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INTERVIEWER: Angela Blanchard is president emerita of BakerRipley, the largest charitable organization in Texas, and one of the largest in the country. BakerRipley's work focuses on community development in underserved neighborhoods in Houston. As the leader of the organization, Angela has worked on issues related to immigration, refugee resettlement, and disaster relief, most recently mobilizing to shelter tens of thousands of people after Hurricane Harvey.

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Currently, Angela is in residence at Brown as a Taubman fellow and a Swearer Center Social Entrepreneur in Residence. She sat down with *Trending Globally* to talk about her work.

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Angela, thank you very much for coming in to talk to us today.

ANGELA BLANCHARD: Well, I'm really happy to be here. I'm looking forward to the conversation.

INTERVIEWER: Me, too. Let's talk about Houston, your pretty much hometown by now, and the city that you love so much. It's the largest and most diverse metro area in the United States. It's the fourth largest city in the United States. And its population is 6 and 1/2 million people, up from 4.7 18 years ago. That's a lot, and mostly immigrants. 1.4 million foreign-born people? Is that sounding right?

ANGELA BLANCHARD: That's sounding right. I think the arc of my career coincided with one of the most dramatic demographic changes in any major American city in the history of the United States. So I've had a front row seat watching as Houston evolved.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a causal relationship between what you ended up devoting your life to and the phenomenon that is Houston?

ANGELA BLANCHARD: My passion since I was a young adult was for some kind of social equity and social justice and opportunity for everyone. That just is my orienting purpose. In Houston, it became a really

fascinating journey, as Houston itself is a very welcoming city. Always has been. Sort of fundamentally embraced people for who they are. More importantly, what are they trying to get done? So people flock to the city not because of its fabulous weather or wonderful terrain. It's about opportunity.

So I work for BakerRipley, an organization over 100 years old with roots in the settlement house movement. So the settlement house movement was fundamentally an international movement in the 1800s and early 1900s that was about creating landing places for people as they arrived. So now you're in a new country, you're in a new city, what do you do now? How does one start a journey, create a new life in this new place? With our roots in that movement, it positioned us, in terms of our values and purpose, to work consistently to create better and better means by which people could earn, learn, and belong in Houston and in the greater Houston area.

INTERVIEWER: Let's talk about BakerRipley for a minute. It's one of the largest nonprofits in the country, I think, and definitely in Texas.

ANGELA BLANCHARD: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: It seems to me that BakerRipley has been doing what some think government should do, but you've found a way to sort of leverage public, private, and philanthropic support for the community. Can you talk about that?

ANGELA BLANCHARD: So I'm really willing to let the really bright and talented scholars at Brown decide what government should and shouldn't do. I have a much more pragmatic outlook. And that is, as a practitioner on the ground, what we think about all the time is how to assemble the available resources, what is going to be provided that could be arranged to support people on this journey. So we're not so much focused on which sector should do it. And practically speaking, that changes.

So over decades, you see one sector-- the private sector, for example-- take on the role and responsibility, feel a greater sense of ownership around, say, employment training. And then that recedes, and then you see government take that on, or you see greater resources devoted to that. You see philanthropy go in and out of all kinds of ideas about how the world should be changed. And they have their passion in one five-year period, and the next five-year period, they're doing something else.

When you lead a community development organization and you're working on practical solutions, you're really examining what each of those sectors has to offer. How are they thinking about these issues and challenges? What are they making available? And then, in some fairly challenging alchemy, you have to pull those elements together to create a program that really works.

As I look back over the things that are really succeeding, they usually have that three-legged stool. There's a publicly funded or publicly enabled aspect of it, there's a philanthropically supported part of it, and then the private sector we need as either actors or partners or supporters, as well. And those things that have those three elements generally are more sustainable, they have a longer-lasting impact, and then, as one sector fades in or out, you don't lose the entire momentum. You don't lose the entire impact of the effort.

INTERVIEWER: Let's stick with that for a second and think about the precarity of philanthropic support. So how do you live with that on a daily basis, if that's one leg of the stool?

