

“How Does It Work? Building Trust in Self-Directed Education”

October 19, 2019

Natural Creativity Center

Philadelphia, PA

Panelists

Ian R. – Graduate of Philly Free School

Simon E. – Graduate of Circle School, staff member at Philly Free School

Desmond L. – Graduate of Philly Free School

Jim Doria – SDE parent

Angela Brockington-Long – SDE parent

Rich Sedmak – Entrepreneur, Schoolyard Ventures

Marika Xifaras – Admissions counselor, Bryn Mawr College

Panel Facilitator

Tess Liebersohn

Tess: Thank you all so much for coming. I've been working on this event for a couple of months and every panelist came! [Housekeeping items: phone, bathroom, write down questions on cards]

To start off, I'm going to read some sentences. If you have thought or heard somebody, say this in your world, please raise your hand. These first questions are for the parents:

“I think I like the idea of self-directed education but there's a lot I still don't understand.”

“How much should I push them to learn what I think they should now?”

“Am I screwing up my kid by doing this weird thing?”

“How will they learn the basics if they don't want to learn them – math, writing, history, things like that?”

“Are they going to be prepared when they grow up?”

“This is hard. I wish it was easier.”

For the young people (or if you've heard your young person say this):

“Am I going to be ready in the future?”

“Sometimes I think would be easier to just go to school so I wouldn't have to explain what homeschooling is for the millionth time.”

“I don't know if I'm learning what I'm supposed to be to be on track.”

“Will diving into one interest block me off from other things?”

“Am I spending my time well?”

“I get the sense that I have to go to high school in order to go to College in order to be successful in life.”

For everybody:

“This feels like a big experiment and I don't know what it's going to lead to.”

“Am I doing enough?”

[Multiple hands were raised after each of these statements]

I have heard every one of these in a partnership meeting at some point. You are not alone. Everything that I said had at least one person raising their hand for it. So **rather than me trying to use some theory and ideas and hope that you're going to build trust, let's hear from some people who**

have already done it. They've been through this path before; they can share their wisdom, their takes their highs and lows. And you can perhaps leave here with a bit more trust in the world of self-directed education. A few more ideas about what the future could hold. An understanding that this is a community and that it's fun, that self-directed education can be fun. And that it's possible to enjoy the ride. It doesn't just have to be a struggle with a lot of question marks; there is fun involved as well.

A note on terms: There are people here from all kinds of different kinds of self-directed ed. Some people get real down in the weeds about the difference between “unschooling” and “homeschooling” and all these things. I'm going to address them up front so that you don't have to worry about them later. Every one of these terms is too big to really apply to lots of different people. Every family reinvents it for themselves. That's what's so cool about self-directed ed. So, if you're like, “I don't know if I'm technically doing ‘homeschooling’ if they leave the home to do things.” “I don't know if I'm technically doing ‘unschooling’ if I'm teaching them something,” don't stress about it.

“Home education” is a legal term that says you have told the local school district that you are implementing a home education plan for your child and you will submit an evaluation and summary at the end of the year. How families do “home education” is as varied as the families who are doing. Some pursue “school at home” with workbooks, full curriculum, parent is the teacher, grades, tests, report cards, things like that.

Then there's a whole spectrum. A lot pursue unschooling. Here's the incomprehensible Wikipedia definition for it: “‘Unschooling’ is a term that refers to advocating learner-chosen activities as a primary means for learning.” This usually means minimal uninvited instruction from adults. **The term I chose to use for this panel was “self-directed education” because it emphasizes the most important thing, the “self.”** In this case, the young person. A person of any age could be a self-directed learner. You could be middle aged and start to pursue a new hobby because you've always been curious about it, so you pick up a book and start learning. That's self-direction as well. I prefer the term “self-directed ed” because it's about what is there rather than what is not there. So, unschooling implies, “we're not that,” but it doesn't really say what it is. “Conventional school” is something we're all very familiar with. It's a system or a setting where there's a hierarchical knowledge transfer from teacher to student.

And then we have three people here who are associated with the Philly Free School. A “free school” or “democratic school” is a specific model about which we're going to get a one-sentence description from Mark [Staff member at Philly Free School].

Mark from PFS: Philly Free School is a democratic school, which means that there are two parts. Kids are free to pursue whatever it is they are interested in while they're there and they also have the responsibility of running a school. Through a body called “school meeting,” they hire and fire staff, they create the rules, they enforce the rules, they decide how to spend our money. We feel like that balance of freedom and responsibility really creates a model that is extremely beneficial. Thanks.

Tess: Great, thank you, very succinct. That's what a Free School is. It's one approach to unschooling. There are also resource centers like what Natural Creativity is, and the Bucks Learning Co-operative, which Jim [panelist] is associated with. Those are not attendance-mandatory places, where young people are in charge of the content of their learning and there is staff there to facilitate the learning. I think that's all of the terms.

Please write questions that you have on your cards throughout this. I'll collect them at the break. Now we're going to start with our panelists. **Would you each please share your name, your affiliation with the world of self-directed ed and a brief sentence about how it has worked for you?**

Ian: My name is Ian. I was homeschooled for many years until spending the last two years of high school at the Philly Free School. **Self-directed education taught me that I am a whole person and I have the power to affect change.**

Simon: My name is Simon Eisenstein. I went to a self-directed democratic school for my whole life, the Circle School in Harrisburg. Once I graduated, I began working at the Philly Free School as a staff member. **Self-directed education gave me the time to enjoy my childhood and now, enjoy my adulthood.**

Desmond: My name is Desmond. I spent the last three years of my high school at the Philly Free School. Before that I did many different types of schooling. **I think self-directed education really, ironically, taught me how to learn. It taught me how to carve a path for myself, find out what's important to me and how to pursue it on my own terms and take it out into the world.**

Jim Doria: My name is Jim Doria. I am a parent at the Bucks Learning Co-operative. My kid V [they/them] goes there. They are in their last year and my wife is the administrator. We started as V got out of sixth grade. We started on our journey first with the Princeton Learning Co-operative and then the Bucks Learning Co-operative. **I was one of those parents who had doubts at the beginning, but I've seen the entire journey and my doubts are no longer there.**

