Secretary Eric Friedlander:
The beauty is getting to wake up every day and know that you can make a difference.

LaToya T. Payne:
That's right.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
And you are making a difference.

LaToya T. Payne:
Absolutely.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
And you said, this is like soul work and in many ways it is because we are here for people, we're here for communities, that's our job and how many places can you say that?

LaToya T. Payne:
You can't.

Julianne Hatton:
Hello and welcome to CHFS Community, a podcast about health and wellbeing for CHFS employees across the Commonwealth, hosted by Secretary Eric Friedlander, broadcasting from Frankfort, Kentucky.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Hello CHFS, this is your Secretary, Eric Friedlander and today I have with me LaToya Payne, who is the Director of the Division of Administrative Hearings in the Office of the Ombudsman for the Cabinet and we'll get into what that is but first, hi LaToya.

LaToya T. Payne:
Hi Secretary Freelander. It's really good to see you.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
It's good to see you too. We've actually known each other over many years, just like I've been at the Cabinet for 112 years, you haven't quite been here that long.

LaToya T. Payne:
I've been here for quite a while. I will share the first time I saw you. I was a new employee in the Office of the Ombudsman and you came to talk to us about KECC in your kilt and somebody said, oh, that's just Eric Freelander, he works for KECC. I'm reminded of that.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Somebody else said something to me about that and I haven't worn my kilt into work in a long time and the brilliant idea - which was not - was I was wearing my kilt and doing jump rope at the same time, very bad idea and bad execution. I was able to put them both together.

LaToya T. Payne:
Very good.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
So where did you grow up?

LaToya T. Payne:
I grew up in a little town called Danville, Kentucky. It's just the quietest, perfect little town and I'm sure I'm romanticizing it, but everybody knew everybody. So I love Danville, I still get back there quite a lot. My parents are still there, but yes, that is my home base.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Oh, nice. Any association with Centre?

LaToya T. Payne:
I attended Centre. I graduated from Centre, I told my parents my sophomore year of high school that I was going far-far away. My mother said, no, you're not and she was right. I went to center college, one of the best decisions that I've made.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
It's a great school.

LaToya T. Payne:
Oh it is and the professors there are just so intent upon developing your voice and making you use it. I went there with the determination to major in chemistry, but my advisor, he drew everything out and advised me on what it would take and this is the path you can go, but you
need to look at all of academia. So I found sociology looking in that they were paper back then, course catalogs.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yes.

LaToya T. Payne:
But I majored in sociology while at Centre.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Oh, nice. Well my ties to Danville really are to Pioneer Playhouse.

LaToya T. Payne:
Oh neat.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
We were doing musicals there, so my mom was Mame in Auntie Mame and oh, Annie in Annie get your gun and I was actually in, I think it might have been the King And I way back.

LaToya T. Payne:
Pioneer Playhouse house is a treasure.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
So I knew the Hensons and it's back when they had the pool and the public pool and what was it? The frontier town, I forget exactly what that called, but meant to go this year, I feel so bad, I meant to go this year and I didn't go.

LaToya T. Payne:
I got to a couple of them, was it this year or last, the months are flying together, but Danville it's just a wonderful little town and I appreciate growing up there.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Well, yeah and in Danville folks are really close, so you had a pretty close knit community there too right?

LaToya T. Payne:
I did and do, my mom's from Cincinnati, my dad's from Adair County and so my mom has this huge network of extended family and growing up, I went to two family reunions on her side every year. Then my dad he grew up one of 16 children and so they have a family reunion every year and next year will be our 45th year of having the family reunion. So I always knew it was something special to have that many people who care about me and poured into me and that I
connected with every year. So we are super close still to that many family members. That's how I grew up, it was church and family and fun.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
That's good. What do you think some of the lessons are of having such a big family?

LaToya T. Payne:
You learn to get along, because you don't have a choice. So I learned the idea of community, I learned the idea of different personalities and how I get along with people and I learned finding commonalities in your family. There are values that you hold in common, so I learned to seek those out in other various social gatherings. Most importantly, I learned that deep connection that you can have with people from my family.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Then you can know how to look for that in other people right?

LaToya T. Payne:
That's right. Yeah you can know how to take care of other people, that's the thing as well and how to value them because of the family. Not only because of a family in general, but because of the family I had, we have a family that for 45 years, we've been having these family reunions and nobody argues, nobody fights it's utopia.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Wow that's cool.

LaToya T. Payne:
It's lots of singing, all of that skipped me, the musical talent, all of that, I didn't get any of that, but just tons of - three tables of food - and singing and storytelling, so I've been really blessed.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah sounds like it, that's wonderful. Then you went to Centre and sociology, so where did you go after that?

