

## **Almost There**

An Emerson Collective Podcast

Episode 14: Is it possible to build a great school in a prison?

Dwayne Betts:

When you leave prison, you don't expect to return. I know when I left, I never expected to come back, but soon after my release I found myself inside of a youth facility. I was inside of Oak Hill, a juvenile detention center in DC. The group I was with, they were imagining and transforming the place so that it looked less like a dungeon, so that it reminded me less of the places that I'd been to before. This is Reginald Dwayne Betts and you're joining us for Almost There, a podcast from Emerson Collective.

David Domenici:

I don't want kids who are in poor communities in DC to not get the same education that I got growing up in Montgomery County. I want those things to happen. I also want for young people who are locked up to get a chance to read a great book.

Dwayne Betts:

You're joining me with David Domenici, the executive director of Break Free Education. Break Free Education is an organization that provides educational supports for schools and detention centers all across the country. Him and James Foreman Jr. started the Maya Angelou Public Charter School and along the way he and I started working together with my organization, Freedom Reads. We build libraries, Freedom libraries in prisons, and with David, we send books to juvenile detention centers all across the country each month.

You went from being a defense attorney who was frequently on the front line of watching people go into the system to running a school for incarcerated youth. I'm curious about where your education fits into this.

David Domenici:

Sure.

Dwayne Betts:

I mean, where were you educated and how did that education get you to this point?

David Domenici:

Well, I was born in New Mexico, but my family moved when I was young, third grade, to the Maryland suburbs and I grew up not that far from you, but in the world of-

Dwayne Betts:

No bullshit.

David Domenici:

... intense segregation that is both the district and our nation. I grew up in Montgomery County, probably 30 minutes from you and a totally different place.

Dwayne Betts:

Oh yeah, that's another country.

David Domenici:

It was, I don't know, 90, 95% white suburban kids is how I grew up. I then went to University of Virginia. How did I end up at Oak Hill and how did I end up doing this? On the one hand, Dwayne, I have no idea, but I do know one thing that got me there was the second semester of my second year of college for reasons which I can't recall I read if Beale Street Could Talk, and I ain't lying to you, I read that book. I can picture the paperback version that I had. I finished the book and went down to the end of the hall and picked up the payphone and called up my mom.

I was one of eight kids and I called up my mom and I told my mom, "Everybody in the family has to read this book. You have to go buy copies or go to the library and everybody has to read If Beale Street Could Talk." I have no idea how I got my hands on it, but I do know it totally changed the trajectory of my life. I mean, I went from being sort of a college is sort of something you kind of do to someone who started to like a lot of reading. I learned African American history, I read all these African American novelists. It was really something.

Dwayne Betts:

I find that deeply moving. People listening to this might imagine that we are connected somehow through Emerson, but the reality is that our connection sort of both predates Emerson but in fact had very little to do with Emerson in the first place. And our connection is very much about that spontaneous sense of what a book might do for your life. And so I wonder how often have you had that happen to young people who you work with?

David Domenici:

In the early days of Maya Angelou, I recall us reading *Beloved*, and I can picture right now, Dwayne, I can picture Jaquita Hebron, a 16-year-old Black girl who struggled with reading. I can picture her lying comfortably on the floor of a carpeted main room of Maya Angelou reading *Beloved*. And no one thought Jaquita could read, I'm telling you, but she loved that book. And that same year, Gary Zeffrin a really tough kid, Gary read *Beloved* and Gary said it changed his life. And Gary gave a speech at one of our big fundraisers where Maya Angelou was there about Paul D and talked about how Paul D recovered his manhood and how it related to his life. And he gave that speech in front of Maya Angelou and hundreds of people. And Gary again, to your point, I mean Gary was a tough kid and Gary gave this incredible speech about that.

