

Michael:

Hello, I'm Michael Rendon, your host of Beyond the Bell, a podcast produced by Animas High School of Durango, Colorado.

Greg: And I'm your co-host, Greg Phillips. This podcast series asks the question, what must our education system do to best prepare the next generation of students, Gen Zers, to lead meaningful, fulfilling, impactful, purposeful, and satisfying lives? No small task.

We'll begin each episode speaking with a local high schooler, college student, or recent addition to the nine to five workforce to hear about their educational experience, their lives, and their visions and hopes for the future. Next, we'll talk with local experts about how we can ensure that education is meaningful, challenging, and engaging. We'll look at what's working and what isn't. So join us as we rethink education for a new generation, because we believe preparing for the future means more than just passing tests. It means empowering young people to thrive, lead and shape a better world.

Greg: Today I'm visiting with Sarah, a 2013 graduate from Animas High School. Welcome to Beyond the Bell.

Sarah: Yes, I'm so excited to be here.

Greg: 2013 class, wasn't that the first graduating class from Animas?

Sarah: Yeah, we started out in a strip mall up on North Main and it's really awesome to see this beautiful building now. This has come a long way.

Greg: Back in 2013, know, what motivated you to go to Animas?

Sarah: Yeah, I think it was the first time in a long time that Durango really had another option for high school education. And so I think just that idea was intriguing. I like to be first. I am a little competitive. So that was definitely part of it. And then of course, my parents were really excited about the opportunity and getting to meet the teachers and be so involved with the beginning process of the school in general.

Greg: And when you look back on it, would you have done it again? Would you have gone through that same process?

Sarah: Yeah, absolutely. Wouldn't have changed a thing. One thing that was so amazing about Animas was how it pushed me to be involved in the community and be able to speak to anyone, any place, any time. I mean, think that's something that has truly evolved me as a person and my professional career more than I could have ever imagined. I think from an exhibition standpoint, that's the biggest takeaway I have is just being able to one, brag about something that I learned about for the last six weeks or so, but also be questioned by people that I barely know and my peers in a really constructive way. And I think that's just something that's really important and I've carried through life and professional career as well.

Greg: How to think on your feet and right now you're in sales, correct?

Sarah: I am, yes. Yeah, so I work in sales for a commercial solar company.

Greg: And you have to think on your feet.

Sarah: I do. Yep. I attend a lot of conventions and shows too, whether it's commercial realtors, brokers, et cetera, or more on the solar side of things, know, equipment and where the world of solar is going. So I have to switch the brain around quite a bit, but it's good.

Greg: And what did you end up doing when you graduated from Animas?

Sarah: I went to school in Michigan, a little tiny school in the UP called Finlandia, and I played ice hockey there. So that's how I ended up in Michigan. Spent four years there, nice and cold, lots of snow, lot of hockey. And after graduation decided to move back to Durango for a couple of years and started working at a software company, a local one that was acquired by a company out of Utah. So stayed with them for a couple of years and then have now been with my current company, King Energy, for almost five. Also do a little bit of coaching for the girls high school team.

Greg: I didn't even know they had a girls' high school hockey team. Wow. You've got a busy life. It sounds like you are fully immersed in your profession and developing and traveling. How would you describe what a meaningful, impactful, purposeful life is to you?

Sarah: I actually just moved back to Durango last week. I haven't even been here a full week. I was out in California for a couple of years. Absolutely loved it. I thought I was going to be a beach girl. Just lived up the California life for as long as I could. And I just decided that something that is truly meaningful to me is my community. Whether that was California, Durango, Michigan, anywhere, I've always wanted to be and done my best to be deeply involved with my friends and family.

Back in Durango, this is really where I want to lay my roots. So I want to be impactful in any way that I can. think coaching hockey is one. Love to be involved with the youth of the community. It's so fun to see them out years later now and just seeing what they're doing, where they're going to school, what they're studying. I'm involved in Big Brothers Big Sisters as well. So that's another huge one, just from a different angle of getting to be involved with younger kids and their passions and just seeing the world and also Durango through a different view has been super special throughout the years of doing that.

Greg: When you left high school and went to college, it sounds like you were in a small school. How did you feel the other kids differed from you in terms of your education? Did you get a sense that you were with your people in your own community there? Or did it take a while to kind of connect and make new relationships?

Sarah: The small school that I went to was mostly an athlete school. Hockey was the big one for both men and women. There was also basketball and volleyball were the other two large sports, but everyone was there to play, not necessarily learn. But I would say that I went into college yearning to learn potentially more than some of my peers. I would like to think that that's because of Animas and my education that I got here and just wanting to continue to explore.

And I think it was just my openness to ask the questions, to be there, not just be there so that my coach saw that I was attending class so I could play.

Greg: If one of your players comes to you and is thinking about their future and education, what kind of advice would you give somebody that's just looking at going into high school?