LaToya T. Payne:
After I graduated at Centre, I went to the University of Kentucky and went to the Family Studies program, so I knew I wanted to work with families and especially families with children, I knew that I wanted that to be my focus, I knew that I did not want to be a child protective service worker, had to eat those words. I knew I wanted to work with families, so in the graduate program it was focused on systems theories and so I learned that framework and I learned that families aren't just living and existing, but they are living with all of these systems around them.
LaToya T. Payne:
I learned that the framework, it helped give shape to how I would interact with families and how I would deliver social services to families. So I really appreciated my time in graduate school for giving me that foundation to be able to look at that and see, and not only in service deliveries to families, but working in branches and divisions and within the Cabinet, understanding that there are the workflows and the systems and what do I need to do to remove barriers so that the service can go forward.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
That gives you a different way of looking at things right?

LaToya T. Payne:
It really does. It helped me to take a step back and to see a bigger picture. At the University of Kentucky I was assigned to an outreach program where we went into a community which we would call disadvantaged and provide some programming to those communities. What I learned was that community was just so full of people who were resourceful and just so talented and often they had the answer to what we saw as problems, they just didn't have the resources to carry it out. So that's one of the things that I learned that generally people had the answers to their problems, they just don't have the resources to carry it out and when they're given the resources, they can do great things. So I learned that working with families as well, it's not always money, sometimes it's knowledge that they need or a voice that they need or connections that they need and so my time there was very valuable and learning those lessons.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Those are great lessons. I mean, it's lessons that we all can learn or relearn because our systems can elevate or can not right?

LaToya T. Payne:
Sure.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Cause trauma is what we talk about and so how do we make sure that our systems are listening to the voices of folks who actually can help us improve our systems, improve what they need? We downplay people's individual and community resilience all the time.

LaToya T. Payne:
We do. It's very easy to see the problems or to see just the surface and not understand all of the resources and all of the gifts and talents that a community can have.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
There are all sorts of different wording around it, coming from a strength based perspective and I think commissioner Straub talks about voices of lived experience. All of that is so vital to what we should be aspiring to do.

LaToya T. Payne:
It's really valuable and one of my professors at Centre College, Dr. Beau Weston, one of the things he made us do was to speak in his class. He did in class, unless everybody said something and he came to me early on in my experience and he said, you have a voice that's unique, you have a voice that's not common here and people will benefit from hearing your voice. I didn't believe him, but because I wanted the A, I used my voice, but it came of value later and so that's the thing that I encourage in others is to use your voice. You have something to say, and to give in your perspective, it's going to help this division, this agency become better.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
The great example of that, just like you're recently within the Cabinet, the social workers who were advocating for that salary and much better compensation and look how it's spread out, it's important for all of us to remember that we have a voice that's unique, we have our own perspective. Doesn't mean people don't agree with us, but still hearing that is so very important.

LaToya T. Payne:
So very true and for one another, we can use our voices for something greater than ourselves.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
That's why we're here right?

LaToya T. Payne:
That's right. That's why I wake up every morning. That's right.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Sounds like you, like me had perhaps some different vocational plans and where we ended up, I was never going to work for government. So how did you wind up with us in the Cabinet?

LaToya T. Payne:
Well, yes I was never going to be a child protective service worker, but I did work for Big Brothers, Big Sisters in a mentoring program that matched children who had parents who were incarcerated, with mentors from faith based organizations. So as I began to see that work, I began to see some of the issues that the children were facing, the families were facing and I had a friend who worked in the Cabinet and she began to explain what her job was. It was like, no, I think that's a good fit and so I came to the Cabinet in 2007 as an investigative child
protective service worker. So the first one out the door when there's a call in, but I was very fortunate that I was hired to work with Julie Snawder, she was my supervisor.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
I remember Julie.

LaToya T. Payne:
Oh gosh, I love Julie, she is incredible. She set me up to succeed, she gave me the time to learn the job, she gradually gave me cases, she coached and she mentored me. I take that with me as a supervisor and as I became branch manager and director. So you have to give people time to learn, otherwise you're setting them up to fail. One of the things I'm thinking about is we're talking about resiliency within the Cabinet, that it's my job as a director to remove barriers and to try to create an environment where my staff don't have to be as resilient. So that's what Julie did for me and that's what I try to do for my staff and try to do as a manager and a supervisor as well, because our job requires a resiliency.

LaToya T. Payne:
We hear incredible things, very traumatic things that we hear, we also know that the decisions that we make, especially within my division, as hearing officers, they know those decisions have real life consequences for people. So you have to be resilient. So it's my job to make sure that they don't have to have an extra layer of resilience in the things that I can control, obviously can't control everything but in the things that I can control to try to limit as much as I can, the resilience that it takes to do this job.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
That's really a wonderful way to look at that. So how long were you with CPS?