Angela/Nuriyya Brockington-Long: My name is Angela/Nuriyya Brockington-Long and I am the mom of three beautiful beings who have all been unschooled. Two have experienced high school and one is now in college. I will say that the **self-directed education learning has been a wonderful adventure. It's been a healing catalyst for myself. It's helped me shift old paradigms. It has allowed me to really know my young people as I have tried my best to just let them be. It has had its highs and its lows. I would not change a moment of it.**

Rich Sedmak: My name is Rich Sedmak. I am an entrepreneur. My kind of self-directed learning path was that **I convinced my public school at the end of my 10th grade year to allow me to not go anymore.** They had a strong incentive to have 100% graduation rate and so I kind of went on my own entrepreneurial path, beginning in the summer between my 10th and 11th grade year and have been doing entrepreneurial things since. **I am involved in an incubator that works with high school age students to start businesses, nonprofits, political movements, things that really matter to them.** I was lucky to have someone who kind of guided me towards this notion of one of the things you should try to strive for is to figure out what's worth suffering for. I was lucky to find that and we're really interested in helping kids understand their place in the world. We're agnostic as to the way they do that. We think that they should be doing that while they're still young, that it's not too early for them to be doing that.

Marika (Mika) Xifaras: My name is Marika Xifaras, please feel free to call me Mika. I'm an admissions counselor at [Bryn Mawr College](#), a four-year liberal arts college for women and gender minorities. My relationship is with applicants that are homeschooled or have a self-directed education. A way that I have been impacted even though I myself didn't receive such an education during my secondary education years is that **these students tend to be some of the most creative people I've met, interested in learning what the world is really like, which is a tenet of the liberal arts** and something that Bryn Mawr very much looks for. They've been very inspiring to me as an individual, to have that curiosity and to reach for it. They've also helped the community that I am a part of, Bryn Mawr, by offering new ways to look at ideas within classrooms, on campuses. They start a lot of movements

themselves. **They ask the difficult questions that might go against the status quo and that creates a lot of great change.**

Tess: Great. Thank you so much for those introductions. The first couple of questions are going to be for the young alumni of the panel. First question is: **How was the decision to pursue self-directed education made in your cases?**

Ian: I was five years old and I had just finished my first week of kindergarten. I said, "I'm not going back."

Tess: So, it was you who made the decision?

Ian: Yeah. My instinct is that the hope for my parents was that [homeschooling] would maybe be a little bit more classical just in terms of what I was actually learning, and working through some curriculums, but I was too stubborn.

Tess: And your two younger siblings are also homeschooled.

Ian: Yes.

Simon: The decision was made by my parents. I started when I was, I guess, three in self-directed education. At that age, I didn't really choose it. As I grew older, **I chose self-directed ed every year because I chose to go back and continue the same path because I was happy and didn't want to risk being unhappy in public school or somewhere else.**

Desmond: For me, it was kind of a hybrid between me and my mother's decision because **I couldn't find any schooling that was working for me. And by "working," I mean something that was enjoyable and that I felt was beneficial. We kind of stumbled across the Free School just by pure chance,** and decided to give it a try because we gave everything else a try. And we went with it and it worked out.

Tess: So you went to public school, private –

Desmond: - homeschooling, cyber, charter.

Tess: You've sampled it all.

Desmond: Yes.

Tess: So, a couple different approaches there, different entry points. One of the questions that I gather a lot from parents is, "I get the philosophy, but what actually happens day-to-day?" My question for you three is: **What was a day like when you were 10 years old? What was a day like when you were 16?**

Simon: When I was 10, my day consisted of playing and hanging out with my friends. That's essentially all I did. When I was 16, my day also consisted of hanging out with friends, but a big part of that was helping the running of the school. That's part of what our schools are like, you know, you have responsibilities as well. I'd be on various committees, helping with the judicial system. And that usually took first priority for me; I would do that stuff first. And then when I didn't have any responsibilities, I had to take care of, I'd go hang out with my friends. **I suppose also, when I was 10, I took some classes, learning stuff like arithmetic, spelling, mathematics, that type of thing. And as I grew older, I kind of**

stopped doing that because there wasn't stuff I felt like I needed to know anymore. And whenever I would encounter something that I felt like I needed to know, or I want to learn, I would learn it.

Ian: When I was 10, I was part of a homeschooling co-op. My days there were pretty regimented, I would say. There were a couple hours in between the classes that were mostly free to play and move around in the space. It felt very conventional to me in that I had so many classes to go to and if I wasn't at them, that's not right.

Tess: What about when you're 16? By that point you were at Philly Free School?

Ian: It was completely different at the Free School. That's sort of the nature of the beast. **There's no way to say how my day went, because it went however I decided it would that day.**

Tess: Were you involved in the judicial committees as well, the decision-making?

Ian: I didn't spend as much time in the judicial committees as I gather Simon did. I spent the majority of my first year as the school meeting chair who is responsible for facilitating the weekly meeting that makes pretty much all the decisions.

Desmond: That's an interesting question. I like that one. When I was 10 years old, I was going to public school in Delaware. At that age, all the decisions were made for me with school I was going to go to: the classes, when I could play outside, little things like that. Thinking back on it, it was relatively easy since everything was set in stone for me, I didn't have to think about the decisions I had to make. When I turned 16 and I transferred to a free school, **I was kind of lost in the beginning because I wasn't used to having this much freedom. I wasn't used to use making decisions on my own. I had to find a way to make these decisions that used to be made for me, to construct my day on my own in a way that I found beneficial to myself. I had to ask myself, what do I want to do with the day? How am I going to do it? What's the importance of these things that I want to do? The answer was music. I spent a lot of time making music, learning music, etc.**

Tess: It changed from there being very little "self" involved in the decisions to all your decisions.

Desmond: Yeah, exactly.

Tess: And you are a music teacher now?

Desmond: Yes, I teach music.

Tess: Parents often ask, "What about the basics? What about reading? What about math? What about writing? If they don't seem that interested in it, do I force them to do it?" Do any of you have any examples of specific times you remember realizing you wanted to learn math or realizing you wanted to get better at reading or something like that? **How did you learn those basics?**

Ian: I don't have any specific answers about those things for myself because I learned those things in a slightly more curricular homeschooled environment.

Tess: You know how to read, right? You all know how to read?