ANGELA BLANCHARD: We live with it-- it's a fact. It's weather. I mean, it's no different than whether the sun is shining or not. These actors are going to develop their own theories of change, their own theories of measurement, their own ideas about societal priorities, and they're going to orient themselves around those. When we deliver consistently-- and the beauty of BakerRipley relies on the fact that we're fanatics about delivery-- so you gain some credibility with those actors, and you can influence the way they're thinking, but they're going to decide for one full era that education is the center of the universe, and it must be focused on, and it's the key to everything. Government is similar.

On the ground where we work, in each community, in every neighborhood, people aren't saying, well, the education is the only thing, or job is the only thing, or housing is the only thing, or an economic institution I can trust is the only thing. They're thinking I want to live in a neighborhood with a clinic I can afford, that's accessible, a financial institution that's suited to my needs, a school I'm proud to send my child to. I want to be able to get to and from work from this place that I live in.

Our purpose has been community development. And it means working hard to bring all of those elements together. The beauty of that is, as one fades in or out, sometimes you replace what that sector isn't stepping up for with effort from another sector. That's a kind of nimbleness around resourcing these efforts that I think is of great value.

INTERVIEWER: And sticking with community development and building these communities that you're describing, before they get built, you go in with something you call appreciative inquiry. Can you talk a little bit about that?

ANGELA BLANCHARD: Well, sort of the prime directive of community development, in my opinion, is you go where you're invited, you do what you're asked to do. So I think when we descend upon-- and it happens all the time in the helping arena-- we identify a neighborhood as troubled and problematic, and then we land on it with our set of solutions.

We've essentially assessed it and compared it to what we think how it ought to work. And then in the deficit that exists between our impression of how it should be and how it is, we start applying solutions. We bring solutions and we bring fixes, and we require of the people there that they sign up for these. And they don't work, often. I mean, they are usually colossal disappointments, and we waste a lot of resources with that approach.

INTERVIEWER: And they don't work because?

ANGELA BLANCHARD: They don't work because that isn't what that person went to bed thinking about, got up worrying about. You know, particularly in low income communities, there is an agenda that they work from every day, priorities, aspirations that drive them. In many cases, things that brought them 10,000 miles to the shore they're on. And when you work with people around what matters most to them, the question of motivation doesn't exist. The question of willingness goes out the window. You're actually delivering in a practical way that which they have done everything possible to secure for themselves. That's a different equation.

So appreciative inquiry gets at what matters most to people. It's a way of looking at any individual, family, system, community from the standpoint of what gives life to it. What is its orienting purpose? What is it that people, in the incidence of an individual, what is it that keeps them going? Appreciative inquiry was developed at Case Western in the '70s by a man named David Cooperrider. It's a very rigorous form. It's not positive thinking. And this is one thing I'm always having to clarify with people new to this. This is not some way of going into a community and saying all of these problems don't exist, let's just focus on the happy parts.

INTERVIEWER: It's more about listening, isn't it?

ANGELA It's really about getting-- appreciative inquiry is getting to what gives life to this system,

BLANCHARD: community, and family, and then we married it with asset-based community development. So in total, we call it appreciative community development. And asset-based community development operates from an assumption that every community has resources, assets, skills, and strengths that should be studied, and that availing ourselves of that inventory, making visible and clear to everyone what's working is a foundation for investment that is much stronger and more effective than the deficit models of the past.

So putting that method of inquiry together, the crafting of questions that get at the heart and strengths of the community, putting that together with inventory about what's there, what's working, what people have already created for themselves, that becomes the story, then, and the foundation for further investment.

INTERVIEWER: So asking what's working, not deciding what's not working.

ANGELA BLANCHARD: Right.

INTERVIEWER: How do you take that approach and that mindset and apply it to disaster relief and recovery?

ANGELA BLANCHARD: One of the most creative acts that any human being undertakes is to rebuild your entire life in a new place. So if that's going to be your undertaking, that's the journey you're on, the starting place is a place of loss and grief and devastation. This is not to be dismissed [INAUDIBLE] people arrive with their stories of what this displacement, this disruption has cost them. And at each step, there's gratitude and grief in equal measure.

