

Where Are They Now? Kanika Tomalin, Ph.D., Health Advocate and Cookbook Author

Dalia: [00:00:00] Exciting news. The Zest has been nominated for best podcast in the Creative Loafing Best of the Bay 2026 competition, and we need your vote. Just go to botbtampabay.com, as in Best of the Bay Tampa Bay.com. Click on entertainment, then click on best podcast and cast your vote for The Zest. Again, that's botbtampabay.com.

If it's easier, just click on the link in the show notes of this episode. Thanks in advance. And speaking of the Best of the Bay, we have been having such a great time catching up with some of our favorite local past Zest guests, and you can hear more about it in this conversation that I had on Florida Matters: Live and Local

Matthew: Welcome back to Florida Matters live and local. I'm Matthew Peddie. Well, this summer, The Zest podcast has been checking in with some past guests. In 2020, St. Petersburg Deputy Mayor Kanika Tomalin released a cookbook called [00:01:00] *St. Pete Eats*. She chatted about the project with The Zest's Dalia Colon, and Dalia joins us now with an update.

Dalia: So before becoming St. Pete's deputy mayor and city administrator, Dr. Tomalin, she has a, uh, doctorate degree in law and policy, by the way. She was a healthcare executive at Bayfront in St. Pete, so health has been a longtime passion of hers, and she founded an organization called Healthy St. Pete. It's a community engagement program. So she invited some local chefs to create healthier versions of their most popular dishes so that the community can enjoy them at home.

Matthew: Mm-hmm. Now, Tomalin talked in your original interview six years ago about St. Pete's foodie scene and how restaurants help shape the city's identity.

Let's take a listen.

Kanika: Our restaurants become extensions of our families and symbols and illustrations of our most, uh, critical and amazing moments in life. And [00:02:00] so we need our restaurants as a part of our culture. They're a, a staple in our culture, and they help, certainly in St. Pete it's the case, help define who we are.

It's also one of the most apparent ways that people are able to find and infuse diversity in their lives in meaningful ways. And we are so proud that in St. Pete we have restaurants from across the world stage.

Matthew: So I mean, it really sounds like the cookbook is a bit of a, a love letter to St. Pete's foodie scene, but it also came out in 2020, which is, you know, when you did the interview, and it was a difficult time for everyone, but especially for restaurants because of the coronavirus pandemic.

So how did timing play into the book's publication?

Dalia: Yeah, it certainly is a love letter to these restaurants. So Dr. Tomalin and her team debated whether to hold the release of the book or go ahead and publish it as planned. They decided to move forward with proceeds benefiting the area's struggling small businesses, including restaurants, and that was a [00:03:00] time when a lot of us were cooking more at home anyway.

So in some ways, the timing was perfect.

Matthew: Mm-hmm. Now, here's Tomalin talking about why they thought it was important to go ahead and release the book then.

Kanika: You'll recall, uh, that time when everything was closed. Uh, restaurants just were not operating, and people felt so disconnected from each other and the community, and we had the same thought that you have.

You know, what a great connector this could be, and to give people the flavors that they've come to know and love, but in a safe way that they can experience them in their homes.

Matthew: It's hard to believe that it's been six years already, right? I mean, such a, a kind of a topsy-turvy time in everyone's lives.

But, um, moving on, what is Dr. Tomalin up to these days?

Dalia: So today she's the president and CEO of the Foundation for a Healthy St. Petersburg. It's an organization that focuses on health equity. They've done some amazing work in the community, including bringing thought leader Michael Twitty, who's a James Beard Award-winning food writer.

We got to interview him for The Zest. So it's just incredible what she's done in her [00:04:00] short tenure there. And on a personal note, Dr. Tomalin recently donated a vehicle to WUSF in honor of her late husband, Terry Tomalin.

Matthew: Oh, wow. And we're gonna listen to your latest conversation with Dr. Tomalin, so let's listen to that now

Dalia: When and why did health become a passion of yours?