All alumni: Yes. [laughs]

Ian: I didn't come through it in a particularly self-directed way. My youngest sister did decide for herself that it was time to read and then taught herself how to do it, which I think is a great example of communication.

Desmond: I think it goes back to what I was saying, "What's important to you?" **The question I ask is, "How will you survive in this world without knowing how to read, without knowing how to do math?" That is going to be something you learn whether it's taught to you or whether you have to learn it yourself.** You have to know how much you pay for gas, or how to read a sign, or how to play a game with your friends. **It's something that's going to come naturally in order to learn how to survive in this world.** We don't teach some of the most basic things like how to talk at such a young age, how to walk, etc. But we learn these things on a natural instinct because we know, "This is how you survive in this world." And it has to happen to survive, in my opinion.

Tess: Mine too. Sorry, I should be neutral. **How has being a self-directed learner allowed you to pursue hobbies, experiences, travel, things that you wouldn't have been able to do if you were in a conventional school?**

Simon: I think for me, the answer is the time that you have. You really have the whole day to do what you want. **What I chose to do, as I said earlier, in my younger years, was actually studying: taking arithmetic classes and then in my free time just poring over maps, atlases, lots of geography stuff.** I don't have much more of an answer than that.

Desmond: Yeah, I agree. It's time that you have to really dive deep into what's important to you and what you want to do with your life.

Tess: And that was music for you?

Desmond: It was music for me.

Tess: **When you encountered bumps in the road, on this journey, what did you do about it?** What were those bumps? Was there a time you captured? I really don't know how I'm going to learn this or I don't know what to do with my time. How is the transition out, you know, 18 and over?

Desmond: I have an answer for that. When I first started [Philly Free] school, I didn't know what to do with the time. The struggle with that was letting it be. **As funny as it sounds, on my first day at the school, I fell asleep. I slept for the whole day because I didn't know what else to do. I woke up and I thought I was going to get in trouble because I forgot it wasn't a conventional school. They were cool with it. That could have been my schooling career. I could have, every day, gone to sleep, gone home, go back to sleep. But that's not beneficial. I knew this very early; I knew this day one.**

Exploring my environment was one of the key steps, getting to know the community, and then figuring out what's important to me, which was music. When I graduated school, I found myself in a similar position where I didn't know what I wanted. It was unfamiliar territory, graduating from the school and not going directly into college. **I was faced with this freedom again of working part time and having all this time to do what I wanted to do.** Again, I had to figure out what I wanted to do how and what was important to me. I knew it had something to do with music so I started learning about producing and

making beats. It was for fun, to take up the time but I found out you can make a business out of this, a legitimate business. It went a different direction, I started teaching it to kids. I learned that you can make a living off of this by selling music online. **I don't think I would have learned as much about making money online had I gone a conventional route to college, etc.** It would have been another thing where it was all decided for me. Now that I've had that time to learn about myself and learn about what I want to do, I found this new opportunity. It's really exciting for me.

Tess: If you were to do it all over again, would you change anything?

Simon: I think the answer is a "no" for me. The whole experience was pretty great. **I guess the only bump in the road that I experienced was what I referred to as my "mid-teen crisis."** I was doubting whether I was really on the right path. "Am I actually going to be a successful adult?" Whatever that means. I wrestled with the same questions that people usually ask about self-directed education. I didn't really do anything about my doubts; they went away eventually. As I grew older, like 17 or 18, I realized that comparing myself to my same age peers, I am ready. I may not be wanting to go to college and I may not know how to do calculus, but I feel pretty confident and happy. I know that if I wanted to learn or need to learn these things, I can do it.

Tess: Ian, would you change anything?

Ian: No. Life is life.

Desmond: It's hard for me to come up with a regret that I had. Even with mistakes I've made, I've learned from them and they've kind of benefited me in a weird fashion. It's hard to say that I would change anything...Maybe make more mistakes, and learn more.

Tess: Do you have any advice to give to parents whose young people may be younger than you? Things that you would like them to know?

Ian: I think one of the most important things you can do as a parent is to let your young person get bored. I think boredom is one of the most powerful tools available to humans. Because we don't like it. An internal need to find something to do that is better than that is going to be one of the most powerful driving forces your child will ever find.

Tess: And Ian now works at a board game café!

Ian: Yes, the Queen and Rook Cafe, 2nd and South.

Simon: Trust your children. Obviously, don't just do whatever they ask, but they'll know what's best for them. It'll all work out.

Desmond: Yeah, I agree with those two points. It's very scary going into this world where you don't know anything. I think there's more possibilities for things to go right than to go wrong. Trust and embrace the process. Embrace the flaws that may seem like flaws now, which can turn into very strong positives later on.

Tess: If you were to have your own offspring in the future, do you think you would unschool them?

Desmond: Yeah.

Ian: Definitely some form of self-directed education.

Simon: That's definitely what I would want them to do. I guess if they want to go to public school, I would let them do that too.

Tess: Thank you so much for those answers. Moving on to our two parents here, Jim and Angie. **How has your understanding of self-directed education changed over the years?**

Angela: Initially I didn't use that term, self-directed education. It was just homeschooling, that's how it was introduced. I had no idea what it was really about. Initially I found Peter. I was guided to him. I met some folks who said, "Call this [Open Connections](#) place." Through there, **I was introduced to the whole notion of allowing young people to explore what they want to do, and I did that. I did try the cyber charter schools for two and a half seconds, and canceled that because I wanted to be in charge. I didn't like that third hand in. I'm speaking years ago at this point, like 2000, '02, '03. I felt my way. I read a lot. We hung out a lot. We talked a lot. I'm talking about my oldest, Isa, here. I just tried to go with the flow with him. That's how we got started.**

And how it's changed over time? I did try to imitate incorporate some instruction with my oldest, here and there. With my last young person, he's really opened me and challenged me on the whole notion of really letting go. With Yahya, I'm learning to just trust and let go. He's such a quiet force and he's very determined with what he wants to do, which is art and different facets of animation. He has no interest in standard forms of writing, math, or whatever, but he will do things as he needs it. He's really teaching me to just let go, let go and trust. That, along with other life circumstances, is also teaching me to let go and trust.