Sarah: I think keeping an open mind is huge. I'm not sure exactly how choosing classes works in high school anymore. I don't know if you get much of a choice, but I think being open to the

ones that aren't top of your mind is a really positive approach to high school and college. Sometimes there's the class that all your friends are in or think it's going to be easy, but you can just get so much more out of a different class where maybe there are less distractions of your friends or just something that your brain hasn't had the chance to operate around or think about yet can really be pretty awesome.

Greg: I think what you're saying is to don't be afraid to push yourself to try new things and push yourself past your comfort level and explore. Good advice. And for somebody that's thinking about their career, you navigated towards sales. Was that intentional? Was that something that you kind of realized that you had some strength or skill in? Or did you just kind of, did it just sort of land in your lap?

Sarah: Exactly. Yeah. Like I said at the beginning, I am pretty competitive. You know, I like the aspect of sales in the sense that it's still a team. You have your team goals, but you're also highly focused on individual goals. And I think when I first graduated, was like, you know, maybe real estate during those. It's booming in terms of real estate. There's also a million realtors. Was that really something that I wanted to get into at 22 when I hadn't even bought a house on my own?

Not necessarily, but took the class, got my license, and then the opportunity opened up with GitPrime. And I think, then, I didn't know much about software in general, but just being open to an opportunity. I started out as an intern. I was paid via Venmo for a couple hours a week, just researching leads for them. Wasn't overly exciting, but it led to a full-time job and then a successful exit as a company, as one of the first 20 employees there. I think that openness again really escalated some of my career.

Greg: Where do you see yourself in the next 10 years?

Sarah: In solar, they call it the solar coaster. We are fully on it right now, but I have no intentions to leave, to hop off the solar coaster. I would love to be involved in the industry in any capacity, whether it's sales or more of an operations standpoint or research. I think there's just so many directions that I can go and I think that's pretty exciting. So in terms of career, I would like to stay in solar for a while.

Greg: And what about personal?

Sarah: I am looking to buy a home here in Durango. Wish me luck. Hasn't happened yet, but it will hopefully. And then I just would like to continue settling my roots here, being involved in as many ways as possible, but also being able to travel. Durango is great, but it's also great to get out. And once you have that positive, strong home base, it's really not that hard. So that's what I'm looking to achieve over the next couple of years.

Greg: Do you have much stress in your life?

Sarah: I do. I mean, I would say from like a work standpoint, sure, but I'm also pretty good about shutting it off. So, you know, it's easy to walk out the door and go on a run or go on a bike ride and have my head cleared pretty fast.

Greg: There seems to be a stronger emphasis in the younger generation on work-life balance. Us old guys, you know, we didn't even know that term. was, you know, just put your head down and work. Do find that you've made that a priority in your life?

Sarah: I do, and I also think that my current company has really helped with that as well. Over the last couple of years, there's been a lot of stress, both on the software industry, the solar industry. As we all know, there's been a ton of layoffs across the country, across the globe in both of those industries. And I would say that King Energy has taken a really unique approach in that we get the first week of July off every single year. So I just got off a week of vacation for just being there, and then we have every other Friday off as well.

Thank you to our leadership for doing that, but I think it really comes top down. As long as you have that support, it's a lot easier to find it yourself as well.

Greg: What are you seeing in the job market now? I'm sure you have friends that are unemployed and employed and folks that you know that are looking for work. What's the experience that you're hearing from those folks that are out there hunting?

Sarah: It sounds like we're still in a market where you should take any and every interview you can. I don't think that necessarily changes even when you have an established job. I think it's good to stay on top of the market, stay on top of your interviewing. But it sounds like it's pretty tough to really explore any and all options. It seems like there's a lot of local jobs hiring right now actually, which is exciting. Whether it's an industry that you want to be in, that's another question. It does seem like there's some options out there.

Greg: And Sarah, you mentioned a commitment to community engagement. Wondering where did that come from? Where did you develop this interest or this drive to be involved in your communities?

Sarah: Easy. My parents, my parents are super community involved. They always have been my whole life. They've both created businesses from ground up here in Durango, extremely successful, community loved, continue to grow even when they want to retire. But they just keep pushing and keep working just because they feel so appreciated. And that's not why they do it at all. But it's just been something that I've grown up with. My dad is a home builder. He has Edgewood Construction locally and then my mom opened Meadow Market up in Edgemont just about two years ago. So my mom's always been involved, but she finally has her thing. I mean, it's super exciting and it's been amazing to watch both her and my dad thrive.

Greg: Well, thank you, Sarah. It's been a pleasure talking to you and congratulations on coming back to Durango. That's a nice place to be. I'm envious of your parents.

Sarah: And thanks for the warm welcome.

Michael: In today's episode of Beyond the Bell, Working 9 to 5, we are joined by Erin Cummins-Roper, Dean of Career and College Counseling at Animas High School, and Janae Hunderman, Director of Career and Workforce at Fort Lewis College. Together, we're exploring how to best prepare young people for a rapidly shifting professional world. Welcome both of you to the show.

Erin: Thank you.

Thanks, Michael.

Michael: Let's start with a big question. The professional world that our students are entering looks dramatically different than it did even five years ago. What are the biggest shifts you're both seeing and how are they changing your approach to career preparation?