Kanika: Well, I trained as a journalist, uh, in college and learned about the power of stories, and was very fortunate to work in my community telling its stories. Uh, and then an, an opportunity opened up at Bayfront. When I went to Bayfront, I took what I'd learned about stories, and I realized all of the things we were trying to do as a community were, like, rooted in health and people's ability to move through their lives, uh, in a well- a state of wellbeing.

And over time, just really it got rooted in that concept of the social determinants of health, and I think it's one of the biggest ways we can make a generational difference for our community.

Dalia: Mm. You're right. Everything is about stories.

Kanika: Yes.

Dalia: [00:05:00] And you can't do anything if you're not healthy.

Kanika: Yes. And all of the stories, everybody's story, all of the people's stories were pointing back to health, whatever the determinant.

It may not be directly health as it relates to a medical outcome, but it was all of the conditions of our lives that shape a story. You could trace it right back to one of these five conditions.

Dalia: What are some of the determinants?

Kanika: And I, I just find it fascinating. Uh, economic stability, obviously, our neighborhood and built environment, where we live, obviously access to quality healthcare, but also social and community context.

These things all shape how our health is experienced.

Dalia: For sure. Okay, how long have you been with this organization, and what are some wins? Because this is not something you can easily turn around. It's like turning around a cruise ship.

Kanika: It is. So the Foundation for a Healthy St. Pete exists to really eradicate disparities in our health outcomes as a community, and we do that through those [00:06:00] determinants that I was just talking about, trying to, uh, infuse some improvement there.

I've been here for three years, came in June of 2023, and we've had lots of great wins. One of the biggest is solidifying a vision that we are going to work on generational change, systemic changes that are self-perpetuating and sustainable. So not only answering the need right now, but figuring out why does the need exist and working together with our community to really craft a long-term solution.

So that was our first big win.

Dalia: That sounds like enough. It, it, it was huge. It's huge.

Kanika: Huge. It, it took us a year to get there as a team. Uh, and since then, we've been just building the blocks that it takes to do that over the course of... Right now, we're working a five- on a five-year plan to get to a 20-year vision of being a community where good health allows all people to thrive.

So we're looking at the issues that, uh, really drive passion in our community and that there's already a, uh, consensus so far- Food systems is a place that we've been working on. We're doing everything [00:07:00] from bringing, uh, great intellectual capital with nationally renowned speakers to really working with the purveyors of the food system to try to understand how we can make an impact.

Dalia: I love that. And since you almost brought it up, I'll bring it up. I got to go to the event with Michael Twitty- Yes ... who was a Zest guest as well. That was incredible.

Kanika: Exactly. And we know that that is something that we as a foundation can do. That is the power of philanthropy. Uh, this nationally renowned, internationally known expert on a topic that we care about as a community, we have the ability to bring him here, and not only bring him here, give our community access to learn from his wisdom and apply it to our solutions.

So that's a perfect example of how we work around community narrative and the power of stories and community empowerment.

Dalia: I was just in downtown Tampa, and I was at the new Publix that's over by Armature Works- Yes ... like off of North Boulevard, and it was packed. And there were a lot of, like, Black and brown people in there, and I'm [00:08:00] like, "People have been wanting this."

Yes. People don't wanna buy their dinner at a gas station.

Kanika: That's right.

Dalia: They just didn't have any other choice.

Kanika: That's right, and it's all about choices. It's all about agency and empowering people to create their best lives, and it's also about innovation and looking at things through an alternative lens when it's helpful.

So we know that food deserts are a very real thing. We know that traditional grocery stores are a way that most people purchase their food, but it's not the only way. And so how do we bring the healthy choices to people where they are, make them easy, make them quick, make them on a currency exchange that works for them?

We've had some great innovation there, and it's one of our biggest wins. We've been working with the city and some others. We have mobile fresh stops that actually travels around neighborhoods. So maybe we haven't built a grocery store in South St. Pete yet, although we have many, but we are taking fresh fruit and vegetables every day to communities that need it.