Jim Doria: V [they/them] went to public school for 5th and 6th grade and then it was time to choose where to go for middle school. There was a very, very large public middle school. They weren't all that interested in that. We knew as parents that there were going to be problems with that because of potential issues with attention and the different milieu. We looked into the [Princeton Learning Co-operative](#), which was a homeschooling cooperative, self-directed. We thought that might be a good compromise. **I went in there with some doubts about it. They were describing a situation where kids come into the building and they can do whatever they want, all day long. They could choose to do things, not choose to do things. That sounded risky to me.** They did about a year there. Then they were looking to start a similar program in Bucks County and my wife, who was looking for a new opportunity at that point, came on as the administrator and started up the [Bucks Learning Co-operative](#). And V chose to transfer from the Princeton co-operative to the Bucks co-operative. By the time V got there, I was starting to see the sort of the benefit of the model. **I had heard a lot of stories by that point about kids who had come out of public school with trauma that needed to be healed and they needed some time to decompress, and then they would come around. I never had any doubt that V was going to get an excellent self-education about things like art and literature. I was more concerned with things like science and math, but those things have turned out to work out fine.** They don't have calculus, but I didn't either. I haven't missed it. It's been an interesting journey, partly because it's been the journey of building a learning co-operative because that's been my wife's work for the last four or five years. We were always very involved; I was involved as a volunteer, I gave some workshops for the kids and did a lot of stuff behind the scenes. It's been great. **The last couple of years has really shown me that I can have that trust because V has turned into this person who is very competent, very capable, bright,**

interested and interested in pursuing knowledge. And I don't have any fears for their future. I feel like they're in a position to sort of follow their star, whatever that might be.

Tess: Conventional schools associate “success” with high grades, going to college, and getting a job that pays highly. **What does success mean for you, in terms of your young people and their future?**

Jim: We'd like [V] to go to college. That's definitely the plan. They want to do that as well. Successfully getting a college degree would be part of that definition. I'm more interested in them finding a path that they find fulfilling. One of the things I've struggled with over the years is that old worry, “Am I going to put food on the table?” I've come to the point where I can always put food on the table...That's kind of like “table stakes.” The more important thing now is: How do I find a path that's fulfilling? And how do I find a path that lets me do things in the world and impact the world in a way that I want to do? And I feel like they're very well positioned to do that now. That would be my definition of success: Finding and walking that path or paths.

Angela: Years ago, I read *Autobiography of a Yogi*. My favorite line in the book was about [Yogananda, the author]. He left the ashram and his teacher because he thought there was a better teacher for him. He went on this journey to the Himalayas in search of his master teacher. He's traveling, traveling, and he meets this guy who says, “Where are you going? You have a teacher. Go back.” He says “Oh my God. [My teacher] Sri Yukteswar - is going to hate me. I was disrespectful.” He goes back. Everything's cool in the ashram. Sri Yukteswar is walking around. Yogananda says, “Did you notice I was gone? Didn't you miss me? Aren't you angry with me?” Sri Yukteswar looks at him and says, “**No, I love you. I want for you what you want for yourself.**” **That's stuck with me all these years, with my young people.** In terms of success for my young people, I used to want them all to go to college. I have since changed. My daughter, that's what she wanted to do. She knew she wanted to go to college, she knew which college she wanted to go to. And we only applied to that particular school and she got in. **Success? What I want for my young people is...I want them to be able to manifest whatever the heck they want in this life. I want them to be happy. I want them to be productive. And I want them to be able to live their life authentically. That's what I want for them. And to be able to take care of themselves so they don't have to live with me forever. That's what I want for my young people.**

Tess: It sounds like neither of you were that worried about them doing calculus?

Angela: No, I can't do calculus!

Jim: I did have a concern about science. I went to public school and I had a really good science education growing up. What I learned about science in high school has really sustained me and helped me make sense of the world all through my life. I understand things that are to me very, very important: innovations and technologies and things that are really changing the way people live. My concern was that V would not have that background and understanding. They did not get the kind of science education I got because a public high school has a lot of resources to dedicate to science programs and science is not cheap. But they have had a very good science education and have shown an interest recently in herpetology [lizards and snakes] as possibly something that they might want to pursue even career-wise.

That was the one concern that I had. **I've put that fear to rest because there was always going to be some diversity between what I had and wanted versus what they had and wanted. I don't feel like they're on the short end of that stick. You don't have to learn everything by the time you're 18. You have your whole life.**

Tess: Could you speak to adjustments your family has made in order to pursue this path, money-wise, housing-wise...?

Angela: I'm choosing my words carefully. Finances have been a challenge...always. When my older two were younger, before Yahya was born, I was married. I was home. We had one income. There were sacrifices. It's funny, I look back at pictures where I'm wearing the same clothes for 10 years. Finances were pretty tough. On the bright side, it allowed me to be home with them, which I cherished every moment. They felt the pinch. I constantly work with them in terms of harboring or holding on to feelings of lack. I don't want them to move around the earth with that in their heart. **To this day, I tell them you're not defined by what you started, you can still create any and everything that you want. There were some tough times financially.**

Jim: For us too. My wife got started with the Bucks Learning Co-operative about this time and it was a startup. She was basically running a small business. They were getting some support from the Princeton Learning Co-operative, so they weren't starting from scratch, but it was a lot of 80-hour weeks, working seven days a week for months on end. A lot of stress in an intense environment. This was also the environment in which V was getting their education. I had a period of joblessness a few years back, so that did put a bit of a pinch on our family for a while until I was able to get back into my career. **Things were tough, we definitely had to make sacrifices.** My wife had been a public school teacher and the school district she was in...was a guinea pig for some educational reforms by people who had no experience with education. Things had gotten very bad for teachers and she had become very unhappy and had left that behind. We were already facing a deficit of that income and the income from BLC was not great at first and then I had no income for a while. We definitely had to scrape and we definitely had to make some sacrifices. But **it's been a great journey for us as a family, it's brought us very, very close, because we were all involved in it. It's like we're all in it together. It's given me some great opportunities to do some things that I wanted to do and be there to support both my wife and my child and other people as well.** The sacrifices, they're eventually gone and what you try to take with you is the benefits That's not hard.

