum: Well, I'll start off. I mean, again, you know, like I said before, I was surprised to when, when we make documentaries, often we're dealing with subjects that have not necessarily touched us.

Now, with loan our loneliness film, “All the Lonely People,” Stu and I along the way realized, you know, actually early on, whoa, we, we also were lonely and were feeling isolated, and it never really occurred to us. And then in this, this docuseries, as I said, I realized, personally that my mother was a victim of financial exploitation. So that was a surprise. But, you know, the other thing that surprises me, or I should say, I'm, I'm just so gratified by, is the amount of caring by APS workers towards their, you know, clients and the victims. It really is truly just amazing and, and what a gift, because they're dealing with so many different types of issues. It's not just abuse. Abuse happens in, you know, many different forms. So I think that that was probably the most surprising for me. But Stu, what do you think?

Stu Maddux: I am surprised at how brave the survivors are and how, really, we ask survivors to talk about their stories. And, of course, we take, you know, care of their confidentiality and that those around them, and also a duty of care to their mental well-being. And that's, you know, it's not easy to relive this in front of a camera, and I'm just struck by how strong people are. Really.

Jennifer Spoeri: Resilient.

Stu Maddux: It's coming from somewhere deep within us. And I maybe, maybe that's another thing that we're we can impart is, is inner strength, but we all have it, you know?

Jennifer Spoeri: Yeah, that's a great point.

Stu Maddux: So that's surprising.

Jennifer Spoeri: Yeah. So how can we, me, the listeners, view clips and stay informed on this project's progress?

Stu Maddux: So we've got a we've got a web page that's got clips. You can go to theclowdergroup.com, backslash, hoap, H, O, A, P, and we'll be updating that, and you can sign up for updates and stuff like that. We're at that point in the process where everybody's kind of like, and then this happens on every, every project, when you gonna be finished, when you gonna be finished? And, and we're like, working so hard every day to kind of get her, get her to the finish line, you know. So check it out and be a part of the journey. This is a group effort and the social hopefully this will impact people, and it certainly does impact us and everybody who's involved. So join us.

Jennifer Spoeri: Yeah, the impact that it'll make for APS is the awareness that we exist and the good work we do and don't do. Because, you know, there are the times when people are calling in a report and it's to change somebody's life, and that person doesn't want to change their life, and they don't need to change their life, they're doing just fine. So it's, it's really upholding self-determination, autonomy, and civil rights.

Stu Maddux: That was another surprise.

Joe Applebaum: Yeah. I have to admit, was the the, the leaning, the leaning into the self-determination part of this. So everybody needs to know that, that that is a priority for professionals in your field.

Stu Maddux: You know, I was just going to say, and I meant to say earlier, that one of the big things that I hope to change is this perception that, you know, APS is some kind of an enforcement agency,

Jennifer Spoeri: Right.

Stu Maddux: The and as you said, you know, people have the right to live their own ways, and APS workers do not have the ability to just walk into somebody's house and, and remove them or remove the suspected perpetrator themselves. But that's the beauty of multi, multidisciplinary teams is APS is leading the charge with this team behind them, which would, you know, include law enforcement. So I have such respect for the work that, that's done. It's amazing.

Jennifer Spoeri: Well, thank you both for your time here, and remember, it's the Clowder Group, C, L, O, W, D, E, R, theclowdergroup.com, backslash H, O, A, P, and I have to tell you, Joe, Stu, you guys are quick studies. You have picked up on adult productive services and the foundational philosophy so well and, and quick and support us so much. So I'm sure,

Joe Applebaum: Wow, that feels so good, because we feel like we are such beginners. Yeah, we, we need some of that intergenerational, uh, transference there.

Jennifer Spoeri: Maybe you'll work in APS someday. You're a solid allied professional. So can't wait to see the final product. And, you know, keep your eyes on the website and enjoy this podcast.

Stu Maddux: Thanks, Jen.

Jennifer Spoeri: Have a good day everyone.

Closing

Andrew Capehart: Thanks so much for listening. To give us feedback on this podcast or reach out to us, please visit our website at APSTARC.acl.gov. This podcast was created by the Adult Protective Services Technical Assistance Resource Center, administered by WRMA, Inc. under contract number 140D0424F1178, from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Community Living, Administration on Aging. Special acknowledgement to the National Adult Protective Services Association, who contributed to this podcast. The views expressed in this podcast do not necessarily reflect the views or policies of the Administration for Community Living or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.