But Trey Copeland read Gordon Parks, *A Choice of Weapons*. Trey's a professional photographer now and he talks about that book and what it meant to him. And then we had a photography class, right? So he took a photography class, read Gordon Parks and is a professional photographer. We used to go take a retreat and we'd be up in the western part of Maryland and I can picture Ernest Jackson and his sister, Kendria Chase and the two Cofield twins and everybody was reading Walter Mosley's *Devil in a Blue Dress*. It's just so incredibly beautiful.

Dwayne Betts:

And actually what I love that you said is that when you talk about Maya Angelou's students or you talk about the students in *Break Free*, and let's just explain this to folks. I do think that it's easy to think that we're just talking about one institution. Can you explain the partnership that we have with *Break Free* and *Freedom Reads* just so that people understand what we're doing on a month-to-month basis, just as

a segment, a sort of small slice of the work you do, just to animate the listeners' understanding of just how many institutions of confinement for young people that we have across this country,

David Domenici:

Your team and our team, we are now putting out, we're sending 10 copies of a great book to 50 youth facilities every month. That's 500 books going out to 50 facilities on a regular basis, month-to-month. There are hundreds of youth facilities in the country. In fact, sometimes people say, "Hey, the numbers have gone down. There's only about 40,000 kids locked up on any given day," which is true. But what people don't say, Dwayne, is that approximately 200,000 kids spend at least one night in a youth facility over the course of the year. That's the number.

That's not like a small little number. There's only 80,000 kids in all of DC public schools and there's only about 25,000 in high school. So multiply that to get 200,000. This is a massive number of middle- and high school aged kids that are getting stuck inside of a juvenile detention center, or a youth correctional facility, at least for a day if not longer. And the majority of them are Black and they're almost all poor.

So the problem remains staggering. It's easy to chop it up into small little pieces because people say, rightfully, "Hey, there used to be 250 kids locked up at Oak Hill," and when we first got out there the year before there was 170, and then there was 120 and now there's only 50 guys at New Beginnings. That's all true, but there's still a couple hundred guys that rotate through there a year and when you add it all up, it's just a staggering number of young people that go through the system.

Dwayne Betts:

I have a friend whose son got picked up and allegedly had committed a violent crime, a carjacking, right? But he didn't do it. He didn't have the name of the person who did it. The person who did it knew the person who got robbed and they told him such and such did it, and they locked this kid up anyway and they made him stay locked up for two weeks before they dropped all of the charges and was like, we had a wrong person. But that was two weeks that he spent inside. I mean, it is deeply frustrating to recognize that the numbers and the way we think about it rarely recognizes that it's a multiplier effect when you make somebody touch the system.

But I do think that it's also a multiplier effect with the work that you do from these teachers who feel supported, from your staff who I've worked with to create the reading guides that they use, from the writers who have sometimes agreed to come in and talk to the young people. I like to believe that this has maybe not the same multiplier effect as what it means to bring somebody inside and make them experience even a day incarcerated. But I do think giving these young folks the opportunity to experience with a book, or with an educator, what you've experienced with Beale Street creates a huge opportunity for them. Can you talk to us about the more challenging times?

David Domenici:

When we first got started, it was Oak Hill. I mean it was a godawful place. It was a terrible place for anybody to be. And I recall 10A used to be the segregation, slash the throwaway unit, at Oak Hill. And I can remember that summer before we got started, I was walking all around the grounds trying to get to know people, and I went into 10A. And although I had been to Oak Hill, I had never been to 10A and I went into 10A, I didn't think these things existed and I didn't think I was naive.

I'm like, this is a total crazy place. All the kids were locked up in these little cells. They were banging on the walls. I mean, I was like, this is the worst. I honestly didn't think this is how stuff happened in the US still. I just totally, I couldn't believe it. So a few days later, Vinny and I are talking,

Dwayne Betts:

I know Vinny, Vinny Schiraldi worked in the nonprofit space and then became the head of the youth detention centers in DC and then went on to do probation in New York.