Tess: Thank you for sharing that. Last question for you two, same as I asked the young alumni. **Do you have any advice to offer to parents were currently on this path?**

Angela: **The only advice I would give is to relax.** Because of the way most of us were brought up in the whole system, peeling back the layers and changing the shift in our own thinking, moving out of that illusion into another awareness is probably the biggest challenge. **It's probably us [who have more challenges] rather than the young people – getting out of our own way. Because they're cool. They come here with so much and they don't need us to suck it out of them. Relax and enjoy it.**

Jim: That is so great, I have to second and third that and amplify that. I would say "relax" is important. The other word I would use is "respect." It was very easy for me to get into this role of "I'm the parent and you're the child" because that's how it is for so many years. **I had to learn to respect the choices that V was making and recognize those as the choices of somebody who had their own agency and had their own idea for their life that was separate from what I might have wanted, or what I thought "should" be, or not even what I personally wanted but what I thought was the "right" way. Part of the journey for me has been learning to respect the process and the agency of my child, as a person in the world and not just as a member of the family or whatever role they're in.**

I think for homeschooling parents, you have to acknowledge that [agency]. Every parent comes to that at some point. I think some parents get to postpone it a little longer; Maybe it's not until their kids are out of the house or out of college. **I think if you have a self-directed learner, you have to reckon with that at a little earlier. But I think that's probably healthy.**

Tess [speaking to Rich Sedmak, entrepreneur]: Like I asked the young people over here, **what were you like at 10 and what were you like at 16?**

Rich Sedmak: At 10, I was sitting on a carpet sample in the hallway outside my classroom at public school. **I was the kid in the principal's office most of the time.** Not for fighting but for my words. **At 16, I was running a computer and electronics refurbishing business. I was not at school most of the time.** I had adults who are working for me. I think a major catalytic moment was when I had an adult who was working for me, who was the primary wage earner in the house and his wife became pregnant. I realized that as a 16-year-old, I was running the business that was providing the income for this family that was now needing to support a child. I think I got my first gray hair that day.

Tess: It sounds like you negotiated self-directed ed for yourself at 15-16 years old. **How do you think your life would be different if you had never gone to school?**

Rich: If I had never gone to school? I guess I'll say something that maybe is a little contrarian in this room, which is that **I feel like the benefit of going to public school is I learned how to deal with authoritarian forces.** I learned how to do combat with them. I learned how to understand what incentives they had, what constraints they had. I figured out how to negotiate based on what their incentive structure was. **That serves me really well now, as I'm trying to disrupt industries,** create positive social impact with businesses and nonprofits and things like that. In terms of freeing up 40 hours a week to work on things that were intrinsically interesting to me, that would have been great. I think that is one thing I would have missed. By the way, there are other ways that I could have gotten that, I didn't have to be locked in a building for 40 hours a week.

Tess: **What was your parents' response to you leaving school?**

Rich: They hated it. Well, they didn't know at first. They didn't like it at all. My mom was a school teacher, a public school teacher, and my dad was a teacher's pet, kind of straight-A student and they laid down the law and said, "This is how it's going to be." It was a battle of wills.

Tess: And now you work with teenagers starting their own businesses. **Why do you think being a self-directed learner would help somebody start their own business, pursue their own interests?**

Rich: I think, **by definition, school is an imperfect simulation of the world.** The thing that you actually want to be developing is helping kids learn how to develop their own feedback loops with the world so that they can better inform their models of actually how the world works. Schools range in their ability to do this, but it's a simulation, right? No matter what. Some schools don't even simulate it anywhere close to accurately and some schools maybe do a little bit of a better job. By definition, it's an imperfect simulation. From my standpoint, **the more that kids can be interfacing with the world and modeling the world and things like that, the more they can understand what their role in it is. For me, this is the big value of education: Understanding what role you can play in the world based on what makes you uniquely you.** You develop your perspective and you develop your sense of taste also, which I think is critically important. [You develop] an opinion and the confidence that comes from that, the efficacy that

comes from having accurate models of the world. For us, the big thing that we focus on is not just starting businesses, it's starting any projects that contribute value to the world. We see this as something that we need. **We need more people who are able to create value for the world. The way you do that is you accurately model the world, people, and their needs and their constraints and you solve problems for them.** The neat thing about that is not only are you a net societal contributor, being able to create value for the world, but you can sometimes extract some of that value to you keep the lights on and make sure you have food.

Tess: Could you share a specific the story of a self-directed young person you work with?

Rich: We work with a student who's a South American immigrant. He went to a magnet high school in Philadelphia. He was the editor of the school newspaper, he was the class president, he was on a path of prestige. His best friend was a year older than him. When it came around to hearing about college admissions decisions, this friend committed suicide. And he was one of, I think, three or four students in the Philadelphia area that year who did that right at that time. He started questioning, "What am I doing? Is this worth it? Is it something that matters to me?" He was very scared to get off that path. He had all the credentials to be able to go to an Ivy League school. He was trying to figure out what this all meant and what he could do.

We were already working with him when this happened, which was great. He decided that he was pretty skilled at math, and he was interested in math beyond the curricular level of what he was engaged in. He ended developing a cryptocurrency stable coin. The problem that he was interested in is governments manipulating their currencies, and preventing people from losing their life savings either through manipulation, inflation-based manipulation, or through poor economic policy. He ended up creating a stable coin. He made lots of trips to Venezuela and got merchants and bodegas to adopt this stable coin. Venezuelans have moved 300 million US dollars' worth of their assets into this stable coin to protect and insulate their families from the fluctuating currency.

In terms of finding his place in the world, this is incredibly empowering. He's now 19. We started working with him when he was 17. He's created real value for people. I think his confidence has increased. I remember when he was six months into this project, and it looked like it was going to start to work, he had doubts. He thought, "It's not too late for me to apply to Harvard!" or something like that. He had to see for himself what he was capable of. I think that that could have happened with an intervention earlier, if he had the opportunity to be more self-directed at a younger age.

Tess: Thank you for sharing. Do you have any advice for the parents out there, from your own experience or those of the people you've worked with?

Rich: Allow your young people to experience natural consequences. Go out and try things and fail and build those feedback loops with the world. Not everything is going to work, but that's the nature of real-world learning. Encourage them to solve problems for other people, for other groups of people, to create value and try to create value. It's not a capitalist thing; we need more people who understand the constraints that people face and the constraints that systems face and try to start creating value. You can start doing that at a very young age.