Janae: One of the things I think has changed dramatically, especially in the last five years, and this is going to come as no surprise to anyone, but the piece of hybrid work and the students, young people's expectations around that has drastically changed the environment that they're approaching, as well as what the employers are wanting and needing. A lot of our students really are looking for that flexibility. They're expecting that flexibility. They've gotten used to that in a lot of their education now, like, we can switch to virtual, can meet with this person virtually instead of showing up in person, and not every job can do that for them. So I think that's one of the big shifts.

From the employer side, I think one of the things that we're seeing is employers are more and more curious about what students' experience has been. So they're expecting students to graduate from high school or college with that internship, with some job shadowing, with more knowledge than that I would have had or that probably anyone in this room would have had when we were entering the workforce.

Michael: And I'm curious too, because you said that students are thinking that they're going to have a hybrid job or there's going to be hybrid jobs available. Are you seeing that in the real world? Are employers saying we're offering more of that?

Janae: I think it's out there more. I think having that expectation, right out of college or right out of high school as well, I think could be a challenge because not every entry level role can do that. It also depends on what field you're going into. There's certain fields, education, health care, the trades, you need to be able to show up in person. I think students and adults and adult learners and job shifters across the board are looking more for that work life balance that ability to take care of personal needs and show up to work and work their own hours. So I think that's dramatically changing the environment.

Michael: Erin, what about you? What are the biggest shifts you're seeing?

Erin: One of the things I see the most in high school students is the influence that social media has on their idea of what work is and what work can be in both good ways and bad. Not every student wants to be an influencer, but they see that that is a way that people make a living. And I think it creates a false sense of anyone can do this because anyone can do it. But the reality of one of our students going on to become wealthy as an influencer is pretty small. Or a streamer, a video game streamer, those YouTube folks and those sorts of things.

So I think that's tough. I think it creates this sense of maybe I don't have to put in very much work to get a really big payout. That is a struggle. So then what I feel sometimes I'm promoting is this antiquated notion of formal education and training. And they're like, but I literally have all of the technology at my fingertips and I could become a millionaire right now.

I've heard it from my own son. Mom, do know how many millions of dollars this streamer makes? So that's challenging.

And then I also think that there's not a tremendous amount of optimism, I think, about the job market for young people right now. And that's not just today in 2025. That's been a trend for quite some time. And the ability to go and make a living wage is not something that high school students are thinking about, but they have a sense for the struggle that exists for them when they come out of either high school or college.

Greg: Erin, from a high school perspective, how do you help students navigate college and career planning when many of the jobs they'll eventually have may not even exist yet?

Erin: I think that this was true for all of us as well when we were younger. The world changes fast and even faster. For my counseling has always been with students to try to get them away from this idea that career and college counseling is about working towards one specific job or career. It's more of thinking about a general idea, helping students to understand what am I interested in and is exciting to me. So interest and aptitudes are the sort of wonky words that we use. And then how can I go and do those things in the world?

So it's really moving away from these are the five things that you should be or become or do, the five jobs that are the right fit for you. And more of what are the things that I know that I'm good at? And we talk about skills and we talk about character attributes. And then how can I go and apply and do those things in the world? So it's really general and not specific, which a lot of people push back against, right? They just tell me, just tell me what to do. Tell me how to do it. And they want something more specific, but it's really keeping it more general, I think, and straying away from that. Like this is the one thing that you're working towards.

Michael: So to follow up on this, this is a question for Janae. Erin's talking about what employers are telling her that they want is experience, character attributes. Is that what you're hearing from employers? And has that changed from a decade ago?

Janae: It is exactly. I love these sorts of conversations with people like Erin because, you're speaking my language. I can just see already that we're thinking about things in the same way. And I totally agree. They're looking for professional skills, soft skills, essential skills. There's so many different ways, durable skills, that all of those are getting to this piece of how we show up and how we understand what it means to work. And that's what the employers are looking for.

You hear more and more, I just want somebody who can show up and wants to do the work. I can train them. But then there we get to another piece of I can train them. That's where my workforce hat comes on of we need to be thinking about once we get a job. And our young people, think, need to be understanding this too. Once we get a job, it's not my career and education is done and now I'm a worker and that's the end of the story for the next few decades. It's, you know, I got all this education, now I'm in the working world and I'm going to have to continue to learn. And it's that lifelong learning piece is what I think a lot of employers are looking for is somebody who's willing.

Things are changing so fast in the world of AI and there's always going to be new skills that we need to learn. And so they're looking for somebody who's willing to show up, be professional, have those people skills and then willing to learn and continue to gain their skills,

Michael: Be adaptable. So are you thinking that these soft skills, essential skills, is that really, I don't know, future proofing is the term about like, well, what do you really need in practical terms to get a job? And what I'm hearing is more the character attributes, attitude that you have when you get their commitment to the workforce, showing up on time, those sorts of skills.

Janae: Yeah, exactly, the human-centered skills, we might call them. Another piece that we need to understand is networking, how to build those relationships, because that is how our career will continue to grow and have new opportunities. When we use each opportunity we have in our job to build new relationships, you're building the network, trying on new things in each role that you get to see where it takes you after that.