So when we're working appreciatively with people who've come out of these devastating circumstances and made these very traumatic journeys to get to a safer place, what we're going to focus on appreciatively is what are the strengths and skills that got them through that. What made it possible for them to make that journey? What are the things in their lives in the past they've overcome? What can they recall was a resource to them when they faced that? Because understanding what it is that people can count on in themselves and others, understanding what they have to offer in terms of their contributions in the new place in which they found themselves, that becomes a foundation for how we help.

INTERVIEWER: Angela, you've said that despair is expensive. What do you mean by that?

ANGELA BLANCHARD: Well, as our work got better known, I started being invited to a lot of other cities grappling with the challenges of creating landing places and on-ramps for newly arrived people, and also

cities grappling with what to do with the people that, as their cities have evolved and grown and perhaps become more high-functioning, there are groups of people within the city that weren't a part of that story. So cities now are saying-- increasingly, I am finding city leaders saying, well, we really can't move on without everyone.

And the notion that we could just make this work, and these people here who are a problem, they'll have to figure it out on their own or they're not our problem or too bad for them or, well, they're here, that should be enough, I mean, that's just dying because city leaders increasingly are seeing, every time we try to write a story that leaves a whole group of people out, we pay a price for that. And when the invoice comes due, it's really expensive.

There's something in the human spirit that responds to, deeply, experiences, the impact of being left out and written off. And it doesn't work well. We go to two things, rage or despair. And both of those are very expensive. And the more we write narratives that leave people out, the more we move away from stories that include everyone, all of us, every one of us, the more we create those pockets of despair and rage.

I find that city leaders largely get that. I mean, they want it to work. And what we have to study better and more intensely is what are those strategies that we can employ in cities, first, so we don't inadvertently actually create those when we don't mean to. Cities all over Europe, for example, now are saying, we don't want to create ghettos. You know, we don't want to create these isolated communities with people whose culture and practice and language are different, and then somehow we build walls without meaning to around that, and they can't get out. We don't want to do that.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: Well, as you go around the world and visit these cities, is there anything that you can bring back that-- are you seeing where this is being done right?

ANGELA BLANCHARD: Yeah. Well, it should be no secret, I'm only looking for what's working. I think we have plenty of people studying the rest. So my focus is on practitioners and the solutions they're crafting. And I find just fascinating solutions that, for example Brisbane, there's a wonderful organization there called Multicultural Development Association. They're one of the largest refugee resettlement organizations in Australia. And I'm just completely intrigued by how inventive they are. The improvisation and the workarounds that they've created that are promising, those are

the things, if developed, could have a great impact on employment and housing.

INTERVIEWER: Like what's an example of something they've come up with?

ANGELA BLANCHARD: Housing is scarce there. You know, one thing that hasn't been true in Houston is we've had a lot of room for people. At 627 square miles, we've got room. But in Brisbane, that's not the case. So one thing that MDA did was start to craft this program around people who are overhoused. So some of us have more home than we can really use, or we have a guest house, or we own a separate piece of property. And when they were resettling people, inviting the people who were overhoused to make some accommodation that would allow the people who were coming in a place to live.

It was a beautifully crafted thing, first of all because it got around creating separate and apart places for people to live that erect the walls that we're trying not to build, and that would later have to be taken down. And the second thing is it built those ties and relationships. So you really were inviting a neighbor to come live next to you or in a separate part of your house.

So what MDA did is they worked with the policies that had to be changed so the people were allowed to do this. They worked with the tax rules so that people could do it without there being a great tax penalty, and they could also make a contribution of the space if they wanted to. And then they worked in very, very simple fashion to help people, for example, put a separate entrance to one area of the home so that they could make that available to a family or an individual.

INTERVIEWER: Going back to Houston, and now talking about community development, immigration, and natural disasters, is Houston the city of the future?

ANGELA BLANCHARD: I think we're the city of now. We've been talking about these things in the future, and it's a very human thing to do. Let's just keep pushing it out. We'll keep calling it the future. That means we have time. But it's here. It's here. So there are three things intersecting in Houston that are intersecting in major cities everywhere. The first is we're living in the most migratory period in human history. War and weather are driving people out of their homes, loss of health and wealth are making them homeless. So displacement and disruption is the way of the world now.