Tess: Last questions, for Mika. Hello. Let's say a 17-year-old homeschooler is applying to a college, and they don't have test scores or grades or a clearly delineated curriculum that they've done. What are you looking at? What is in their file?

Marika Xifaras: I'll talk about what we see at Bryn Mawr in particular. Usually what we get from homeschooled or self-directed students, whether they have grades or not, is a **write-up of the classes they've taken or how they've directed their own curriculum.** Maybe they organized a syllabus for themselves for a semester, like a philosophy course: "I read some Kant, I read some Descartes, I read some Nietzsche," they'll talk about that. Otherwise, they'll tell us, "I'm very interested in this field and I've learned by doing these readings. I've also gone out into my community and done such and such." They give us a bit of that in their actual physical application. Where usually we would see the course listings and transcripts and a recommendation letter from guidance counselor, instead, we would see the student's write-up, or if their parent is helping them with the write-up, from the parent.

Usually what I recommend to homeschooled or self-directed students is that they get in contact with their [college admissions] representative. For students of Philadelphia and the surrounding areas applying to Bryn Mawr, I would be your representative. I recommend that you email or call them, and talk to them and explain who you are. Briefly say, "Hello, my name is XYZ and this is my educational background. This is what I'm doing. Can you guide me into how I could translate that into my application?" **They will work with you one-on-one. They'll also get the added bonus of knowing who you are.**

Tess: On the entrance table, I prepared a piece of paper with information about Community College of Philadelphia's early enrollment program [see link at bottom of this page]. A lot of homeschoolers I know start with community college courses, age 16 or 17. They do a bunch of courses that interest them or fulfil general education requirements, and then transfer to four-year colleges. You can start at CCP at 16. Montgomery County Community College and other community colleges also have those early programs as well. **Why would a college be interested in a self-directed student?**

Marika: The reason that we, at least Bryn Mawr, are interested in self-directed students is because they are self-directed. **They have that initiative to learn, that desire to learn—not just get a general education and get straight A's and be this perfect student—to really experience the world and understand it, to gain wisdom and skill, not just general knowledge. At a school like Bryn Mawr, a liberal arts college, that is the hope we have for all of our students.** That's what we guide them towards. We call it "claiming your education," which means that you do what you guys are doing: Deciding how you're going to learn, what you're going to learn, and not stopping when you get your degree. You're going to make something that you put your own self into. Not just "here's the information." **We love self-directed students because they already have that coming in.** They don't have to be "untaught" the "invisible curriculum" that you find in a lot of school buildings, high schools. I went to one and I had to do a lot of unlearning.

I can't really speak yet about the students I helped admit [in the last two years] but I can speak about my time at Bryn Mawr. To keep her information private, I'll call her Hannah. She was homeschooled, did a self-directed education. When I met her, I was a sophomore, she was a freshman. According to her, she was very shy and more of a listener. Immediately when I met her, I could tell that she was an active listener. I could also tell that she very much wanted to engage and contribute to the community rather than join a club for a few years, maybe become a leader of it. She went straight to our Self-Government Association and ran for a position. When the SGA wanted to continue a committee that wasn't working very well and she said, "Why don't we change it?" and everyone looked at her funny. They said, "You can't just change it up. That's crazy." At a school like Bryn Mawr, you're supposed to have these crazy ideas and it was really incredible that she was the one who initiated the change, "Let's do it our way because we can make this what we want." She encouraged everybody else to start thinking outside of the box. She was a huge leader and we see a lot of those sort of leadership skills in students with self-directed educations.

Tess: Let's say a student gets into Bryn Mawr – or any college because this question applies to lots of different schools too – and they've got the leadership qualities and the soft skills that are so important, but they're not as strong in some academic things. What can they do on campus to address this on campus?

Marika: A lot of schools have different tutoring centers. **There's almost always a writing center or a quantitative center for math, physics, and the sciences. There's also a student advisory center with deans and advisors who can help with those questions. Schools have different resources, so you want to do this before you attend.** At Bryn Mawr, we have a half-semester program called Thrive for new students. Each cohort of 10-12 students is facilitated by a staff member and an older student. They talk about managing the social life, how to join clubs, get resources, and so on. The idea is that if you need help in a certain realm, there's going to be somebody in that room who can give you advice, and vice versa. We also have the Pensby Center for Community Development and Inclusion. Bryn Mawr is a very diverse place. If you are an international student, a first-generation student, a homeschooled student, you can go to the Center and speak to counselors, attend programs with other minority students, and join projects specifically designed to integrate students into the school community.

And then of course there are mental health counselors, peer leaders, and the faculty themselves. **Go to a school where you can actually speak to the faculty members, where they are invested in your education and want to help you learn in a multitude of ways.**

Tess: I went to a public state school and I was a tour guide. I used to answer questions like this on panels as well and it was almost the exact same thing. Every school has those same resources. If you're enrolled in just one course at CCP, even as a 16-year-old, you have access to all of their tutoring centers, writing centers, math support, everything. **What advice would you give to a parent, perhaps of a teen right now, who's thinking about college?**

Marika: **Ask admissions counselors the hard questions.** Like the parents said before, you have to define "success" for yourself. Once you have that answer, see how that might fit in with the school you're looking at. Consider learning styles and what kind of social life they want, make sure that that fits with the school as well. Let's say it doesn't work out with one school, **there are so many other options, so many different paths. Don't get caught up on "My child needs to go to this one particular college." We have over 5000 colleges in this country, and some of those are self-directed.**

[Intermission]

Tess: Hello again, it's me. [Brief introduction by Tess] This is my second year as a facilitator at Natural Creativity. I didn't know this world existed until a year and a half ago. I went to public schools and this world has changed my life. I'm so impressed and inspired by parents who choose this unconventional path. [Mention of co-sponsors who contributed to this event: [Philly Free School](#), [Bucks Learning Co-op](#), and [Princeton Learning Co-op](#)]

Here's a question from an audience member: **Are there certain personalities you think that thrive best in these approaches? Both parents and young people?**

Jim: I would say that it's not so much a question of personality but some people need more structure. **Some people flourish more when they have better set of expectations and a better structure around them to guide them.** People who need that may not find that as much in a self-directed community

because it is very much self-reliant. There's a certain amount of structure, so it might work. To me, that would be the big deciding factor. If you have a kid who needs a lot of structure, who needs a lot of sorts of direction, I guess, then self-direction is not the best.

