

Interview of Norman Atkins and Gloria Bonilla-Santiago

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SPEAKERS

Gloria Bonilla-Santiago, Norman Atkins, Sarah Tantillo

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Sarah Tantillo 00:08

Well, welcome and good evening. I'm Sarah Tantillo. I'm the author of 'Hit the Drum'. You may have seen it online, about the history of the charter school movement. I'm also the former coordinator of the New Jersey Charter School Resource Center and the former executive director of the New Jersey Charter Schools Association. Today is October 21st, 2021. And I'm really pleased to be part of capturing what one hopes is the first of many New Jersey charter school oral histories as this year New Jersey is celebrating its 25th anniversary of charter schools. Joining me this evening are two of the state's earliest charter school founders: Norman Atkins, co founder of Northstar Academy Charter School of Newark, and Gloria Binya Santiago, Chairperson and founder of LEAP Academy University charter school in Camden. Welcome to both of you.

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Sarah Tantillo 01:03

All right. So before we begin, I'd like to take a moment to mention that this oral history is part of the National Charter School Founders Library, a special initiative of the National Charter Schools Institute, and the Founders Library strives to preserve the living history of the charter school movement through the collection of pioneer documents, artifacts and oral histories in an effort to inform the future of chartering. So we're going to get started.

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Sarah Tantillo 01:40

For people who may not know, New Jersey's charter school law passed in 1995, signed by a Republican governor, Governor Christie, Todd Whitman in January of 1996. It was introduced as an omnibus bill and I'm sure Gloria may have things to say about this. That included vouchers and the compromise that was created was landed on charter schools. It was co sponsored in a

bipartisan way by Senator Jack Ewing, we miss him, Republican and Assemblyman Joseph Doria, a Democrat and Assemblyman John Rocco a Republican. So it was a bipartisan piece of legislation.

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Sarah Tantillo 02:20

The first 13 charter schools opened their doors in September of 1997. We are so old. Currently, New Jersey has 87 charter schools in 40 cities and 18 counties serving 57,000 students, with another 36,000 students on waitlists around the state. Norman and Gloria were both truly instrumental in launching this movement in New Jersey. And that is why I'm so excited to speak with them here tonight. So, all right, so we're getting to the questions. Here we go. So I whoever wants to start first can start actually let's start with Gloria. Gloria, what originally inspired you to become involved in charter schools?

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Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 03:06

Well, you know, I was, I was doing research back in the 19-, early 1990s, actually I studied at Rutgers in the 80s. But early 90s 1990s, I began to really do a lot of work around educational policy and Camden city and Governor Florio asked me to be part of his transition team before he ran for governor. So I began to really look at what happening in the city and I was totally taken by the poor conditions in the city, the abysmal, you know, teaching conditions, high school dropout, the violence in the city. I was I it was, it was a shock to me and kids getting killed every every, every year. And then I also was so concerned with the lack of leadership in the city. We have for, you know, Mayor after Mayor getting indicted, superintendents going to prison. So Rutgers, Rutgers Camden was back then in a very difficult situation because they were like a bubble. And I wanted to bring the university to the community. So I began to do research. And when I began to see this conditions, I said to the governor, I cannot be just in your transition team, I have to tell you, that we have a serious problem. And so, so that's what inspired me early on, you know, those terrible conditions. And yet, when I began to do focus groups with the children and the families and the people and the desire that they had to, to have quality schools, and when I began to see the disparity that existed in that city, I was you know, I knew that I was in for the job, that I just do research that was irrelevant, that my work hadn't a had an impact, and I had to bring the work to the limelight, right and so, so it was part of a community development effort in my work, right? Because I saw the lens. I mean, I saw this through the lens of community development.

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Sarah Tantillo 05:00

Right.

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Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 05:00

I needed to develop that community using that school. And that's how I began this great work. And that's what inspired me. I feel it continues to inspire me.

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Sarah Tantillo 05:09

Yeah, yeah. Now, I know you were you were a friend, friendly with, you know, the legislators in a lot of ways. Can you talk, tell us a little bit about how you were involved in the legislation at all?

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Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 05:20

Yes, absolutely. I, you know, as I began this work with Governor Florio, I mean, one of the things that he said to me was, you know, give me a proposal. And I gave him a proposal to develop. But back then, you know, I was looking at community schools, because I had done a lot of the research and I wanted to create a community school that was holistic, comprehensive, I come from a social policy background. So, um, so he said, you know, give me this plan, I put it together. And then, you know, we began, he gave me \$1.5 million. And, you know, to to plan, can you imagine, and so, you know, I made it, he says, "How long is gonna take you?" I made it up. I said, three years to study, nobody's gonna. So it took me really three years, to collect data, collect information, you know, traveled to other states like Minnesota and Michigan and begin...

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Sarah Tantillo 06:04

So was this in the late 80s, I'm sorry, was in the late 80s, then?