Michael: How do you teach students how to network?

Janae: You get them out there and you do it, number one. Just this week I've been thinking about there's two different sides of networking. We often think of networking as you go into the room, you wear your name badge, you've got your business cards and like your shaking hands. And that's still very, very valuable. And I think we need to teach students to do that.

But there's this other side of it. We do informational interviews, which are those one-on-one coffee dates with somebody maybe you've never met before. Maybe it's a Zoom call. That's also networking. And I think coming at it from both angles, we've got our extroverts and our introverts too. People who want to go into that space are comfortable milling about in a large crowd and entering a conversation.

But there's so much power in reaching out to a complete stranger and say, hey, your work intrigues me. Can we get together? Can I have 30 minutes of your time? So I think that's something that's future-proofing your career as well.

Greg: You bring up a really interesting point. We talk about this a lot in our family. The power of learning how to ask questions. It seems to be a lost art, especially with young folks. To be able to focus the attention on the other person and inquire. Folks like to talk and if you're a good listener, it makes a good impression.

Erin: Speaking of questions, we teach our students, when we teach them about networking, we tell them the simplest thing that you can do is ask the question, who do you know that I should know? Because networking sounds really scary to them. So we just say it's as simple as that.

After you've spoken with somebody and built a little bit of rapport, maybe at the end of your informational interview, great, who should I talk to next? Now that you know me a little bit, who do you think I should know? And that also can create that warm handoff, right, for the next person that they can contact.

Networking is more important than ever. And in a world of AI and technology, AI can't network for you. And so really teaching students those human skills of being able to have interpersonal interactions and a network are so important.

Janae: Yeah, there's a great quote. don't know where I got this from, but I've been stealing it lately. It's, net work is your net worth.

Michael: Can you tell us more about that?

Janae: It's that whole thing about who you know. Like I can say for myself, I've gotten roles that I didn't even know were out there because somebody tapped me on the shoulder and said, there's a job opportunity for you. We often talk about the invisible job market and that's all based on who you know. You can get a role by saying, I have an idea. There's no job description out there. It's not on a job board, but I have an idea and I think I can do this. Will you hire me? And people will say yes.

Greg: I think you're both talking about the virtue of having self-confidence and the ability to get out there. Erin, or actually for both of you, how do you both address the anxiety that some students feel about choosing the right path, you know, when the future seems so uncertain?

Erin: I'll jump on this because we actually created some really cool programming around this at Animas High School this past year for our ninth grade students. And we have a whole project that's called the Stepping Stones Project. It's all about career exploration in the ninth grade

and some of the key questions that we explore with our ninth graders because starting to talk about the rest of your life is really intimidating. And so really what we do is we explore these questions of what is work, what do people do at work, and then where do I want to go?

And we use this metaphor of a river, trying to cross a river using the stones, the rocks, as stepping stones in the river. And we've all probably experienced this at some point in our life, especially our students who are up here in Southwest Colorado. And so we say, imagine yourself crossing this river. And to get from one side to the other, it's highly unlikely that the path will be straight, right? You're going to hop to the right. And then you might have to take a couple steps back because it turns out there weren't any more rocks past that one that you jumped on. And then you might have to zigzag a bit.

And then there's so many places we go with this metaphor. Like, uh-oh, the water might rise. Now what? We use it to springboard and talk about resilience and failing forward, starting over, those sorts of things. But to circle back, Greg, I think your question was specificity, right? Helping them understand where they need to go. It's helping them understand that you don't need to know. That if we have a general idea of where we're going, which is across the river, you don't have to know exactly how you're going to get there when you set out because it's going to change. And you might need to make adjustments. In fact, you're definitely going to have to make adjustments. Things aren't going to go to plan, and that is the plan. The path will not be linear, and that is the path. That is the nature of it.

There's this whole other piece where we help them understand the value of side quests, which is teenage language if anyone plays video games. Oftentimes in a video game, you'll encounter a separate little room or whatever, and it's not connected to the mission of the video game, but you go in and you fight a bad guy and you win some things. Maybe you get an extra little token and it helps you in the larger video game. And helping them understand that.

Going on these little side quests doesn't mean that you're off track. Maybe you're off accumulating more of these soft skills or bits of experience that you may not know right in that moment exactly how they're going to connect to this goal of getting across the river, but eventually they likely will, right? It could result in you meeting that key person that introduces you to the next person who introduces you to the next person that gets you that job.

It's really just moving them away, I think, from this idea that the path is linear and we have to know. We have to know every single step and have it all written down in a nice pretty little outline and followed exactly.

Michael: Erin, it seems like about 15 years ago, this idea that college is for everyone was kind of out there. And now people are really questioning college. And what I hear you guys saying is that anything's good. And I get that. Everything's experienced. And I totally get that. But how do you help students and families think about different post-secondary options besides saying, that's all good, and it's all who you know, and you can always make connections, and don't worry if you fail because you'll, you know, it's just learning experiences. But what kind of advice do you give them? You know, when you say here's some different post-secondary options.