Angela: It's not so much personality – **it's about whether the parent is open to the change and allows the young person to have a voice in their own space and time.**

Desmond: I think it's not so much personality as it is surroundings, whether it's the community or household figures. **Even though it's "self-directed" education, you still need some sort of backbone of support.**

Tess: That's why a lot of these places exist: resource centers and free schools and co-ops. **People have this view that homeschooling is one mother and one child in a room, by themselves, whispering. In fact, if you go to any of these resource centers, they're very loud, very active.** There's a lot of activity going on. **They are they are not bad at socializing;** I'll tell you that.

Ian: An idea I've come to fairly recently is that **self-directed education is, by definition, for everyone because life is self-directed. You're not going to be able to lead a life that is just a perfect continuation of what you were doing in a conventional school. It's an imperfect simulation, right?**

Tess: Why not start earlier?

Ian: Yeah.

Tess: **How does a parent who struggled in traditional schooling and career settings switch gears to embrace this approach?**

Jim: It's tough because there's so many kinds of struggles.

Desmond: **The parent struggled in conventional school and they're looking to embrace self-directed education? Isn't that the answer right there? You struggled in school and now you want to try a different direction.** My father struggled in school and yet he's all for conventional schooling. My mom did well in school and she was the one who supported me going into self-directed education. Like we said earlier, let go, trust the process, embrace all the flaws, which will help this individual later on.

Jim: One of the struggles you can face is wanting one thing for your child when the school wants another thing. That's mostly worked out well for us. We had issues with ADD and the school was helpful for getting accommodations for V in public school. The schools we were open to were open to that. **If the problem you're having is engaging with the school, that's not a problem you'll find in self-directed education. You won't find those super authoritarian people who say "my way or the highway," like you might find in the public school system.**

Tess: This next question is mostly for Angela. **How do parents balance needs of siblings? If a family has multiple siblings pursuing self-directed ed and of course each sibling is different...**

Angela: I don't think I've ever really had an issue with that because they're different and I never tried to fit them all in one box. Isa, when he was younger, could be building Legos and writing while Ananda liked to read and write. I never had that struggle. Now it's different with the last one because Yahya's

interests are art and animation. He could sit for hours in front of that computer. It takes a long time to do what he does. I've had to learn to respect the craft, to give him the time and space to do that. But then again, it's still different from his siblings, so I never really had to deal with that.

Audience Member 1: I have a follow-up question to that. I have the opposite experience to what you're describing. I have a 13-year-old and an eight-year-old and it's like, "Daddy come here," "Daddy do this with me." Every kid is feeling let down that I'm not giving them all of my attention. **Does anyone else relate to the struggle of giving every child what they're asking for?** [Knowing laughter]

Desmond: What do you think what would happen if you gave them individual space and less or no attention?

Audience Member 1: The 13-year-old would probably say, "That's fine." The eight-year-old might be very upset.

Desmond: Do you think he would be lost or would he pursue his interests?

Audience Member 1: I think there would be a period of angst and boredom and eventually that would work itself out.

Tess: I encounter that a lot here because there's 20 of them and only three staff members. I do sometimes feel pulled in many directions; I can't be everywhere all at once. They survive, they do okay. It's natural, it's normal. It's part of developing self-direction. He will not be eight forever. One day he will be nine. Other questions?

Audience Member 2: **I'm curious about chores and community work. How does that work in the self-directed approach?** My biggest part of my journey is resisting the feeling of an imposition like "What's your times tables? Can you read that word?" I've been through all that but there's a lot of stuff that needs to get done. I'm still learning where my boundaries are as a mom, like how much I should sweep up after you and where your freedom lies.

Desmond: Chores like cleaning or academic work?

Audience Member 2: Like cleaning, cleaning up after yourself, how you manage your personal space.

Desmond: Two things to take into consideration when it comes to cleaning. "You're in a space, so you're responsible for it." And "Clean up after your messes." It's part of growing and learning. **You make the mess, you clean it. You'd be surprised how many adults don't follow that rule. It's a learning process.** It's simple to forget about that plate you left, but you're going to learn it and adults will notice it in the real world. I hear what you're saying, it's a learning process. It's a genuine concern.

Jim: They actually had to shut down the kitchen at the Bucks Learning Co-op, because it was a problem that kids would leave messes. Nobody would fess up to it. The kids had a lot of meetings on it. "How do we solve this problem?" People had ideas and one guy said, "Let's put in a surveillance camera!" but it continued to be a problem. Some people were, for whatever reason, not able to do what Desmond was saying - take responsibility for themselves and have the presence of mind to always, always, always take care of it. Then it gets to be the "tragedy of the commons" thing where because someone else didn't do it, I'm not going to do it. This year, the kitchen is off limits for them except for classes.

Angela: It's still a challenge. "Hello!?" I still go through that. On a bright note, my daughter told me yesterday that she was going back to her dorm to clean the bathroom. There's hope!

Tess: At [Circle School](#), they have a pretty strict rulebook about what people's responsibilities are. If somebody breaks a rule, they are taken to the Judicial Committee and there's a whole judicial process for that. In that system, it's the rulebook that's being the enforcer. Not so much the person.

Rich: I have a tactical approach that could work in a family. When we're working with students a lot of times, they're pushing themselves to do things that are scary to them, outside of their comfort zone. As you increase the difficulty level, you control fewer and fewer the variables. You fail and sometimes you feel powerless. You get stuck and there's nothing you can do.

I think a great way of positioning chores is as something where you can shift down gears a little bit. You have 100% control over the outcome of it, and it's something you can get a win with, which you can use to slingshot yourself to have the courage to do something that is more difficult. We all probably face that sense of powerlessness. You have a lot of power over being able to do the dishes because you can predict with 100% certainty that you're likely to complete that thing. That gives you a little momentum to be able to power back up. We have some residential programs where students have to do chores. That's one of the things that they love doing because it's something that can knock out of the park when they're feeling powerless.