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Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 06:07

Yeah, no, this was really no, early 90s. Because I began to look at collected data in the 1990s, in 92', 91', 92', 93'. All those three years was for years of collecting data. And basically, I'm visiting other states, because I early I understood that we could not, we could not develop a new school without having a new piece of legislation because we didn't want, the parents did not one more the same. So I began to talk to the local legislator, because Florio remember he was instrumental in getting this going. But as I'm getting this going, of course, he loses the election. And by then now I have friendships with Joe Doria. I already know. You know, John Rocco, Donald DeFrancesco. You know, I'm involved in the legislature because I'm interested in social policy. So I begin to talk to them about this idea.

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Sarah Tantillo 06:55

And you and you had heard about charter schools because they started in...

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Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 06:59

No, I actually literally did the research, I found out that Michigan and and Minnesota were, Minnesota was really the first state that had a charter. So I flew out to Minnesota. Okay, okay, and I got to see what the school would look like, I wasn't too happy, because was a little church, you know, a little house. And I said, "that's not what I want for poor kids", you know.

We already got a little big, old houses that are not conducive for learning. So I went into Michigan, and I got to see the University of Michigan was really starting programs with community there. And I liked that idea. So I came back to New Jersey and began to talk to members of the legislature about introducing a bill. And so already Joe Doria had ideas. He was completing his doctorate about this. And then you have people like John Russo and, you know, to Rocco and Yeah. And, and then, of course, later on, I met Jack Ewing, who actually were mentors to me. And even Donald DeFrancesco who actually, you know, support it. So I had my partisan...

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Sarah Tantillo 07:59

Another senator, yes.

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Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 08:00

And other senators that were in the process, but you know, from Camden, you know, I initially started my discussions with, you know, with a senator, what's his name, Walter Rand, but then he passed away. And then and then Wayne Bryant was not supportive, so he actually became supportive after we passed the law. But, um, so so , my early years with the legislators were, it's about getting them to, to buy into the idea. So I began to have what I call education committee meetings and scheduling them. I understood the legislative process, you know, yeah, I'm a big, you know, I'm a big supporter of public policy. So I understood how to get a bill started, I knew how to call and get in the education committee. So I began to organize, you know, I talked to the private sector, like Prudential gave me a \$50,000 grant to organize parents. So, you know, remember, I come from a Saul Alinsky a school of thinking, you know, I was learning about organizing. My parents were Saul Alinsky students. So how to organize parents. And so I organized 500 parents who signed up to the idea, and there we go, we go to the legislature, and we begin to say we want, you know, we want this kind of school, we brought the children. So we you know, we introduced the bill early. Yeah. And so that's how it started. And, you know, of course, then Florio loses the election, Christie Todd Whitman wins. Jack Ewing is really critical, because Jack understood the importance of children's quality schooling and he was the one who said to me...

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Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 08:14

And can I just interrupt for a second. For people who don't know Jack Ewing, he was also really involved in prison education. Right, a Republican from, uh I forget.

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Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 09:42

Ewing, New Jersey. Ewing. Yeah, but Jack Ewing was the chairman of the education committee. So he had a lot of power to schedule committee meetings, and he introduced me to Christy Todd Whitman. And you know, I hadn't I had nothing back then in common with her because she was for vouchers. I wanted charters, with charters that will be about equity and about for kids and something new. And so we had to convince her and it was Jack who really bridged us together. And she said to me, if you guys can deliver the votes in the Senate, I will sign that bill.

And I remember that, you know, but we spent at least a year it took us a year to get that bill signed, but it was a year of a lot of parent engagement, a lot of trips to Trenton, getting kids and parents...

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Sarah Tantillo 10:27

Gloria. That's so, it's so great that you guys, all those parents, I didn't really actually know this part of the story because my involvement started a little bit later. But it's, I've also heard that some people came from out of state to testify did...

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Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 10:28

Oh, yes,

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Sarah Tantillo 10:31

Do you recall anybody from out of state who came in?

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Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 10:44

We had some folks like Nathan, from

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Sarah Tantillo 10:47

Joe Nathan,

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Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 10:48

Joe Nathan came in from all the way from Minnesota, as you know, he had started to written a book about this early on, he was very instrumental in legitimising the story about Michigan, we also have people from New York, like Joseph Fernandez, who have been as you know, a district in New York City school districts, and he understood, you know, the conditions in New York. So he said, let me help you. He came in. So he brought people from New York, I brought in people from Michigan, as well as people from Virginia, you know, so if we sort of engage the intelligencia, right, that what I call intellectual capital, because we needed to convince Republicans and Democrats that this was not just parents who didn't know what they were talking about, right. These were researchers, intellectuals, these were, community leaders, they were people who, from urban cities, who were saying, look, we got a problem in urban education, and we have to fix it. And and this is one way. I mean, we weren't saying this is the only way, we were saying this is one way to begin to break, right with with the the plight of poverty that was occurring, because we were losing so many kids to crime. And you know, and no one was caring. I mean, no, nobody was saying anything. And so when we began to listen to the stories, we brought parents and kids to tell their stories about how horrible their schools were, you know we had a kid who talked about, you know, how he got breakfast lunch, he had,