Erin: I think this college for all narrative is important in the sense that I think every single person should have access to college and that is something that I steadfastly stand behind. Everyone should have the financial resources and the counseling and advising that would enable them to attend a four-year college if that's their goal and or any other type of post-secondary education or training. And I think that we as guidance counselors and college and career counselors in

high schools, and really anyone that works in a role with a high school student, and Janae, you can maybe talk about workforce development and folks that are out of high school.

You know, this word post-secondary is really jargony and it's really hard to use that word even though it is the most appropriate word. Because when we talk about education after high school, the word that we tend to default to is college. But really it's just education after high school is what I talk to my students about. We know the value of a bachelor's degree and that can be a little bit tricky depending on the choices that you make in terms of money that you choose to spend and where you go. But in general, what we know is that the more education that a person has, the higher their socioeconomic status.

And we know that education is the key to socioeconomic mobility. And so when I talk to any student, it's not, you going to do something after high school? It's, what are you going to do? And how are we setting you up in high school to enable that and to help make that happen for you? So for me, it's really watching my language and not just using the word college and also reinforcing to all of my students that, hey, when I say college, I mean education after high school. I mean all of it fits.

And I really am working with all of you on what is the education or training that we are going to shoot for after high school for you. Janae, I don't know if you have some ideas about folks that have already graduated high school and are in that space.

Michael: Or, Janae, if you could also hit on community colleges and trade schools and what are their roles, that would be great.

Janae: I used to work at the Colorado Community College system, so I'm a big fan of community colleges. I kind of like to think of them as, well, they were doing workforce before workforce was hip. They've always been gearing their education towards the exact skills that you need in the jobs that you're planning to get afterwards. That's just the basis of what community college does. So I think their role is incredibly important.

I think there's certain fields where community college is the route rather than a four-year degree. And there's certain students where the four-year degree, that type of learning, depending on the institution that you get into, is not the type of learning for every student where the type of learning that community colleges can do is it fits so much more for certain students. So I think they are critical. They're a critical piece of the whole puzzle. But I think what we're also talking about, we're kind of veering into other options after high school.

And we've got the apprenticeships, certificates, micro credentials. We've got that whole world happening too. And I'm really excited to have the opportunity here at Fort Lewis to do what my three favorite things, which are education, career development, and workforce. So we're just kind of getting into this workforce realm. And what that allows us to do is develop trainings that are relevant to the skills that we need in the job force, but you don't have to be at Fort Lewis to get a four-year degree to hop into one of these trainings.

So you could be a student still in high school, or you could be recent graduate and you could come in, you could do one of these trainings and that will help you get into a role that'll help you pay the bills much quicker and help you use those skills, contribute to your community, all of those things that we're really, we're striving to do. We all want to contribute and pay the bills. So those short-term trainings can do that.

And then on the flip side with our workforce efforts, we can also support people who are on the other end. They might have a bachelor's degree and a master's degree, like I do, in a topic that

you're no longer working in. then you get certifications and you do these more short-term things to help you have the knowledge and skills for the next phase in your work.

So I think this piece of workforce, it's a good piece of the puzzle. Community college is part of that four-year education. It's all about, like Erin said, it's all about the types of education and training that we're going to get and there's so many options and we need to be we need to have many access and exit points from education.

Erin: Community colleges have largely sort of stepped into the space that 50 years ago trades employers were occupying in terms of apprenticeships and internships. Fewer and fewer of those exist. They certainly exist, but most often it's people coming out of college or who are currently in college, whether that's four-year or community college who are doing those apprenticeships and internships. so community colleges have taken up that space, which is why I think there's this shift of maybe some of our students, parents, you know, didn't attend a community college to become an HVAC technician or a welder. Whereas today, a lot of that education and training is happening in the community college space.

I would just also say I try to build value in any type of education or training after high school for my students. Circle back to the Colorado Talent Pipeline Report every year with my students and parents to illustrate to them the data. And the 2024 numbers were wild. 95% of what they call tier one top jobs in Colorado, which are essentially jobs that pay a living wage where you're going to live comfortably, required some type of post-secondary education or training. So 95% of jobs. And then it was something like 63% of jobs that are considered tier two, which pay slightly less, require some type of post-secondary education or training to really sort of hammer home to them that this idea that you're just going to become an influencer, right? The data doesn't match up with that. The 95% of jobs are asking that you've done something beyond a high school diploma.

Michael: So Erin, how do you help students understand the return on investments for different educational and training paths? Or I guess my question is that even a focus? Or how much of a focus is that?

Erin: I have to make it a focus. It definitely doesn't tend to be the first thing that 16, 17, and 18-year-olds are focused on, most of them. Certainly their parents are thinking about it and caregivers, but it's something that I have to bring to the forefront for them. And I think this is really tricky because return on investment on a bachelor's degree or any type of certificate or training program in large part depends on how much you have invested.

