

Bard TLS Podcast

0:00 Mackie: Hi everyone! My name is Mackie Siebens, I'm the director of Admission at Bard, I'm also and alumna of the college and graduated in 2012 and today I'm joined by Paul Marienthal who is going to talk to us a little bit about TLS Project, Hi Paul.

0:15 Paul: Hi Mackie it's nice to see you again.

0:17 Mackie: It's nice to see you too.

0:19 Paul: This is Paul Marienthal, I'm the dean for social action and I'm the director of the TLS program. I've been at the college for 23 years. I was originally the squash coach.

0:34 Mackie: very good, very good.

0:36 Paul: and like many of us at bard we went from being one thing to being another thing and that's one of the wonderful things about the college.

0:44 Mackie: I actually watched a little bit of squash last night, it's a fascinating game.

0:47 Paul: Yeah, it's a fabulous game.

0:50 Mackie: So to start off, maybe for everyone who's listening in and doesn't know what TLS projects are, we're going to talk a little bit about it but first of all it stands for Trustee Leader Scholar programs and we have a little bit of a history that we should outline. So, I'm going to ask Paul to talk a little bit how this got started and where it's gone so far.

1:10 Paul: Yeah, twenty something years ago the college was really interested in going towards what its mission is now which is a private institution in the public interest and even though we had a lot of good ideas, many of our students couldn't get off campus, couldn't get around, there was almost nothing organized. I was asked as a coach, and also many other things, as many of us do have many things in our backgrounds, to put together a program that would attract and give opportunity to especially earnest people who wanted to make a difference in the world and so that's what I did, that's where we started. There was a lot of skepticism at first whether Bard students would actually do this, would this actually work? And originally it was a part of the admissions process that you could actually apply to the TLS program and for two years I read along with all of you in the office here dozens and dozens and dozens of files and pulled out the best students who had the most amount of background. It's an interesting thing, very quickly I came to understand that the students who were really going to make a difference in the world were not the ones who necessarily had done lots of service in high school. Service is different. TLS is not a service program, it's a leadership development program, it's a program for people who are actual zealots, it's for people who are just fired up, have to get something done, they walk into my office on fire, "I have an idea, I have an idea!" They just, they just can't stop themselves and it turned out that those were not necessarily the students who had been doing things since they were 12 years old. They were students who showed up at class and a teacher got to them and they said "my God, I had no idea about trafficking, I have to do something on trafficking." One of my big international projects, the Bard Palestinian Youth Initiative, we send students to a small west bank village and have for more than ten years. The very first day of L&T (which is this program that you will all do, this wonderful three week orientation in which you will look at yourself, examine yourself, write about yourself, think about the world on the very first day,) that student came to my office, a palestinian, said, "nobody has asked me my opinion in 12 years more than I got asked today and I need to take this back to my village" and 11 years later we have been there almost twice a year, every year running camps, running L&T, building playgrounds, that's the way TLS projects start. Which is probably one of the questions down the list here..

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4:23 Mackie: Yeah!

4:24 Paul: That's the way they start, you show up and say I have an idea, I gotta do it!

4:28 Mackie: Yeah, so I'm sort of interested..so you obviously do a huge amount of work speaking with students about their idea, helping them flush out next steps..can you talk a little bit about how the college at large also supports these students and what kind of resources they get?

4:42 Paul: Yeah that's great. One of the unique things about Bard is we take our students really seriously. Across the board, students here are considered adults. Show up, you're in the real world, this is real world work. One of the wonderful things about this institution, both for my students and for me personally, has been that I am not micromanaged. I think my colleagues trust me, I think they like the work I do and they don't mess with me and consequently, I try to do the same for the students. I have a stained glass window in my office that says, "say yes, unless there is a compelling reason to say no." And that's the way I try to do this with students; I do say no occasionally..students who..students who..one student once wanted to do an outreach program in Somalia and I said no, no we're not sending students to Somalia in the middle of a civil war.

5:54 Mackie: Yeah

5:57 Paul: Short of that, I've said yes pretty much every other time. And the college, because it takes it takes its students seriously, it gives people a...the projects that have come out of this program are quite magnificent in many ways. They're not only college-altering but they're world-altering. This is different than in a lot of schools. There are wonderful community service offices at many schools and there are programs that view what are called service learning where classes are tied to amounts of..small amounts of action in the community. There's absolutely nothing wrong with that work. Most schools send their students..hundreds of hours of students, student work in communities and they do the work. It's very different than this program, the TLS program is about students forming, making, designing, funding, organizing, and delivering programs on their own. I could do these programs but it's my job not to, I think I'm pretty good at giving permission. That's my number one skill is how not to meddle and to provoke. I'm pretty good at "what's going on, tell me about it, where are you stuck?" ..drawing students out..so my job is, I'm a counselor—I'm not an organizer, I'm a counselor. And consequently projects often go in directions I couldn't imagine and they can't imagine either, but they work and students...I have one student a number of years ago...on a video...made a video of this project and in the video looked right into the camera and said "the college doesn't do anything for us." And I really appreciated the sentiment of it and I said "you have to edit that out, that's really not fair."