you know, cold pancakes and how, you know, he couldn't spell the word four. You know, I took Jack Ewing to a classroom where a kid could not spell the, you know, was in fifth grade, couldn't spell a number. And so, you know, he was heartbroken, he said, and that's how we began to educate the legislature about what was happening, for example, in Camden city. Yeah. And, you know, and so we were able to, that's how we were able to convince them, right. And of course, of course, you always had the union, the NJEA, who was always present trying to kill those right, trying to say, Oh, we don't believe in that. But, you know, I remember a kid from Camden, who said to a member of the Union, who was opposing, in front of the legislature, who said, you know, would you send your kids to the schools? Yeah. And, you know, if you have kids, would you do that? And they said, "No", and he says, and then this kid says, "Well, why would you want us to go?" And, you know, that kind of applause, that kind of momentum was really what got everybody touched, because it was human life stories about people's conditions, you know, and I think that that's what people forget, the opposition, forget, that is not about taking anybody's monies away from other districts, that this is about getting an equitable education. And this is about access to kids who never had quality schooling. It's about breaking that, you know, that, that that system that has not worked for so many years. And that's really what we did, we created a competition that literally broke a system that was already broken, but no one was doing anything about it. Right. Yes, we begin to show that we could do this better. Right. And with less money. Okay. Because it was less money, as you know. Yeah. Yeah. We had so little money given to us, which is, you know, still we haven't fixed that. Yeah, that per-pupil costs...

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Sarah Tantillo 14:01

Alright, we're gonna get to that in a second. Don't jump the gun here, Gloria. So I just want to give a little bit more national context to the New Jersey legislation before we move into how Norman gotten involved here. So remember that, you know, the first law passed in Minnesota in 1991. So we're all watching the laws pass around the country, California, Michigan, you know, and so forth, Colorado, Arizona, you know, so there were a bunch of other states that in quick succession, pretty quick succession over the next few years, passed laws. So I think that I suspect that probably also helped to convince the New Jersey legislators that this was a real thing, and not some, you know, crazy idea that nobody was doing but Purdue in California passed their legislation. I think that's kind of a, you know, wasn't just Minnesota's Hot House of policy ideas anymore. It was really a big idea that was going to take hold. Now one last thing about the legislation and I'm going to turn it to Norman to tell us how he got involved and then we'll start to see how these, all these things interacted. So Joe Dory mentioned to me at one point, you know, as one of the co sponsors of the legislation, I think his dissertation was to some degree about this topic that, you know, they put in an omnibus bill, partly because they knew that the union would want to take out the voucher piece. And that was kind of the way they got it to pass because it was like, well, at least the vouchers aren't in there. We'll just put it in. I don't know if it honestly, I don't know if the union reps really believed anybody actually start any of these. And they really were kind of like, we'll see, you know, do you have any sense of that Gloria?

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Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 15:36

No, no, I think the unions knew very well, that what we were trying to do, they always do. And this case, you know, they were they were pressing. They were objecting this from the very beginning. I mean, I got ostracized because I got individual phone calls, because I come from

labor. My father was, he comes from organized labor. I write a book, initially in my early career about labor. So they knew that and so they why is the, why is this woman who's for labor...

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Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 16:05

You're a traitor!

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Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 16:07

Yes, exactly! I was going on traitor, I mean, yeah, it was like, they would like, threaten me to know to come after my family and take pictures at your house. I said, what you know, and so I said, Look, you know, I was not afraid, because I knew that this is what they, you know, this is what they do. Yeah. Oh, you know, as we went to testify, we did have a position but it wasn't massive. I, I really believe that they, that we got this through because they underestimated the power of that of the time and the people that were there. I think they believed that, oh, yeah, we're gonna we're gonna oppose it. But you know, we're not going to give, we're not going to put millions of dollars behind this because its never gonna pass. So they never believed it was gonna pass. It passed. It was undermining. Yes. I mean, if you talking one best practice out of that process is that under, the underestimation of a pool of poor people who were part of a movement, and folks like me and others, yeah, you know, they nearly never believe it was gonna happen. And that worked to our advantage.

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Sarah Tantillo 17:09

Yeah. Interesting. All right. This is this is fantastic. All right, Norman. What inspired you? Tell us.

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Norman Atkins 17:16

Well, I should I should say, Wow, first, it's really very meaningful for me after, you know, a quarter century here to just hear Gloria share that history. Because yeah, it's essentially she's, she's set the table. She and you and you, Sarah, and a bunch of other folks set the table for the work that I and many others embarked upon. And I don't take that for, I don't take that for granted. And I think, I think Gloria, I think Gloria has described the deep need for change and reform, and how parents were empowered to start to demand and drive that particular change. And so it's, it's, it's, it's really kind of gratifying to look back on that. I came into this in January of 1996. So I had I, I had helped set up a, a public charity in New York City that was involved with poverty fighting broadly, and had spent a lot of time you know, visiting homeless shelters and soup kitchens and programs for people with AIDS. And people were just struggling to survive, and was very moved by those programs. But more was trying to, I was trying to figure out how to fight poverty by breaking the cycle of poverty, and started to like, become educated about after school programs and just got frustrated that after school programs, even the best ones out there, were just trying to mop up for the challenges that were not being addressed by the schools during the day. And so then I just visited more schools than anyone you've ever met, and really came to believe that. By and large public schools in the poorest communities were not serving children well. They were, they were dangerous and dysfunctional and had low expectations. And I also visited low fee private schools and those poor communities and saw