And so you could spend \$400,000 on a bachelor's degree. I kid you not, Wellesley College just hit the \$100,000 mark. And you could also be like my sister who worked her way through Fort Lewis College and probably spent, after financial aid and scholarships, probably spent a total of \$25,000 out of pocket. Her return on investment on that degree was extremely high. She's now the controller at that institution. So her accounting degree and then subsequently her CPA led to a very high return on investment.

But the conversations I have with students are those which is, you interested in public service? Then what we have to start with is how much are you going to spend at the outset? And so how much are you investing when we think about what the return is going to be?

Really another great example of this is I had a student who was really interested in a NOLS program, the National Outdoor Leadership School, and wanted to spend around \$30,000 to go and do a training program. It was a very short-term training program to become certified, get some sort of certification through NOLS. And he was convinced that this was his only path into

becoming a NOLS instructor. And I said, let's think about on the other side of this, right? We know that folks in the outdoor industry are generally not high paid. These are not high paid positions. I know that you want to do this because you're passionate about it. Let's look at some other avenues where you're not spending \$30,000, like some programs through Colorado Mountain College where you can get some of these same certifications. Now, you're not getting the experience directly through NOLS, but what you can bring to them is a resume and some credentials and certifications that cost you maybe \$5,000 versus the \$30,000. So return on investment is just such an individual subjective tricky thing. And what's tough is when we consume media that tells us that college is too expensive and it's not worth it. That's misleading, right, because you have to look at everybody's individual choices. And so much of that is the advice that students are being given or not being given.

Greg: Earlier you talked about the soft skills in the industry being something that employers are looking for. What are those soft skills? How do you prioritize it with high school students? And how do you actually teach it? And I shouldn't just restrict that to high school students. Let's broaden that to just students in general. Let's start with you, Janae.

Janae: They're not skills that you're surprised to hear about. We've been talking about these forever. know, communication always lands on the top. Creativity, emotional intelligence, being able to build relationships and do team building or teamwork, rather. Being able to make meaning of things and find purpose in things. These are all the things that AI can't do. And these are all the things that like make us human and it's what we need from each other as colleagues and as friends and as workers.

And when it comes to teaching these things, I imagine a subtle shift in what's already happening in the classroom, where I think what our educators are doing is fantastic. They're passionate about it. They know the content. They love working with young people. But I think one piece that a lot of educators miss is getting really transparent about what you're learning with each activity, each group project, each assignment – taking a moment afterwards to support the students to reflect on their learning. These are the technical skills I am learning from this activity. And then these are the professional skills or the people skills that I'm learning from this activity.

And really, it's just that transparency. By creating that transparency in the classroom, the impact that that can have on the students is amazing because now they know what to put on their resume when it comes to what their skills are. They know what their skills are. First of all, it builds that confidence because they can start to say, this is what I bring to a team. This is how I show up in this space. These are the skills that I have. These are the skills that I enjoy using. These are the things I've been learning. And then you put them in an interview and somebody asks them, well, how do you XYZ? And now they have the language for it. So I think a lot of it is just it's pure and simple getting transparent about what we're learning, not I got the grade on the test. It's not about the grades. Yes, we need those too, but it's about what are the skills that you're showing through every activity that you do.

Michael: And you talked a little bit about skills that AI are not going to be able to provide. Can you talk a little bit more about that, either of you? What are the skills that people have that AI is not going to take away?

Erin: I think adaptability and problem solving, critical thinking, those things are the biggest ones that AI just can't do. And I think Animas High School and the project-based learning model does a really great job at putting students in situations where they're going to have to build and practice with those skills. And so when they have a project that they're working on,

it's much different than a more traditional model of read the chapter, take notes, and then here's the test.

There's absolutely learning that is happening there and there's value to that. But what students aren't doing, they're not problem solving, they're not adapting, and they're not necessarily, well, I shouldn't say they're not using critical thinking skills, that you absolutely can do that in analyzing a piece of text, but problem-solving and adaptability. And so when students are in that project-based mode, most of life and a lot of the workplace is project-based. There's something that we need to accomplish and we have to figure out how to get there.

And so I think that that is really important. For students that don't have access to say like a project-based model of learning, it's experiential learning. And all those skills can also be built outside of the classroom, putting yourself in places where you're a little bit out of your comfort zone as a student. So maybe it's in your extracurricular activities, maybe it's at a summer camp or a paid employment opportunity.

And I always think about the things that make you feel that twinge of maybe resistance or discomfort, those are the things. That's where you're growing. And often that's where you're having to exercise that adaptability and resilience and problem solving.

Michael: All right, let's change directions a little bit. And this question is for both of you. Maybe we'll start with Janae first. What are the most common mistakes you see students making in their career prep? And how do you avoid them?

Janae: Yeah, number one is just waiting too long to think about it. And this isn't just on the students, this is on the adults in the space too. People will say, first year student in college, it's too early to talk about career with them. They need to learn how to do their laundry first. And I wholeheartedly agree. Yes, not on the laundry part. They do need to learn how to do their laundry. But if a first year student, they've these conversations with Erin about the the ROI and like this the expenses and they've made this decision to come to college because they want a better career on the other side. And if we aren't getting them started talking and thinking about careers in their very first year, then why did they show up? And they're looking for that. And if we're not offering them that, then we're missing the boat there. And I'm not thinking that first year students we need to be saying, well, these are the jobs that you might be applying for. And your resume needs to be perfect first.

