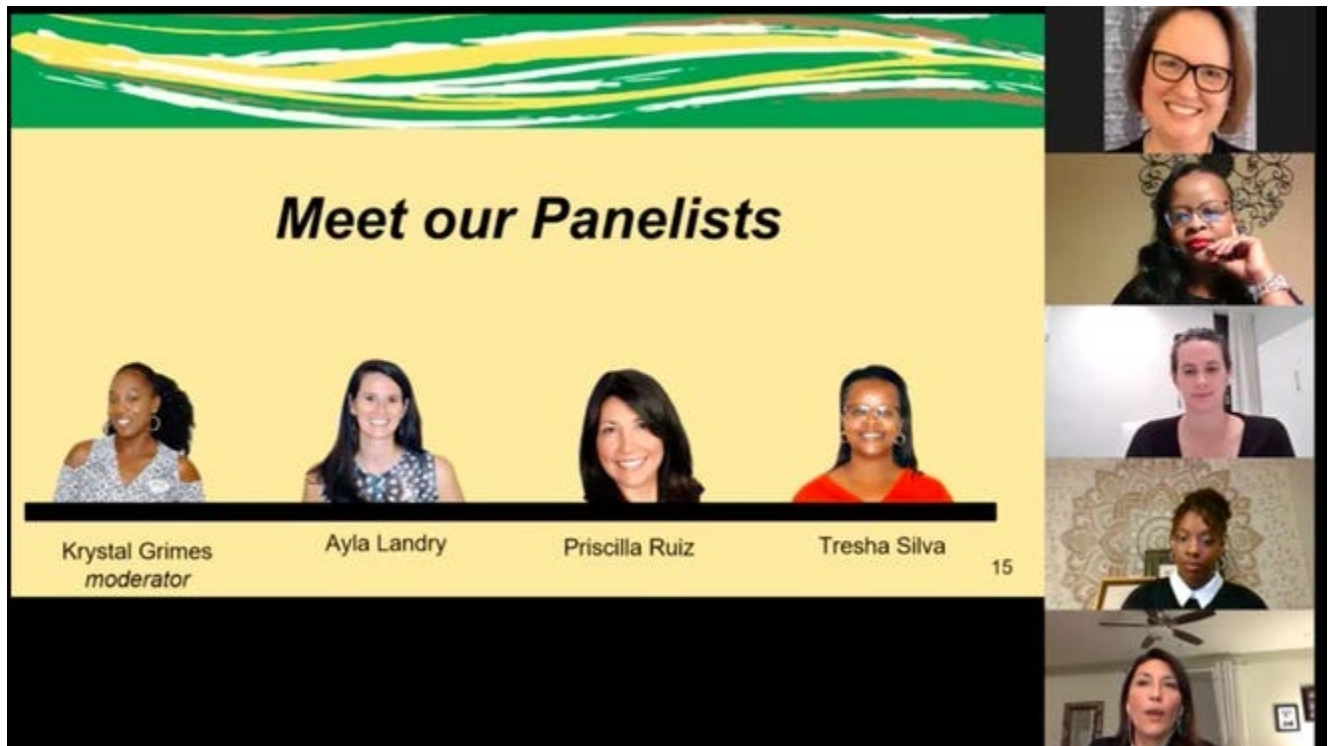


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## Building bridges: Virtual event promotes network weaving in Bastrop County

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A virtual event last week brought together community leaders from across Bastrop County to promote “network weaving” and advance health equity among county residents.

Network weaving is described as “connecting people to people and networks to other networks,” officials said during the virtual event. A network weaver is

“someone who senses where there is potential or opportunity waiting to be ignited or invited.”

The event, titled “The Power of Network Weaving: Catalyzing Community Transformation,” took place Nov. 12 and was presented by St. David’s Foundation and Bastrop County Cares. The 90-minute presentation served as a virtual summit on network weaving and the impact of it on daily life in Bastrop County.

“An important step is for residents to come together with a common purpose and a common vision for what they want to achieve collectively,” said Edward Burger, president and CEO of St. David’s Foundation, during his opening remarks. “We look to amplify thoughtful voices that are traditionally not included in decision making and to create opportunities to build relationships with community members, leaders, systems and institutions.”

Featuring music from Bastrop County residents Hannibal Lokumbe of Smithville and [Jonas Wilson of Bastrop](#) during break periods, the event highlighted the tangible effects of network weaving in the county.

Essentially, network weaving encourages Bastrop County residents to use their energy, social skills and vision to connect with diverse individuals and groups to exchange information and ideas, with the end goal of identifying community needs and bringing about associated changes.

As was repeated several times during the event when network weavers shared their firsthand experiences, this process allows for an egalitarian system that promotes common community goals and interests.

“We believe there’s ample evidence it can help communities get more connected, more focused and more effective in shaping an equitable, healthy future,” said Abena Asante, a senior program officer at St. David’s Foundation.

Asante said the foundation has worked with rural advisors for more than three years to help network weavers bring the community together to positively impact Bastrop County.

Several success stories from this engagement process were featured during the event. Among them was Priscilla Ruiz, one of 28 people listed as part of the first network weaver cohort in Bastrop County.

Ruiz, who serves as the director of youth ministry at Ascension Catholic Church, explained that people are already part of several networks, like a neighborhood or church community, through their everyday lives. Taking these groups of people with similar issues at stake or visions for the future and gathering more support that can be translated into community energy is how network weaving yields meaningful results, Ruiz said.

Linda Ornelas Wilson, a Bastrop County cares board member who is at the center of the countywide Pinky Promise initiative, credited network weaving with helping Pinky Promise reach its target population of people to screen for breast cancer.

Pinky Promise aims to improve breast cancer screenings in Bastrop County, primarily among uninsured, underinsured, underrepresented and rural women of color, and Wilson said 33 women have already been serviced as part of the program.

“I think that network principles build relationships that remain intact,” Wilson said. “It’s these relationships that will really enhance the positive changes within our communities that we’re all seeking.”

A key discussion in the virtual event came when a four-person panel featuring Krystal Grimes, Ayla Landry, Tresha Silva and Ruiz swapped stories about community challenges they faced and community opportunities they created through network weaving.

Grimes, the director of inclusion and resilience for Bastrop County Cares, served as the moderator and facilitated discussion among the other three panelists.

Landry, the community health manager with Lone Star Circle of Care and Bastrop Family Connects, a newborn and caregiver home visiting program, cited the “belonging” aspect of network weaving as one of the reasons she’s found success in addressing local issues through this model.

Ruiz described her experience with network weaving as transformative, and said it “freed” her from the confines of “hyper structure” she experienced working in corporate America.

“We’re all really just trying to get the voice who is not heard to the table,” Ruiz said. “That great sense of being able to connect in that free range kind of roaming experience and grab that Smithville resident or the Elgin resident that is working on something phenomenal and put some support behind it.”

But perhaps no network weaver featured during the event has seen the tangible results of the network weaving process like Silva, the executive director of the Bastrop County Emergency Food Pantry and Support Center.

While Silva used her time on the panel to stress the importance of being the person to initiate important community conversations, something she said network weaving encourages, she explained how network weaving helped the food pantry during the coronavirus pandemic.

Silva recounted how food pantry services were affected in Bastrop County by COVID-19, in particular its services to seniors in the community. Through network weaving, a solution was reached to get food boxes delivered directly to the doorsteps of seniors who first contacted the county coronavirus hotline.