like really very moving mission driven programs that were just not scalable and not able to serve the poorest of the poor at scale. And so I quit my job. I was living five miles outside of Newark and I started walking around for a couple of years saying I'm going to go start a school and I didn't really know what that meant. Nobody, nobody, nobody, nobody was inviting me to, to go and do that. But you know, when you say something when you say your vision, share your dream out loud, it starts to attract other co conspirators. Yeah. And one day somebody told me to call this guy named James Verrilli, in, in Newark. He was a teacher and leading a low fee private school about a block and a half from the epicenter of the Newark riots. And I called him up and he said, he was just about to call me, I went, I went to his school, which is called Link Community School, and watched him teach and he was the best teacher that I had ever seen. And to make a to make a long story short, he was dreaming about starting a school of his own. And he wanted to do it in the public sector, where there would be adequate resources to pay teachers, and where you could start to serve more and more students. And he had been tracking the charter school legislation from Minnesota 1991. And he's said, "you won't believe this but just like a few days ago, the governor of New Jersey signed a charter school law in our state, and I want to go start one of those first schools, would you open one with me?" And we agreed on about three quarters of the kind of issues that we describe, our visions were, were somewhat aligned, but not entirely, but I realized that, you know, I would, I would do much better working with him than do something by myself. And we decided at that moment that we were going to go found a school, and we went around, and he because he had been working in Newark for a dozen years, had hundreds of parents who were really interested in him and his leadership, and we brought together a group of parents and put in a, I went to Columbia Teachers College, and started to write the charter application, one course, each was one of the chapters of the operation, and we submit an application and became one of the first charter schools in New Jersey, and...

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Sarah Tantillo 17:39

Along with Leap, yeah,

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Norman Atkins 20:54

Along along with Gloria's school, and there were and there were, and there were 11 others and, you know, the the first, the first day, the first day of school, right after the day after Labor Day, in September of 1997. We had 72 Students, fifth and sixth graders walking in the door to be part of, to be part of North Star and then all these years later now, North Stars part of Uncommon Schools, which is now it's an, I think we've got 14 schools in Newark serving and five and Camden, Gloria serving about 8000 students and 21, 21,000 students in New Jersey, New York and Massachusetts. So been an incred, it's been an incredible journey.

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Sarah Tantillo 23:20

Yeah. Now I was there on the very day that North Star opened, which is actually the opening scene of 'Hit the Drum' and 'Hit the Drum', the title came from watching the opening drum ceremony that you all did on the first day of school, which was incredibly moving to me and so inspirational to see students joining the community through this through this ritual. And it was it was just really inspiring and made me wonder, like, if today's first, like what is tomorrow

gonna be like, and what what's going to happen to these students who are having this incredible experience, and, and I just briefly, I got into the movement as a teacher, in district schools, I was in my seventh year of teaching in a, in a district school and, you know, had been trying to do innovative things within the structures of district, you know, the district situation, and I found myself increasingly, like, frustrated. And when I, you know, and I was also kind of a policy geek and followed the charter school legislation as it came across the country, kind of like Jamie really in that sense. I was like, "it's coming, it's coming". And, you know, talked to some friends about maybe starting a charter school and then pretty quickly realize it, I don't think I'm going to do that myself. But I really want to get involved somehow. And I went to the first charter school conference, that Seton Hall organized, it was with actually the co sponsors of the legislation organized it at Seton Hall. And Norman I remember you there, Gloria you must have been there. There were probably 300 and something people there. I think they expected. I think 75 people registered they told me and like 110, you know, said they were gonna maybe come and then like 300 people showed up and it was like they ran out of food for lunch and everything was like a conference organizers nightmare. But the energy of that conference was just like, the place was like rattling with just people who were entrepreneurial who just like rubbing their hands together and like, what are you going to do? This is what I want to do, and just bumping into people like that and feeling like how can I get involved in this? And there was a panel that was basically about the Charter School Resource Center in in Massachusetts. And Jim, oh, my God, I'm blanking on his name, Norman help me out.

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Norman Atkins 25:48

Jim Griffin?