It's not that it's this piece that we've been talking about here about going out and exploring, understanding who you are, what your skills are, what your interests are, and finding in your first year on campus, finding more opportunities to go try those things. And understanding that every time you try a new thing and decide what you like about it what you don't like about it, that is career development. The students need to understand that.

What happens a lot is the students think, career services, well, I'm not ready for a career, so I'll wait. And then suddenly they show up in our office because they have a job interview tomorrow. And we're like, well, we can do a mock interview with you, but I would love to slow down and understand why this job. Because if we back up and do that work first, you're going to show up to that interview and you're going to know how to interview them and figure out if it's the right job. But we we start much too late. We focus too much on grades rather than experiences.

They also expect their first job to be so perfect. A lot of our young people want to make big bucks right out of the gate. They want to be in a leadership position. They want to, you know, I'm going to graduate from college and then I'm going to be the CEO. And it's like, yeah, well,

there's, you know, there's these things called entry level jobs and they're really kind of a good thing for some of us. So they also think that they're going to jump right in. And the last thing that I'll say before tossing over to Erin is that they ignore their online presence. They are online. They all are. We know they're all online and they don't think that their employer is going to look them up on Instagram or they're going to look them up on Facebook or, you know, they're not using Facebook because they're not, they're too cool for that these days. But you need to have a LinkedIn presence and you need to be aware of what you're putting out there and the rest of your online world because your employers are looking at that.

Michael: Erin, what about you? What are the most common mistakes you see students making in career prep?

Erin: I just want to emphasize what Janae said, it's not doing things. And I hate to say this phrase "build your resume" because it's not about resume building, it's about going and having experiences. It's having experiences and then to jump off of that, they cannot articulate what they've learned from those experiences and the skills that they now have.

So it's this inability to connect the things that I've done with now how that has built value in me as a potential employee. So for example, if I'm talking to a student who has volunteered as a DEVO coach and they simply just write that on their resume, on their high school student resume, DEVO coach, road bikes with little kids. Let's talk about this in terms of skills. Did you have to problem solve? Was there ever a time where you had to engage in problem solving? Yeah, there was this time and the kid threw a fit and someone got a flat tire and...

But they aren't making those connections. And I think Janae probably sees this a lot in interview prep, where we have to coach that into students. It's that mistake of maybe not asking for help and or coaching and mentorship, because they just out living their life and doing things. I can pull out oftentimes a lot of examples from them about when they have demonstrated these things and really also helping them understand that they have these things, these things called resilience. Like you have resilience and here's a time where you exercised that, right? You understand how to problem solve and here's a time where you did that, right? So it's being able to articulate those things and identify when they have done those things in their lives.

Greg: How do you get parents and families to support their children's career development? We've got this language we're speaking of and what we're trying to do in the classroom, but how do we get the parents to help advocate?

Erin: Well, I would say, again, coaching the parents away from what my dad did to me, which is, it has to be linear. You must follow this path, predetermined path from point A to point B. It really stresses students out when what they hear from their parents and caregivers is, we must have a concrete plan of what you're going to do with your degree.

And again, there are instances where that is totally applicable, right? I'm gonna go be a paramedic. And sometimes it is linear and it's appropriate to talk about the linear path, but oftentimes it's not. And I encourage parents to just take a deep breath and listen more to their kids. And I do have children and I understand how hard it is to listen to them. And what they want isn't necessarily what you want. And what are your kids' goals? And can you get on board with those goals because they have to be the ones that they are bought into? They need to be the ones to lead the conversation. I think avoid the power struggle is really important. Your student needs ownership. The ownership leads to the buy-in, which leads to the effort and motivation. And so I think not projecting your hopes and dreams for them onto them and

allowing them to come up with their own hopes and dreams and goals and get on board that train.

I would add the value of storytelling in the home and that your experiences as the adult caregiver are really valuable as long as it's from a place of not proselytizing. Even if, let's say that you don't have a college degree or you didn't get any education or training after high school telling stories, how did I get my first job? My first job was this. It was stacking rocks. It was a manual labor job and I stacked rocks for eight hours a day. And then I had this other cool job and we talk. So talking about work. Talking about different jobs that you've had. If you have education or training, talking about that. I find the dinner table's a great place to do this. So the value of storytelling is, I can't overestimate that.

Michael: Janae, if you could redesign career preparation from the ground up, what would you change?

Janae: This would be my dream. Let's burn it all down and start over again. One of the things I would want to do is make sure that every educator out there, it doesn't matter kindergarten, professor in a college, every educator needs to have some understanding of the career development kind of strategies that we're talking about here so that they can see how what you do in the classroom is career development.