David Domenici:

Yeah. And I started to talk to people and I realized that for the entire history of Oak Hill, that sordid long history, the kids in 10A had never come to school. The kids in 10A lived in this little lock space. They even had a little enclosed basketball hoop. I don't know if you ever saw it, where the only place they could go out and get exercise was, within their little fenced-in space, they had a little half court basketball space. It was terrible. Vinny and I struck a deal. We said on the first day of school at Maya Angelou, every kid in the facility comes to school, including the guys in 10A.

And the place was going nuts because people thought kids in 10A would just tear the whole place down. They thought of them as animals. They had never thought of the fact that they could walk out of their unit, come over to the school, because the school was like a different space across the yard, and have school. People were terrified. But we took our best teacher, we had a really good strategy where we came in the side door. And then the very first day of the start of Maya Angelou at what then was Oak Hill, the guys from 10A came down, marched down, came in the side door and we made it. It was just unbelievable. I mean, it was like, we got it, man. We got it. And they made it through the day and it just changed the whole tone of the place, like that's how we're going to try to do it here.

Dwayne Betts:

I remember touring Oak Hill when I first came home from prison, and I literally thought that you leave prison to stay away from prison. And being asked to go back and tour Oak Hill was a culture shock to me because I wanted to know in my own head why people thought I wanted to see this. And of course since then I've been in countless prisons, most of the country the first thing that they will wonder, talking to somebody who starts an organization called Break Free Education that's working primarily in secure facilities, that's working primarily with young folks. The first question would be, and people have asked me this, "Why are you working with young people in the system? Why aren't you working with young people outside of the system? It feels like you're putting lipstick on a pig."

David Domenici:

Well, I think people make judgments about who's in a youth facility compared to who's not in the youth facility and lose track of the humanity that exists that is innate in our teenagers and really lose track of and try to box in the distinction between these two. I see very little distinction, but this idea of sort of lipstick on a pig, I'll tell you a quick story.

I used to teach math at Oak Hill. It was in a crappy little room. We used to have a little overhead projector, those old things. You'd have to write and this put the slide down. And there was this big kid and I go teach math every day because I wanted to keep working with kids hands on all the time. I was a principal. This big kid, I can't remember his name. I can say it's Dwayne, but I don't know if that's right.

Dwayne was basically deaf, although no one knew it. We knew it at the school. They didn't know at Oak Hill. He was this big, really big kid. And he was in my math class. I had him sit right there next to me and I'd be kneeling down it with the overhead projector. Dwayne was a good kid. And one day in the middle of math class, I'm just writing there, Dwayne. I'm doing my stuff with the overhead teaching geometry. And Dwayne, he picks me up, twirls me all the way around, and you know how I'm small, and throws me to the other side of the room. And I'm like, "Whoa."

And the next thing I knew, all hell broke loose. Everybody in the class was fighting and everything else. And afterwards we got everything calmed down, put everything back together, put the overhead bracket up and started doing it. And afterwards I was like, "Dwayne, what's going on there man?" He's like, "David, I knew something was going to break out and I knew no one was really going to try to hurt you, but you were going to get caught in the middle of it, so I wanted to protect you." So he picked me up like a little twig and spun me around and threw me to the other side of the room because he wanted to protect me.

And people don't think that he exists inside of our youth facilities, but he does. He's everywhere. There's some amazing kids inside of these facilities. There's also a lot of kids that have gone through an immense amount, as you know, an amount of trauma, immense amount of struggle and done some bad things.

Dwayne Betts:

But the other thing it makes me think of, though, is your response was radically different from how other educators might've responded because you asked him. You said, "Why did you do that?", as if your first inclination was to assume that it was a legitimate reason. I don't know. I mean, if we're trying to help other people see some of what we see, what is that thing that gives you permission to expect that it's a rational reason for what seems incomprehensible?

David Domenici:

I think there's two pieces to this. One, your question, the question also is limiting. I don't want there to be Oak Hill. I don't want a bunch of teenage Black kids to be locked up and I don't want them to live in a state of violence both in their community sometimes and have to live in a state of violence all around them in the correctional system in prisons. So I don't want that. And I don't want kids who are in poor communities in DC to not get the same education that I got growing up in Montgomery County. I want those things to happen.