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Sarah Tantillo 25:49

Nope. Nope. Peyser. Jim Peyser. Sorry, Jim Peyser, who was overseeing the Massachusetts the Pioneer Institute and Linda Brown was running the Massachusetts Charter School Resource Center at the time. And Jim Peyser was on the panel and they were two, two women from the state of New Jersey. And you know, they were talking about what Linda Brown was doing running this resource center in Massachusetts, and how because Massachusetts law predated New Jersey's, and they had started up and how they were helping people get these things off the ground. And then they said, "Okay, does anybody have any questions?" And I stood up immediately. And I was like, who's gonna? Who's gonna help people start these things in New Jersey? And, you know, Peyser looked at the two women from New Jersey, and they looked at him and like, nobody said anything. And he's like, Well, that's a good question. And so, you know, I reached out to Scott McVay the Dodge Foundation, who I knew from from an earlier, you know, intervention. And he's like, "Hey, why don't you come to lunch, and let's talk about this." And like one thing led to another and, you know, started the Resource Center to help people, help support people, run, start and run charter schools, which was incredibly exciting. I obviously didn't really know how to start a school because I previously only been a teacher and a graduate student. And well, I started to used bookstore, but that's a separate issue. But you know, I knew a lot of people though, in the in the New Jersey Department of Ed, because I had interned there over a number of years. So I knew a lot of secretaries. And I knew people who knew things. So I figured if I don't know, I can always call somebody. I know enough people to call. So let me, let me see what I could do to be helpful. And so we were able to get some funding to start it, it was, it was housed under Leadership New Jersey, with Tom O'Neill. And the

New Jersey Institute for School innovation was kind of the umbrella. And you know, we started running meetings, I was able to meet with people all across the country who there were only about 10, or 12 of us who were running these kinds of organizations at the time. And so it was really a very small group of people who were trying to figure these things out and share ideas with one another. So that was super exciting. But there were tons of challenges. And so now, so my next big question for everybody is, what do you what do you recall is the earliest challenges that you faced? And how did you handle those challenges? Whoever, go ahead Gloria.

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Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 28:15

Yes, yeah. I you know, for us, you know, as you know, we opened right after, like, when Norman right in. So the early, the biggest challenge I had, I remember, I will never forget this. It was June, July. And I kept telling the parents that this school was in the highway, they didn't understand that I had purchased trailers, and that they were coming. I had this lot. And everybody, you know, everybody bought my vision for the school because I had a strategic plan, I had a wonderful plan. It looked great. I had teachers, I had a team, everybody was already hired through a grant. But I didn't have a building. I didn't have a building and so I had to literally talk to Prudential to, to work with us to put together what we call a loan for charters because nobody wanted to lend us money for buildings as you know, for charter school law with a we didn't, we didn't qualify for facility funding. So you know, we were smart enough when we were writing the the law right, because writing that piece of legislation was a lot of fun for me, we were able to put their language that said lease purchase, right? And so I remember having this discussions about lease purchasing because that was what really led to us being able to go to Prudential and say, we need you to do a loan for us and we can pay a lease purchase. And so in the meantime, could you give me a loan for \$2 million? Because I need to purchase this you know, I lease purchase this, you know, these trailers. We called the affordable units because we wanted to be sexy with a name so that nobody got upset. So you know, so the biggest challenge again was facility aid but it was real, and it wasn't until like almost at first of August that they arrived and had a run with, you know, with a developer to put them together, build a deck around them. And you know, with the support of Prudential, I was able to open you know, my first day of school, and let me tell you that community when you talk about the drums that you you know, your first day opening, I mean, we had roses, we had, we had people marching through this bridge, you know, tons of parents, the whole community came. Yeah, this day, that's how we celebrate. I mean, one event, everybody comes, I mean, graduations for a 120 kids are like what, a 1000 people? You know, because it's a community, right. And so, so that challenge of not having enough money for facility aid was a big one for us, and I think continues to be a bigger challenge for a lot of schools. Because if you don't have the capital, to be able to do it, the good news here is in New Jersey, we can do that lease purchase, right? You can borrow, you can you know, you can do that those kinds of arrangements. So I will say for me, that was probably the biggest.

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Sarah Tantillo 31:00

Yeah, yeah. Yep. That's, I mean, that's been a prevailing challenge for for charters across the nation, actually, because not a lot of states offer facilities funding as part of the legislation. So yes, yeah. What do you think, Norman? What else?



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Norman Atkins 31:15

Yeah. I, like from the moment that I started working on the the charter from that, from that meeting with Jamie Verrilli, to the first day of school that you described, it was an incredibly positive, productive, generative journey in terms of recruiting the initial teachers and recruiting this, the students and the lottery nights to bring the students in and building the blueprint and curriculum and program for the school. And like I never, I never worked so hard, but never had so much fun. In that, in that period in the first couple of years. I would say that, that the biggest challenge probably was what are we going to do about about a facility for the school. So, it was amazing to me that the state of New Jersey funded us at whatever, 90 cents on the 90 cents on the dollar, giving giving public funds toward the education of students. But the public schools had the sunk cost advantage of owning their own facilities. And so we essentially had to figure out a facility when, at the time, the district didn't want to share any facilities with us. And nobody want nobody really understood like what a charter school was, and so they weren't going to lend on the basis of some kind of enrollment and funding that was unpredictable. And so I found myself simultaneously trying to raise money for a facility, find a facility. I must have looked at 70 buildings and every building, every building looked like it could be a potential school. And then I was essentially in a race to get the building that we bought. And we got it bought by a local community development corporation to renovate it to be compliant with the school facility regulations by the first day and I think we got the the the temporary certificate of occupancy like 18 hours before I the kids arrive and I kept thinking like I'm going to end up in the bottom of the Passaic River because I have these like workers going like non stop renovating the facility as I'm trying to raise the money for it and like what happens if I can't like get the money in time to pay them to get done so I think that was probably the most stressful the biggest stretch but really it was really it was just a it really...