8:05 Mackie: Yeah.

8:08 Paul: I mean, they don't do a lot, but nothing? Come on.

8:09 Mackie: I don't know. As someone who was engaged in a TLS project myself and as a colleague now I think you do an incredible amount of work and the students have the ideas and in that sense yes, the college is not feeding them ideas, they're...the whole idea is that they come up with these themselves and they are really eager to get to work but in terms of, I think, your time and the resources that the college provides, it's quite substantial.

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8:36 Paul: Well thank you. You know my people ask me sometimes, well shouldn't you write a book about what you do? and over the years I realized my book gets shorter and shorter and shorter, not longer. I've come to understand that getting things done in the world really comes down to human relations and so I've spent a fair amount of time with my students now doing very skill-based work on how to talk to each other in good times and in bad times. You know there are hard conversations to have in the world, there are real conversations to be had about whether you're going to do a project or not, whether you're going to get married or not, whether you're going to have children or not, whether...you know there are...and in partnerships in these whether we're going to do this together, are we going to go to Africa or not? How are we going to fund it? Are our parents going to let us do it? These are challenging conversations and there are real language skills about how to have these conversations and so I spend a lot of time doing that and I call it empathic behavior and communication and in an interesting way I've come after twenty three years to think the most important skill is that students can get is how to pay attention to other people, it's not to do something. It's not to, you know all the doing and all the formulating and all the ideas, those are great but it really comes down to are you paying attention to the people you want to work with, are really paying attention to them and that's what I do.

10:23 Mackie: Yeah and I mean we talked a little bit about the Bard Palestinian Youth Initiative which was started a long time ago and is one of the international projects, one of the examples of just how far-reaching TLS is, but there are things that are done on a national and local level here in the Hudson Valley, can you talk a little bit about, maybe give some examples of students who have done things in various parts of the world.

10:47 Paul: So, I mean back from international, Bard has sent more students to New Orleans than any other school. We're a small school in the northeast and we have a very substantial presence in New Orleans. We adopted a neighborhood, Broadmoor, right after Katrina because one of our students is from New Orleans and he came to my office right after and said "I have to do something for my city" we went there..that's by the way, the way projects really happen in the world, you get in a car, you get in a plane, you walk over, you go and see it. You can do email from now until the end of time, it doesn't make connection, the way you make connection is you go there, which is also how the Bard Prison Initiative started. Max and I got in a car and drove down to Fishkill prison, went to see the superintendent. That's the way things start, show up, I can't... show up everybody. So we went to New Orleans and there was a big sign—"Broadmoor Improvement Agency Meeting at Loyola Auditorium from 5-6 on Sunday," I said let's go, we went. It started at 5, it ended at 6 right on the dot and I said, "these are our people." The woman who was running that meeting, LaToya Cantrell, is now the mayor of New Orleans. The Bard student who took over LaToya's job as the Broadmoor improvement agency director as LaToya became a city council person, is now running an office for the city of New Orleans, Emily Wolff, an office that was actually created for her by LaToya, knowing that Emily had what it took to do this, which gives you an idea of the arc of some of these projects and what people do. Emily went there to teach art in summer camps in Broadmoor for three years, then went to work for the school that we helped renovate, then became a Director of the Broadmoor Improvement Agency and is now essentially the mayor of all the youth of New Orleans. And it wouldn't surprise me at all if Emily became the next mayor, in fact I kind of expect that she will.

13:08 Mackie: That's very exciting, that's really exciting yeah.

13:11 Paul: So that's national, locally. There are many, many projects and I'm actually going to the very first TLS project that started twenty two years ago at the Astor Home, which is a facility in Rhinebeck near us for children who have been pulled from abusive households—challenged, really challenged kids, behaviorally challenged kids, bright, but behaviorally challenged. It's actually a wonderful facility, I had a student years ago who asked what is that building, it's a very big, imposing stone structure.

13:47 Mackie: This is the one in Rhinebeck?