Dalia: That's so cool. So what are you guys working on now? What are you excited about?

Kanika: Oh, we're working on so many things. [00:09:00] I'm, uh, particularly excited about a couple of things. One is our Youth Griot program. Uh, we had some-- We believe narrative, in our theory of change, we believe narrative is a

critical component of the change that we seek, and we need an inclusive narrative that reflects our entire community.

And, uh, in, uh, African American culture, story keepers are called griots, and so we trained, uh, some very talented young people to carry that tradition forward. They completed that program earlier this year, and it was such a stunning outcome for these young people who will carry these lessons for the rest of their lives.

Dalia: That's, I'm lit- I'm speechless. Yeah. I love that idea.

Kanika: It was really transformative and, uh, it's a way that they can impact the health of their community by keeping its stories.

Yes.

Yeah.

Dalia: That's so good. And stories are sticky. Absolutely. People don't remember numbers, but they remember the story of the one person- That's

Kanika: right

Dalia: who really made an impact. I love that.

Kanika: Yes.

Dalia: Okay, somewhat personal question because I'm a fan of your family, and I got to work with [00:10:00] your late husband, Terry Tomalin. Yes. Okay, you recently, and on, on a journalistic level, it's public media, you recently donated a vehicle-

Kanika: Yes ...

Dalia: to WUSF. Thank you so much.

Kanika: Oh, absolutely.

Dalia: Can you tell me- An

Kanika: honor ...

Dalia: the story behind that?

Kanika: So Terry was a longtime journalist in our community, 25 years, the outdoors editor and adventure writer for the Tampa Bay Times. Best

Dalia: job.

Kanika: And, uh, it was the best job, and he was so good at it. He went all over Florida doing adventures. And, uh, his car, he, he was an equipment man.

Everything was about his equipment, and, uh, his car was a big part of that. He called it the War Wagon because he was always, like, going into battle and, uh, had 250,000 miles. Uh, after he drove it, and it was beloved to him, um, it's been all over the state. Uh, my son then drove it for eight years, and it was at a point where it wasn't going to work for us as a car anymore but could certainly work to honor his legacy and his love for public radio and WUSF, uh, and all things [00:11:00] journalism.

So we decided to donate it to WUSF.

Dalia: Oh, that's beautiful. Yeah. I love that.

Kanika: He would be so happy.

Dalia: Oh, yeah. For sure. It'll have many more adventures.

Kanika: For sure, and WUSF was the constant in my, uh, husband's car all the time, so, uh, my kids grew up on it. It's a big part of our family, and so it was very fitting.

Dalia: And by the way, I should mention that you have a recipe in the cookbook that is in tribute to your husband.

Kanika: It is. Yeah. It's called Be Prepared, and it's a pear-based cocktail, but he was always prepared because he's an, a journalist, an adventure journalist. And, uh, writing that cookbook was so much fun. It, uh, the proceeds went to all the restaurants that had to close down or pare back during COVID, and I still have people requesting copies today.

So we're so glad we did that project while in City Hall.

Dalia: Oh, amazing. Would you do another one?

Kanika: Absolutely.

Dalia: You would?

Kanika: Yes.

Dalia: Okay, I, I need to talk to you about this because I wrote a cookbook, and I don't know if I would describe it as so much fun. It just seemed like a lot of work, and it- It, it- There's a lot [00:12:00] that can go wrong.

Oh, my- The wrong i- ingredient, the wrong quantity ...

Kanika: and the pressure, my goodness, it really, like, took my understanding of the anthology of cooking to another level. But it was, uh, such a project of love, and it was a celebration of St. Pete's food scene. And it was giving people access to the meals they loved so much but couldn't get to because of COVID, and to do it with a healthy spin.

So it was such a celebration of all the things I love. I would do it again in a heartbeat.