I also want for young people who are locked up to get a chance to read a great book, to get a chance to create, to get a chance to connect, and get a chance to say, "Hey, there's hope there. There's a reason for me to think that if I can take a few steps, I got a shot, I got a fair shot at being free and having a sense of agency." And so I find the question sometimes boxed in like, "Why are you doing that? Why are we putting resources over there when the resources could go over there?" I'm not trying to put resources over here as compared to don't put resources over here. I want all the kids in DC to get a great education, including the ones that are stuck at the detention center, or the jail, or New Beginnings.

Dwayne Betts:

And I also wonder, I mean, I actually don't feel like we are as resource starved as we like to tell people. I sort of feel like what I choose to do with the resources that I find a way to get my hands on has nothing to do with the possibilities and the capabilities of others to shift resources to go to the outside community. And given that, I wonder what is the popular thing that we understand about the work that you do, that you agree with?

David Domenici:

I think it's a fairly uncontroversial notion that young kids of color who are poor, who grew up in segregated neighborhoods have a really tough road in front of them. And for those young people, they don't need to end up in a detention center. They shouldn't end up there, but some of them do. And I think most people do agree that way too many of them end up there than should be there. And I might

disagree on the numbers, but okay, they shouldn't be there. The vast majority shouldn't be there. Let's make sure they get a really good education while they're there and they never hit the space again.

How do we get to a point where no kid goes through a detention center twice? The one time they hit it, could we wrap our arms around that young person in terms of as a people in a sense of caring and a sense of the right tools and systems for him or her and their families? Never go back. That would be the radical shift if no kids went back twice.

You know what was also amazing? I am driving around DC with my kids on a Saturday morning, just random up Georgia Avenue and some not kid, some 30-year-old comes rolling down the window, "Hey Mr. D, what's happening man? How you been?" I'm going to wherever. Right? We're standing in line trying to get something to eat. Like, "Hey, aren't you that guy that worked out at Maya Angelou and came out to New Beginnings for a little while?" Or I have dear, dear friends now that were students at Maya Angelou, because that was 25 years ago, Dwayne, and these kids were 17 and 16 and I was 30. So now I'm 57 and they're whatever. They're 40.

Dwayne Betts:

You are older than me.

David Domenici:

Yeah, man. I'm a lot older than you, man. You cut that out of the podcast, but yeah. But anyway.

Dwayne Betts:

I got all this gray head, man. I got all this gray hair and people would be like, "Man, Dwayne, what's going on?" and I'm like. But nah, that's cool. Well look, it's always a pleasure. It's always a pleasure.

David Domenici:

Dwayne, thanks for all the work you do. I'm glad we get to work together and I'm really glad I got to spend some time talking with you. Hope to catch up soon.

Dwayne Betts:

Yep, me too. Definitely. Thanks man.

This conversation has me thinking about Baldwin and specifically Baldwin's *If Beale Street Could Talk*. I wanted to read a passage from it:

Being in trouble could have a funny effect on a mind. I don't know if I can explain this. You go through some days and you seem to be hearing people and you seem to be talking to them, and you seem to be doing your work, or at least your work gets done. But you haven't seen or heard a soul, and if someone asked you what you have done that day, you have to think awhile before you could answer. But at the same time, and even on the self-same day, and this is what is hard to explain, you see people like you never saw them before. They shine as bright as a razor.

Maybe it's because you see people different than you saw them before your trouble started. Maybe you wonder about them more, but it in a different way. And this makes them very strange to you. Maybe you get scared and numb because you don't know if you can depend on people for anything anymore.

Almost There is produced by Jesse Baker and Eric Newsom at Magnificent Noise for Emerson Collective. Our production staff includes Elena Kagan, Brianna Garrett, Paul Schneider, and Kristen Mueller, along

with Patrick Darcy, Alex Simon and Amy Lowe from Emerson Collective. Special thanks to Nia Elliot. I'm Reginald Dwayne Betts. Thank you for listening.