13:48 Paul: It's the one in Rhinebeck as you go down, out toward the train station. "What is that?" I don't know, so I said let's go down there. Turns out it's this facility. She started teaching photography there and over the years we have become the recreational and non-academic part of the program about twenty students a week go to the Astor Home, we have run theater programs there, we do sports, we do cooking, we do science, and many many many students, at this point hundreds of students, have participated in the Astor Home, so that's on-going and it will continue.

We teach an ESL class in Red Hook, locally, we've been doing it for more than 15 years, two nights a week Bard students teach non-English speakers of which there are thousands in the Hudson Valley because of the agricultural nature of the area. We teach, we have a wonderful program in which we teach all the non-English speaking children in both Red Hook and Rhinebeck an after-school program which meets three times a week, that's a great program and we've been doing that for about 10 years. And I can go on and on. We're in youth prisons, we're...Bard students get around.

15:15 Mackie: Yeah, yeah. I definitely think that TLS, it's obviously, it has a strong history and students here know about it and they're excited to participate and it's something that certainly makes the college special.

15:31 Paul: Let me just say a little bit more about that because it's important to get the difference between TLS and what a lot of schools do. The students who are formally in the TLS program are actually members of the program and we give them stipends. We consider it so important at the very beginning, back to the history, I've been in the world long enough to know none of us are utterly generous about the world; there's always self-interest involved and that's fine, that's the way it should be. It should matter to us, we should be invested. And I said we are either going to have to give these students academic credit or we're going to have to pay them. We can't ask the amount of organizing and the amount of work that leading one of these projects is way more than a moment here or there. Many students will tell you that this is the most important thing they did when they were in school and because there's so much accountability. I just say look, there's no way we're going to do this as volunteering, so we pay students. We don't pay them a lot, we pay them. There are in return, hundreds of students who volunteer in this project, so at last count something like 450 of the Bard students out of the 2000 were involved in TLS projects. It's important to understand that the students in the TLS program, we do workshops, they write me monthly prompts, we're really in relationships with each other.

17:05 Mackie: And they're real opportunities too, talking a little bit about that self-interest, opportunities for students to go on and as you talked about with Emily, really sort of inserting themselves into a community, in a really important way after graduating. We have a close mutual friend Daniella Anderson who ran a TLS project based around a group of people in Nepal who had leprosy and she actually got a Watson Scholarship and traveled the world to study leprosy and now she's a doctor. This was a sort of slightly medical, but it was more about community and more about supporting these people with this disease in sort of more of a social way and then she went on to study it around the world.

17:55 Paul: And what's significant about Daniella is that as a medical practitioner, her medical school was financed by the government in exchange for a commitment to do 6 years of world medicine. Very in-line with where she started, all about community and as far as I know she is there doing that now.

18:16 Mackie: Yeah, she I think is doing her internship in Chicago.

18:22 Paul: Yeah and she will probably end up in Wyoming or Montana or Idaho in the middle of the prairie doing important work.

18:34 Mackie: Yeah, so there are lots of opportunities too to really use this. Development skills that are important to the person who started the TLS program and take them into the professional world and do more of the same thing but actually make a living out of it. Which is exciting.

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18:50 Paul: Yeah, I can give you many examples of students whose work here in the TLS arked into their professional life starting with the Bard Prison Initiative. It started as a TLS project and for those who don't know what the Bard Prison Initiative is, Bard gives full-scale degrees, academic degrees in medium and maximum security prisons in New York and at this point is now advising other schools in even other states on how to devise and run first-rate academic programs in prisons and that started as a TLS project as a sophomore.

19:36 Mackie: And this office we're sitting in, the Admissions office is actually..so connected to that program that applications from students who are in the prisons come through this very office. They're read by counselors here in conjunction with Max Kenner who was a student and started the TLS project and now he runs BPI. So, we're very much linked to these programs not just sort of as..they're not siloed necessarily, we actually interact with students who are in the prison in exactly the same way we would for students who are coming from various high schools all around the world and are looking to find their place at Bard.

20:10 Paul: Yeah it's quite a unique, quite a unique program.

20:14 Mackie: It is, it's very special. So, well this has been fabulous, thanks for coming Paul.

20:18 Paul: It's such a pleasure—and for you listening, my office is in the campus center right in the middle of the hall, I'm easy to find, you are welcome to come to my office in the very first day you are here. In fact, I'm going to give you my phone number. You could call me now if you had a project to start. My number is 845-505-1795. Call me if you have a TLS project idea and we'll talk about it.

20:52 Mackie: Great! Thanks, Paul. And for those who have questions that you want to direct to the admission office, you can call us here or you can also email admission@bard.edu and we'll be happy to answer your questions and to help you consider this next chapter. But, for now, we will thank you Paul for coming and we will talk to everyone later. Thanks so much!