Audience Member 3: A wise man named Peter [Bergson, co-founder of Open Connections in 1978 and Natural Creativity in 2015] once challenged me to think about the language we use. **I'm thinking right now about the language of "chore." No one wants to do a chore. But what if you want to engage in a "wonderful learning opportunity"? Young people don't see things as onerous unless we teach them to see it as onerous.** For me, I had a lot of baggage with kind of chores and seeing women in my family being taken advantage of. Whenever I was doing a chore, I would automatically feel like I was being taken advantage of as a woman instead of thinking, "I love cooking," "I enjoy this," "This is an opportunity for me to meditate while I wash the dishes." I really worked on changing that perspective for myself and I can see that my young people take joy in setting the table now because it's artistic to them. I think that's helped me more than anything, a perspective change.

Audience Member 2: I did change the name to "community work" but the "work" part is still there...

Tess: Maybe they can help you come up with the name!

Audience Member 2: Yeah... "So fresh and so clean!"

Audience Member 4: I am often thinking about the conundrum about **boredom and the wide availability of screens and their ability to anesthetize that feeling. Thoughts?**

...

Simon: At first, screens can be an escape from boredom. But if that's all you're doing every day, then it becomes the boredom.

Audience Member: So, you're saying, they will move on when it becomes boring?

Ian: I find that I will naturally move away from screens if that's my escape for too long.

Tess: Was there a time when [using screens passively] was your main thing to do? `

Ian: Yeah, for sure.

Tess: Around what ages?

Ian: It's been a favorite pastime of mine for a long time. I'd say ages 14-16. One of the things that catalyzed me out of that was when I realized that there were cases coming to the Judicial Committee that I cared about. I can either sit here and look at my phone, or I can engage with real people and affect real change.

Marika: We can all be reminded that we need to constantly reflect, and sometimes screens can pull us away from that idea. The moment you remind somebody, "Hey, it's great to relax, but are you being productive? Is this taking you somewhere in your life?" I think people care about that and once you spark them back with that question, the screen will become less interesting. Maybe the way that they interact with those media will change. They love watching movies and now they're very, very in tune with what's happening. They look into the details, the symbolism, they want to learn about the directors and then there's something deeper going on there. They're really honing in on critical thinking skills in these very important things that can translate to other realms.

When I was younger, I was bored all the time. I didn't have a lot of resources to do stuff. The computer was my babysitter but I became bored soon enough. Playing solitaire can only hold your attention for so long. I played a game with myself where I would read a page and when there was a word, I didn't know that had a link, I clicked it. I'd see how many links I could get through. Twenty clicks later, I'd look: Where did I start? Where did I end? Maybe it was a waste of time but maybe I was getting curious about the world.

Rich: Tactically, have a place in the house where the computer or screen is. You go to that place for a specific thing and it's ideally not a comfortable place to be for a sustained period of time. In our office, we don't use computers as the primary mode of work. We have notepads with actual paper. We go to a computer for a specific task and I have to go to a room where the computers are and sit and actually do the task. **You're using it as what it actually is: a tool, not a crutch or default mode of thinking.** I think it takes a lot of discipline to do that.

Tess: I think this shows that there is no one way to use a screen, no one way to feel about how people use screens. **I have a vision of doing another kind of discussion next spring [2020] about this topic, to air and vent those fears and find some tools and techniques and things like that.**

Jim: Can I add one thing? **[Screen usage] is not something that's specific to self-directed education or education or kids. It's something that we're all struggling with as a society: How do we deal with these omnipresent screens** and these algorithms that are there to capture our attention on the other side of those screens? It's definitely an issue for kids in an educational setting, but it's also a larger issue for everybody. I don't know that anybody has solved it yet.

Rich: I spend a lot of time in Silicon Valley and the people who run tech startups there send their kids to analog schools. That's how they're solving it...The people who have the best information are trying to get their kids out of it.

Jim: If you're being self-directed, it's hard to then turn around and say, "But you can't do that."

Peter Bergson (from the audience): I would like to circle back to some of the first comments this afternoon regarding trust. If we apply it here: start with **trust that there is some value for the young person on the screen and you don't know what it is**, which is okay. **Engage them in having them share with you. "What is the value that you're getting out of it?" It may be decompression.** I watch TV for about an hour or so at night when I dinner because to me, it is a social experience and I live alone. It's an easy way to bring people into the space. We have some young folks at Natural Creativity who have really taken off with animation. Much of that was either spurred by or extended by YouTube. They watch a YouTube video for 15 minutes and then go off to do it.

Start with an honest question: "Tell me, what do you get out of it?" Don't try to come to any resolution. Just trust that that it's there. That question might, for those who are sort of stumbling into it, raise their consciousness. They recognize why they're doing it and think "Maybe there is something I'd rather be doing."

[End of panel speech]

Tess: You are not alone. Everything about parenting is an experiment, from what I've heard. Even if your young person went to a conventional school, you would still have questions. You would still be wondering how it's going to turn out. "Are they going to be prepared?" "What's the deal with screens?" You just happen to be in this world. Enjoy the ride.

Relevant handouts:

Free website that shares long-form profiles of grown unschoolers, ages 20-99, in their own words
www.GrownUnschoolers.com

Alliance for Self-Directed Education: resources, directories
<http://www.Self-Directed.org/>

Website dedicated to the legacy of John Holt and his books and newsletter promoting self-directed
<http://www.JohnHoltGWS.com/>

Website of Alternative Education Resource Organization (AERO)
www.EducationRevolution.org

Peter Gray's blog about all things self-directed, supported by research
www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/freedom-learn

[Info about Community College of Philadelphia's offerings for young people 15-18 years old](http://www.ccp.edu/academic-offerings/high-school-student-programs/advance-college)
www.ccp.edu/academic-offerings/high-school-student-programs/advance-college

BOOKS

The Teenage Liberation Handbook: How to Quit School and Get a Real Life and Education (1991) by Grace Llewellyn

Instead of Education (1976) by John Holt

Unschooling: Raising Curious, Well-Educated Children Outside the Conventional Classroom (2019) by Kerry McDonald

Interested in speaking to the Executive Director about your family joining Natural Creativity? [Click here.](#)