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Sarah Tantillo 34:11

All things considered you have an amazing amount of hair. You didn't lose it all in that process.

G

Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 34:17

But, but you know one of the things Norman, that I can share with you that really scared me was also you know, starting with the, with the trailers and then they the Delaware River Port Authority gave me the land and they say you only have two years because you have to find yourself a building and so a year into it they said you know your time is up we want that land for like a supermarket which by today they never build a supermarket. So I had to also literally also do that go look for a building. And you know I sometimes I think about this we must have been out of our heads but I was so desperate that I call for you know, I call all the parents, I remember there's an article in The Philadelphia Inquirer and sitting in front of this old building which is an old Catholic church that is all totally destroy. And I sit there I had already called three phone calls to the Camden diocese asking them for them to basically sell this building to me, you know, even if it was for \$1, I was going to you know, while I find the money because I didn't know where I was gonna get the money. And so I literally said that the Camden diocese refused to sell this building to me. Then the Enquire wrote this story the next day, I get a phone call from the Camden diocese, the bishop who says, you know Dr. Santiago, you embarrass us, now you better have the money, I'm going to give it to you for 100,000. I said, Fine, great. I'll get it, I'll get my attorneys to call you. I have no attorney, I just made it up, and then I get on the phone, and I called Florio, who happened to be my friend. Now he's at Rutgers. And he

says, I have friends at the Delaware River Port Authority, let me call them and see if they can give you you know, a lease purchase because just like you tell me you could pay, you have 300 kids, you can pay you have a mortgage. Right? So the Delaware River Port Authority purchased this building for me, you know, this old, beautiful facility 1925. Today, you know, it's worth it \$20 million, you know, for 7 million they fixed it. And they turnkey to me and in a matter of almost a year. And I was in that construction site every day, you know, begging people to work. And you know, again, not knowing if the DRPA was going to give me that literally because they were you know, they still had to go through a board, it was all kinds of politics involved. But you know, taking those risks early on, and really giving everything you had, and of course, you know, we always have a saying or school that you know, whatever it takes, right. It's one of our vows, it's so critical, because I think having intentions having commitment, let some of us to put everything we had on the line here because we knew that we had to deliver and I think that I share that with with, you know, with Norman, when he talks about being afraid, like what, you know, what happens if this doesn't happen, you know, whatever. But, but, you know, that's the beauty of taking those risks, and to really putting everything on the line, because we knew those kids were worth every step of the way.

S

Sarah Tantillo 37:08

Yeah. Agreed. Agreed. Yeah. So you did open, and your schools have had a positive impact, I would say on public education over the last 20, 30 years. Personally, the, the reason that I got involved in charters was to improve public education overall, to have some kind of impact on the field. That was my, that was my hope that we could do that. How would you say that chartering, charter schools have positively impacted public education in New Jersey and nationally, whichever perspective you want to take, in the last few decades?

G

Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 37:55

I will say that, you know, we have changed the discourse. Particularly locally here in Camden city, we changed the discourse from cradle to prison to cradle to college, we created a safe, you know, environment where we could come to a space right, public space, to have a debate with the local school district about what we needed to do differently. And I think when we began to, to show results, right, graduating all the kids, sending kids to college, and you know the waitlist kept growing, and other charter schools kept coming. That, you know, and we built six schools right in the model of like, a couple years. So we were able to take a lot of those kids and make them successful. Well, you know, they had the brothers and sister failing, and, you know, in the block from where we were, I think that changing that this course, I think changing the trajectory was in the conditions early on, led to the school district having to lose 1000s of kids and then saying, "Okay, we got to do something", right. And they, you know, they changed, they were changing, you know, superintendents, they were going into a disarray, because we weaken, you know, they were weak as they were but there were people there in power, who were sustaining that poverty, they were living off that poverty, right, they didn't care if the kids succeeded or not, we were able to break that. And we, you know, we expose that by not necessarily saying how bad it is, but by creating an opportunity and a choice

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Sarah Tantillo 39:26

And people could see what was, people could see what was possible.