We used to think, I remember working in K-12 and it was like, well, my job as a fourth grade teacher is to prepare them for fifth grade. My job as an eighth grade teacher is to prepare them for high school. And I disagree. I think every single year you're preparing them to become our future workers. We are preparing them for the world that is beyond K-12. And getting that mindset shift in each and every educator, I think, would transform everything.

Because then we're going to have kindergarten teachers who are going to say, when we're learning this, how can I bring in this idea of what do you like to do? Even in kindergarten, how can we start there? And I know people are going to be like, Janae, really, career development in kindergarten? Yeah, because career development is understanding what our skills are and what our interests are and what we like to do. And so starting from that really young space and doing that. And then as we get older, more and more partnerships with businesses.

A really underutilized strategy, I think, in what we call work-based learning in the field is industry-sponsored projects where our businesses are short-staffed. They've got projects that are on the back burner that they don't have time to do, but man, it would make a difference. So you take that project to a group of 10th graders or to college students, and you say, here's my big question. Here's this thing I don't actually know what to do next here. I need to do some research. I need to do some digging. I need some brainstorming.

And you leave that with those students for a week or for two weeks or whatever the project is. And then you come back and they give you some ideas and you give them some feedback and you let them do it some more. And then the end, the business, the organization is getting, they're getting something back from it. But what the students get is phenomenal because now they understand, wow, I did teamwork and I came up with ideas and I wrote a report and like now this organization is going to use it and it's going to make a difference out there in the world.

And bringing education and industry together more often, I think, is, you know, if I could break it and put it all together again, it would be about that. It would be about much more of the interests and transparency about what we're learning from a young age and then much more interaction with industry.

Erin: It's interesting that you mentioned the industry sponsored project today because we do that with our 10th graders at Animas High School. We do it in the form of a service project, but we essentially we sort of put an RFP out to a whole bunch of nonprofit community partners in Durango and we say, what do you need done? We've got a group of 10th graders that are going to come and do some stuff for you.

So, you know, examples are one year, a group of our 10th graders built a whole bunch of little free libraries and installed them around Durango. And the students work as a group. They take the project from beginning to end. And prior to that, we do a lot of pre-work with them around this self-exploration. So here's what I think my interests are. Here's where I think my strengths are. And then leading into the project, we say, OK, what do you think would be a good role for you then? Aren't interested in using power tools, where do you think you're going to fit in in the group, right?

And they could be like, I'm gonna draw the designs or I'm gonna be the project manager, whatever the role might be, right? And then after the projects, so they go out and they do things, these industry sponsored projects, and then they come back and they reflect. So did I like this work? Why or why not? Were the things that I thought I was good at, did I do those things? Did I do them well? Am I actually good at those things? And so there's a lot of reflection that goes on that they then carry forward into their 11th grade year, which is when they go do an internship.

But every junior, every 11th grade student at Animas High School completes a three week internship. So our spring semester for those students basically stops three weeks before the rest of the school and they then do a full time internship for three weeks as juniors where they go out into the world and literally into the world. So the beautiful thing about the three week format is they're not obligated to stay in Durango. Most of our students do, but this last year we had a student go to Italy, we had a student go to Costa Rica. So students often will travel somewhere else in the country and they get to do a full-time internship. And what's really great about that internship is not just the internship itself, but all the work that leads up to it.

All of 11th grade is spent refining their resume and they do informational interview practice, they practice with networking, and they build this really great library of skills that they take into their internship. And then that's sort of the culminating experience of their junior year is that three-week internship that we call LINK.

Greg: This is for the two of you, for each of you. What gives you the most optimism about the next generation's ability to thrive in this changing work environment? I know you mentioned the passion and the desire for a healthy work-life balance, but where's the hope? Where's the optimism?

Janae: Yeah, I love it that you brought up the passion and the work-life balance. Again, I think those are really important. But also, I think this generation, they're scrappy. They're willing to make it work for them. And I think that that will really serve them in the long run. I think they're willing to stand up against things that they don't think are fair or right. And I think by doing that, they're going to create changes in some of the structures that have just been stagnant for a long time.

And the other thing that I think is really important is they value and embrace inclusion and supporting each other. And we've mentioned the mental health piece, but they're able to talk about it with each other. And I think they will build stronger relationships and networks once

they get over the fear of doing that. think that they'll build a, it's cheesy, so cliché, but I do think that they're gonna build a world for us in the long run.

Erin: I think what gives me optimism is that young people today have a group of adults who have a much better understanding of career development and all the things that we have spent the last hour discussing. Whereas I didn't have that. I don't know that any of us had that. Right? And so what gives me optimism is the guidance. It's all of us adults that have learned it the hard way and or that do this work professionally that can guide students towards more fulfilling lives and careers that they have passion in, which ultimately will lead to a more fulfilling life, right, which will enable them then to change the world, like Janae said, and make the world a better place and I think just be happier people and be able to make other people happier.

Greg: I think the fact that we have two women here helping our younger generation gives me incredible hope. You guys are amazing.

Janae: Thanks, Greg.

Michael: Thank you both for your time. It's been a pleasure chatting with both of you.

Erin: It was awesome. Thanks for having me.

Janae: Thank you.