LaToya T. Payne:
I was on the frontline for three years and three years doing child protective service work and I loved every minute of it. I worked too hard, I'm a recovering workaholic but after that I went to the Office of the Ombudsman to their appeals section and then became a section supervisor and then I'm branch manager and then I was asked to become a director and I said, no. They asked again.

LaToya T. Payne:
I've never really saw myself as a leader, I've just been really committed to the work, I'm really committed to doing what it is that the Cabinet does. I love that work within my very being and my soul, love the Cabinet and so when I've been caught upon, even if I say no at first, and generally I will say yes, but I've had incredible opportunities and I'm very grateful for them.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
You talked about resilience and the importance of Julie and how she mentored you, but then, you go from frontline to supervisor, that's a gigantic, it's a big difference.

LaToya T. Payne:
It's a very big difference because the frontline worker, you're in their trenches and things change every day. Why are these things changing? As I moved up to management, I begin to see that the laws were changing, that's affecting the work, those who write the regulations, that's affecting work and also the research changes, things happen and we need to be doing our work with the best of research in mind. So yes, it was a big leap for me to go from being that hands on and doing the work to supervising. I understood that as a supervisor, it's my job to support those who do the work, it's my job to remove those barriers to the systems that are within our job duties so that the experts can do their job with this little frustration as I can control.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
That's what we aspire to do, absolutely. That step into supervision is a tough one, I'm not sure it's compensated correctly and then that step into really a directorship having to be a leader and thinking about what that is, that's also a gigantic step, isn't it?

LaToya T. Payne:
It was a huge leap because been able or having to see the organization as a whole and not only sort living for day to day, but also looking into the future and trying to assess future needs was a huge shift for me and I remember my executive director would try to tell me, LaToya, you're in the weeds, you've got to come up higher, you've got to change your perspective of you're too far deep in it. It's been incredible mostly because I have an amazing team and I have people who have been with the Cabinet for decades and they saved me time. I remember when I became a supervisor, I had a gentleman on my team and I would just announce this wonderful idea and he would say, LaToya you're not going to want to hear this, but we tried that and here's what happened.

LaToya T. Payne:
We'll do it but we tried it before and here's what happened and of course my idea would crash and fail and so I learned to tell him, I said, it is your job to save me time and I learned to listen to the experts, to listen to the people who actually do the job. I need to have vision and I need to be able to project to the future but I also need to listen to those who have boots on the ground because they have a valued perspective and it will save time.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
I define it as there isn't anybody who doesn't have what I call blind spots, where you just can't see based on your personality, based on folks you know, based on what you know, we're going to have blind spots and it's so important that somebody, I'll make the decision when I make the
decision, but that it's not only save time, but it's like not walk into something that's just going to be awful.

LaToya T. Payne:
Yes and it's so very important because I've been a state employee for a very long time and when you've been there for a long time, you have that knowledge base and you can see the unintended consequences coming a mile away. So yes, it's very valuable.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Sometimes you have to make unpopular decisions.

LaToya T. Payne:
That's true, you just got to roll with it, yeah absolutely.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Work on making lemonade out of all those lemons.

LaToya T. Payne:
That's so very true.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
In those points you have to work on inspiring folks, so how do you work on inspiring folks around you?

LaToya T. Payne:
I'm inspired by people around me, which is very important and as I'm inspired, I can inspire others but for me, inspiration, as I try to provide inspiration to others, I try to keep that positive attitude, I do a lot of reframing, but then I also focus back on why we do what we do. That's the inspiration, it's not about anything else except for the residents of Kentucky and making sure that people have what they need, that's why we do what we do. In the division, we're making sure that they have appeal rights, that they have the voice that they are entitled to according to the law and so I do that a lot that let's focus back on while we're here and what we're doing and that's where I find inspiration and that's how I try to inspire others.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Folks who listen to these podcasts will be not surprised that I'm going to say that that's the beauty of working for this Cabinet, the beauty is getting to wake up every day and know that you can make a difference and you are making a difference. He said, this is like soul work and in many ways it is because we are here for people, we're here for communities, that's our job and how many places can you say that?
LaToya T. Payne:
You can't, you're empowered to make a difference, that's incredible.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
It is, it's a gift. I think it's a gift.

LaToya T. Payne:
Yes, it absolutely is and that's why I try to remember on the days when I'm mired in administrative things. I get to do this work for the residents of Kentucky and I can make a difference and that's why I started, that's why I started with child protective services work and that's why I'm still here.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yeah it's a privilege.

LaToya T. Payne:
It is absolutely, every day.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
I don't know as I've said this to you directly, but coming back and knowing where the hearing's branch has been and where it is now, more leadership has just been fantastic and I want to thank you for that.