INTERVIEWER: Get used to it.

ANGELA BLANCHARD: That's not a future, that's now. The second way I see Houston sitting at this intersection is, you know, we're talking about climate change as if it-- actually, I see in my city people wanting to go on arguing about whose fault it is. You know, is it oil or God. And really, I could care less at this point if it's oil or God. It is here. The seas are rising. The storms are bigger. Everything we built and imagined would somehow help mitigate, all of that is being overwhelmed.

You know, this is not the Angela opinion. There are great, well-developed works around the fact that many cities will be living with water. So I think we're one of those cities. We're living with water. And in some respects, I think the city, Houston has this-- our geography demands this. We are in a race to see how fast we can move past an utter dependence on fossil fuel, and can we do that before the water comes up and covers the refineries.

INTERVIEWER: That's a powerful model.

ANGELA BLANCHARD: It's hard to describe what it feels like to be the city that is both-- we had wonderful, helpful people during Harvey that tweeted things to us like, it's your fault you're having this flood because you made all the oil that warmed everything, and now you're getting what you deserve. You know, we find that very amusing in our city because, of course, we pay a great big price for producing what the country largely, a significant portion of the country depends upon.

And in Houston, people are thinking all the time about what are the alternatives, how can we do this in a different way. At the same time, you know, we saw Florida struggle with a hurricane there right after Harvey with people who couldn't get gas because we couldn't send it. So the interdependencies that we're all going to face are also not being addressed. And I think Houston sits there kind of at the intersection of these challenges that we face around how we're going to live in this world with a completely different climate.

INTERVIEWER: I suppose Harvey is still fresh in your mind as the recovery--

ANGELA BLANCHARD: I'm still dreaming about it.

INTERVIEWER: I'm not surprised. So my question is-- and you lived through Katrina-- is Houston getting better at response?

ANGELA BLANCHARD: We've had Allison, Katrina, Rita, Ike, et cetera, et cetera. And also I think I heard one Houston leader say we had three 500-year floods in two years. So first of all, I think we have a better

grasp of our own geography, certainly than the rest of the country does. We kind of know we're flat and it's going to rain a lot.

So I think we are very good because the attitude and culture of the city is get up and get it done. And we're very good at what's the work in front of us, we'll tackle it. What has been challenging is to try to figure out how to redesign huge elements of infrastructure in the region so that we can cope with what's coming, because that can't be a Houston alone deal. And I think that comes back to interdependencies. We need, country-wide, a very smart set of infrastructure redevelopments. All we've had so far in this country on that front is talk. But there has been no real brainy plan that addresses how we, for example, need to protect the port of Houston.

You know, if the port of Houston did nothing but deliver to Houstonians those things that we like, our favorite coffee or, you know, the latest gadget we wanted, that'd be fine. You could just say, Houston, fix your port. But in tonnage, it's the second largest port in the country, in project tonnage. Well, you basically can't build anything without the port of Houston, and also can't power anything. So I think this is where we need, as a country, to start looking at these major redevelopments of infrastructure in light of climate change.

INTERVIEWER: Because you are, you know, so present in these dire moments, what's the most frightened you've ever been? Have you ever been frightened?

ANGELA BLANCHARD: Yeah, I'm trying to remember when I haven't been frightened. I think fear, it's just part of the human condition. I mean, here's the thing. Sometimes we think a good life is made up of safety, security, predictability, and routine. And we'll do almost anything to create those. And actually, when we get them, all right, we're living in a prison.

So I think that's-- a long time ago, what I've learned from watching all the people that come up on our shores is that that really isn't-- we're really not at our best when everything is totally within our control. We seem to be better as a species when we're challenged. I found that I'm less afraid when I'm actively engaged in doing things, but there's also moments, like the middle of the night during Harvey when I learned that there was a refinery, a chemical plant that caught fire. I didn't know where it was yet, and I'd just come from the shelter. I didn't have all the information.