G

Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 39:28

People saw the results so they came this way. And so that created, that created an opportunity for us to continue to do the great work and for them to say, "Oh, my God, we're not doing we're losing." Right. So how do we, how do we come to the middle? And that's what allowed for us to begin at this discussion. But I think you see that at the national level. Okay. We begin to create better public policy for charters, you know, the National Charter Schools Network established, you know, national policy, every president that gets appointed after that begins to bring the charter discussion into the dialogue. Because, you know, the Clintons, I remember being in the Clinton administration, involved in the policy process as a delegate from New Jersey and having to say we need to put charters on the table, we need to talk about education. So, you know, bringing that, that dialogue to the national levels also was really important, because they begin to create better public policy to support charters, right to see charters as as part of what you know, the left no, left child behind the so called no child left behind us, you know, they created all the issues of I mean, all the policy options of choice, we turned that choice into an opportunity for poor kids who really never had a chance. Right. And we exposed that, we'd started talking about the disparities. And and that, I think, was what really made this significant because every other president included in it. So it became a bipartisan effort, Democrats and Republicans. You always had, I think the Democrats have always been in my opinion, probably the less clear about, you know, funding this well. I think that Republicans were more more, I will say, more clear about, you know, why they wanted them. But it always had a hard time with the unions. Right. And getting them on board. And understanding this, we still have that debate, because I think part of that is, you know, we're talking about a conglomerate of people who benefit from a system that has not really provided the best opportunities for poor kids. So, so I think that, you know, this debate about, you know, what charters are and will look like, and I think that's one thing that I think we have not done well, what I think when people ask me, well, what, it's one thing that we haven't done well? It's I think we haven't been able to educate the public about, about the goodness and the greatness of the charter schools that are in place. For some reason, you know, we've been so busy building and designing and creating that, near that movement has not been as, as I will say, as visible in as, as, as as maybe as successful. In getting the other side to understand what we're doing. I think that that's, you know, as part of the work that we still got to do.

G

Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 39:44

Yeah, that's fair. That's fair. Norman, what do you think?

N

Norman Atkins 42:19

Yeah, I think it's important to understand that when charter schools started, there was understandable fear that charters would be could be used as white flight schools. And that they would, and that they would be sort of dangerous to the whole in that respect. And I think it's important to see, by and large, in New Jersey, and many other parts of the country that charter schools have largely succeeded as a phenomenon to support low, predominantly low income students and students of color in, in cities, and certainly that's the case in Newark, and in Camden and largely, and largely, and largely, in New Jersey.

S

Sarah Tantillo 43:24

Yeah, definitely in our state.

N

Norman Atkins 43:26

So to the extent that charter schools are a solution, for for a choice, an option for low income families and for black and Latin X families. That's I think that's, that's, that's number one. Secondly, there are hundreds of 1000s of students who are in charter school networks that have emerged like, like like Uncommon Schools, which is an outgrowth of North Star, who are getting months, half a year of additional learning per year as shown by a Stanford CREDO study. Third, there are certain cities like Newark, I would point to, in particular, where the results are stunning. Yeah, not just in the charter sector, but have improved outcomes across the board in the city, and there's an there's an there's an there's good evidence of that. When I look at the data for Northstar and for Uncommon, what I'm most kind of excited about is not the test scores that have gone up from year to year or the extra learning time. But, but two things, one, that when they came up with a single enrollment system for all students in the city, parents chose Northstar and their 14 schools as their number one place where they wanted to send their children by a huge order of magnitude, I think like half of the parents put Northstar down as their first choice, meaning that this is what this is what parents want for their kids, and two that in a in a in a place where fewer than 10% of the kids are graduating from a four year college, we've got 60% of the students graduating from four year college, which is the same rate as the wealthiest, white quartile of students across the nation, which I would define as closing the achievement gap. And then finally, I'd say that charter schools I think, have succeeded as the r&d innovation engine, or public education in terms of providing a ton of new solutions, tools, blueprints, that are being broadly adopted by public education. Sort of having said all of that, and, and, and being somewhat optimistic that charters I think will likely become the majority solution in time in about 20 to 25 cities across the country. I think we're still, you know, as a as a as a whole public education has been sliding backwards in the past couple of years, especially coming out of COVID. Really kind of humble and reflective about the challenges that are facing the broad spectrum of, of students across the nation.

S

Sarah Tantillo 46:57

Yeah, yeah. What do you what are the what do you see as the biggest threats to chartering nationally? Hmm.

N

Norman Atkins 47:17

Look charter, charters, charter schools, the charter idea, in and of itself, is, is really a governance solution. Yeah, it's a it's a, it's an it's a new way of governing schools, and creating an alternate accountability and oversight mechanism to the traditional public school board. And it's, it to that extent, it's a vessel or an envelope, and not necessarily a guarantee about what happens inside of it. Right. And so to the extent that there are, there are political actors, who are trying to preserve the status quo in terms of governance and politics, or the traditional collective bargaining agreements, charter schools, as they have grown to serve, more and

more students are more and more of a threat than they were when we started. And there are certainly plenty of charter schools that are not getting demonstrably better outcomes for kids. And we shouldn't sort of take it for granted that just because their charter schools, that they'll be good for kids. Right. And so I'd say that, that sort of the the two, the two biggest threats are one, that we, that we regressed toward that the charter, the charter sector regresses toward the mean, as we're responsible for serving more and more students, because it's really difficult to do the work. And two, that the people who never liked charters in the first place and were threatened by charters are going to use all of the difficulties to eat away at it. And I think that that kind of the momentum for the for the for the charter sector has slowed in in many places, and it's largely a very complicated political issue. That relates a little bit to what Gloria was sharing earlier, which is that the kind of storytelling and narrative of the charter for charters has not has not been winning yet.