LaToya T. Payne:
Well, I really appreciate you saying that and I will say my success is owed to my team, they worked so hard. One of the things that happened when I came to the division is I realize they were being forced to use the system that couldn't tell anybody the work they were doing. So folks were doing the work, but no one could see it and because the system wasn't working. So sometimes we try to fix people or things when we just need to fix the system.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Amen, so many systems to fix.

LaToya T. Payne:
Oh yes but they work so hard and they're so very dedicated and the only thing that I did was give them a voice and remove barriers. That, that's been my whole focus is that the things that are issues that they see, making sure that I give that a voice and in removing the frustrations of the system not working. So I really do appreciate that, we did through a ton of work for my hearing officers and admin staff, we saw a federal punitive corrective action plan that had been around for 10 years get closed and those backlogs leave. It's been incredible to see, that if show up every day and you work hard and you correct some barriers, state workers can do incredible things and we have.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Yes and you have. I try not to be in your way too, by moving through as best I can and not letting stuff sit, which when I was-

LaToya T. Payne:
You did a great job, I will tell you, you do a great job. I'm like, I can't believe how many.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
So you've talked about some of the changes, is there any one thing you feel most proud of or most good about in terms of what you've been able to do?

LaToya T. Payne:
I think just being able to give the division a voice and to have them understand that they're a valued part of the Cabinet. We're sort of independent, we sort of sit in that area of hearing the cases between the Cabinet and whoever the appellant might be, but having them know that they have a voice and that they feel valued. Also seeing those federal SNAP correction action plans go away, which is just a burden to the division, that's been an incredible weight off of our shoulders.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Well, it's a big deal.

LaToya T. Payne:
It is.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
It was a lot of work to get there and I know because it had been years, the folks like, oh that's not possible, but you know what? We not possible is what we do around here.

LaToya T. Payne:
That's right. Absolutely, we work miracles every day.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Well it's true. All this stuff through COVID and all that emergency response pieces, I mean, nobody thought we could pivot as quickly as we did, but we can, really can.

LaToya T. Payne:
Absolutely, we are capable of doing incredible things and we have.
Secretary Eric Friedlander:
We keep demonstrating it again and again, like a little rest from that, but it's OK. Things can calm down please.

LaToya T. Payne:
Absolutely.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
So you said that the musical talent skipped you in terms of generation, so I know sometimes seeings relaxing for me and that kind of thing. So what do you do, how do you take care of yourself?

LaToya T. Payne:
Well, I'm a Christian, I pray a lot, my faith is extremely important to me that calms me and centers me, but I also read, I love to read. I'd gotten away from reading because my job was to read but I love to just get a good book and a cup of coffee and zone out. So those are the things that I do and I love to travel too, not anything big, just a road trip. I love to go somewhere new and to eat new food that I don't have to cook, but those are the things that I enjoy doing and that help build my resilience and help me take care of myself and wake up and do it again the next day.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
If I fly someplace, that's when I pick up a book and because you used to not be able to have the wifi and all that stuff, but still, I mean, it seems like just the best time to have hours devoted, just rolling through a book. It's so nice.

LaToya T. Payne:
It's so nice and I still love the paper books, I have the Kindle as well, but I still love to flip the pages.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Me too, I'm old. I would say I'm old school, but I think I'm just old, but there's something about it, right?

LaToya T. Payne:
Yes, there absolutely is.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
You can get transported to so many different places and emotions and things and thoughts and learn and it's a fantastic thing to do.
LaToya T. Payne:
It absolutely is. My parents made us read as children and it got to the place that in middle school, my librarian came to me and she said, are you reading all of these books? I said, yes and she was like, you check out as many books as you want. Reading has always been my love. I Actually won a medal for reading the most books in the seventh grade.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Nice.

LaToya T. Payne:
I'm a bit of a nerd, but I wear it proudly.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
That's fantastic, I don't see you as a nerd but that's okay. I want to thank you for talking with me today, this has been such an enjoyable conversation and I appreciate everything you've done for the Cabinet, thank you.

LaToya T. Payne:
Thank you. I really do appreciate the opportunity and thank you for everything you've done. Your words have calmed us through this time of the pandemic and I'm sure you'll lead us forward. So I appreciate it, thank you.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:
Well, thank you. I appreciate that and I hope folks, who've enjoyed this podcast. We'll tune into others coming up. Thank you so much.

Julianne Hatton:
Thanks for joining us on CHFS Community. Hosted by Secretary Eric Freelander, produced by Julianne Hatton. Our assistant producer is Beth Fisher. Our technical director and graphic artist is Lisa Wallace. Watch for the podcast preview in your email, so you'll never miss an episode. While you're at it tell your coworkers about the show. Until next time stay healthy, Kentucky.