I learned the water supply had gone out in Beaumont, Texas, which is just 80 something miles

from Houston, and 120,000 people live there. And then that was the beginning of the talk about our concern that one of the key reservoirs might fail. And what I feared most at that moment was a series of cascading events that added up to something far larger.

And I do think that some of the disasters that we're facing going forward are going to be of that kind, where you see flooding that creates this circumstance that causes the loss of that that leads to this and back to the interdependencies, that then the field, the arena of disaster becomes much larger than the actual geography where the rain fell. And so that night, I was pretty scared. I kind of took a mental checklist of all the leaders I knew and everything I thought we were capable of doing together, and thought this could get bigger than all of us. And that was frightening.

INTERVIEWER: I'm glad it didn't.

ANGELA BLANCHARD: Yeah, me too.

INTERVIEWER: You are in refugee camps and you make pop-up shelters in the middle of a hurricane for 17,000 people in a day. You are on the ground doing the work, but you're also a gifted storyteller. And I think it's incredibly fortunate that you are able to be the ambassador for this kind of work. Was that a conscious thing, or is that who you are?

ANGELA BLANCHARD: Born of necessity. First, I'm Cajun, and Cajun culture really is a lot about storytelling. And I actually come from a large family, so you have to be good or you won't get heard. It's just that simple. You know, [INAUDIBLE] constant competition. But I think also, in terms of creating that big we, which is really my whole career has been about what's the narrative in the story we all belong to, because people don't support that which leaves them out. And demonizing one group in favor of another or explaining your responsibility for hurt and parsing grievances, it doesn't get us anywhere.

And oftentimes, there is a story at the heart of every community that unites everyone in that community, in that city. And at some point, sometimes, in a country. And those are the stories that I'm interested in, because when we tell those, we can come together and be constructively engaged. But really, I think I tell stories because I think that's the way we learn best. We don't learn exclusively that way, and we need scholarly effort, we need research, we need to examine what we do, we need reflective practice, we need all of that. But when we come out with that, it needs to be woven into a story with a beginning, a middle, and some

kind of ending or possibility that we can move toward.

And honestly, no one could be more surprised than I am with where this has taken me, because I'm telling you honestly, I'm a Cajun girl from Beaumont, Texas, and this was not-- I was not thinking, oh, one day I'll travel the world and learn about displacement and disasters and work with city leaders on how to do that better. No. My passionate curiosity about how to help, you know, how do we help people realize potential, how do we eliminate unnecessary suffering, I think these are the bookends of all we can really do for one another. And we ought to do it as well as we can, and we ought to be as efficient as possible while doing it. So there you have it.

INTERVIEWER: You've been invited to the White House three times?

ANGELA BLANCHARD: Mhm.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think you'll be invited to this White House?

ANGELA BLANCHARD: I hope not.

INTERVIEWER: Why?

ANGELA BLANCHARD: Well, because I just don't know what we would have in common. You know, I'm always kind of looking for that narrative that unites us. I can't quite tease that out in this particular case. The fact is we're caught up in the ugly stories. The headlines are filled with ugly stories that are all about the ways in which we're divided.

What I marvel at is that we can carry on that kind of hideous conversation in that sphere while all day, every day working together, helping one another, teaching one another, employing one another, training one another. God help us, if we actually function the way the headlines say we do, nothing would ever be accomplished. We'd be fighting all the time, every day, every minute.

That's not what happens. In many, many places, you know, face to face with another human being, we will do what we can. And that's what's actually going on. And people ask all the time, well, you know, Houston, Texas, Texas is so conservative, it's so anti this and anti that. And I guess that's true in the headlines. On the ground, what I've found is generosity, compassion,

and a willingness to be on the same road with the people who've just gotten there. So.

INTERVIEWER: Thanks for that reminder of what it's like day to day, face to face with other humans.

ANGELA BLANCHARD: Yeah. We really do know how to do this.

[MUSIC PLAYING]

INTERVIEWER: This has been *Trending Globally-- Politics and Policy.* If you enjoyed today's conversation, you can subscribe to the podcast on iTunes, SoundCloud, or Stitcher, or download us on your favorite podcasting app. If you like us, rate us, and help others who might enjoy the show find us. For more information, go to Watson.Brown.edu.

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