G

Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 49:55

Yes, yes, it Yeah, and I yeah, I sort of agree 100% with that, because, you know, for me that that thread is that the sustainability of the movement, right. So, you know, sustaining that movement is going to be critical. And, and paying attention to the actors that are against it, and in the education that we have to do in creating a space for that, for that, you know, for that debate, I feel like, that's the threat, like if we don't create that space, if we don't continue to share the successes in a way that, you know, because we're so busy trying to, you know, build our schools and everybody, and, you know, the graduation rates for us, you know, the 100% graduation rate and 90% college, you see in those kids coming back, you know, of course, that has forced the district to be a partner, we're partnering with our district, we're partnering with other places, you know, but, but I think what I see at a national level, is that lack of that sustainability, like where do you look for that? And we had, we need to create that those spaces to into, you know, have with our national organizations, more of, you know, there have what I call it an urgency of, of, of discussion about, you know, how do we make these schools better? And how do we, you know, bring that movement more to the present. And so that we become part of that portfolio school, like portfolio schools have success, because it can. If a traditional school has, in many ways have died, but no one talks about it, but the traditional schools, school model doesn't work for, particularly for urban school kids, it doesn't work, we know that that model will fail. And for traditional America, the traditional public schools, you know, has changed, right? So it's totally different. And so we need to be talking at the national level about this portfolio, what is what does public school should look like? And we started changing that movement. You see, we, we've done a lot of work around that. So to the extent we can sustain that. So that thread of the opposition, because I think the position is about ignorance is about sometimes it's about, you know, it's about politics, right? It's really sometimes about money. But we can, we can balance always that threat, because that threat is always going to be there, but we need to be vigilant. And I find sometimes that we, you know, we need to get our national organizations and national partners closer to what was happening at a local level, because that local development work is so critical for charters, so that we can take it to the national and then begin to make a better national presence to sustain that movement throughout.

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Sarah Tantillo 52:46

Mm hmm. Yeah. It's interesting to have this conversation right, right now in the middle of a pandemic, right. Um, I don't know if we're in the middle, or who knows where we are in it

exactly. But we're still clearly in it. Yeah. Right. And, you know, currently, I work at a charter school network in, in New York called Great Oaks Legacy charter schools. And, you know, we're, I mean, like many other colleagues in the field, you know, we have a ton of challenges. Just in terms of like the pipeline of educators, the talent pipeline seems to be a little bit drying up. There's aren't as many people willing to join the field. Currently, as maybe there were in the past. And it's really challenging to fill positions, even in some of our schools, which can be really disheartening. People who were working, they're like, ah, you know, trying to do my job and somebody else's job because we need more people. So it's, it's really hard work, it's super important work, we know how important it is. And that's why people get up every morning and go back to work and do it day after day after day. And it's, it's just like, you almost can't think about the politics of anything, because you're just like, trying to do you're, just put one foot in front of the other, and be your best self. For these scholars. You know, it's really hard work. And it's great that we have the opportunity to do it. It's great that we're able to be there for scholars and you know, that, that they have a choice, that their parents had a choice to be able to choose, you know, one of our schools. So, yeah, it's hard to it's kind of hard to make predictions about what's gonna happen in the future given that, you know, so many things in our just in our lives are are so uncertain right now, you know?

G

Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 54:37

Yeah, difficult. It's a difficult time for kids. More than anybody else I will say, yeah, for sure. Yeah. So all the other learning loss that has occurred, and, you know, it's tough, but, you know, we everything we've done in our work here, has taught us to be resilient, and to be prepared. So having the platform's prepare, I mean, being a school that was ahead of other times with having the technology, computer etiquette, educating the community about, you know, having hotspots available. And, you know, all of that. When this pandemic hit, let me tell you, that's when the test came. That's when we knew that we were ready because Schoology, you know, ready to go, the platform. You know, to, you know, to to at&t and other networks.

S

Sarah Tantillo 55:33

Also your parents, the parents organizing, right, yeah. Those relationships with parents to be able to like, very quickly, like, within a week when we went remote yeah, we had systems that we were able to roll out.

G

Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 55:45

They were ready to go, ready to go. We have busses that we took, we say, now we have the busses sitting, we're going to use them to give food to the kids at home. I mean, we organize everything, and it worked for us, you know? Yeah. I mean, I'm so against this online programming, but quite frankly, you know, our lost time was not as bad as other places. I mean, so we were able to recruit and support those kids him things were 100% back, you know, we're, I've got it was it was just just being ready. I mean, just being everything we had done in this past years prepare us for this tragic event that occurred. And if anything we'll learn out of that process was that, you know, it was critical to be ahead of the time by in terms of innovations, and having the technology and the ability to change things without having to go to the state to get approval, you know what I mean?

S

Sarah Tantillo 56:36

All right, to be able to pivot to be able to pivot quickly. Norman, I think you wanted to say something.

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Norman Atkins 56:42

No, I, I, I think that I would sort of echo I would echo a lot of what Gloria said, I think, just on this particular point. Yeah, I think probably charter charter schools, by and large, and certainly, I'd say this for the 21,000 students in our schools. And our team probably did a better did did did a substantially better job in remote learning last year, and in sort of giving clear clarity of direction on on school opening, then the district schools, probably, but probably by a long shot, if you look, if you if you could, if you could just sort of play the videotape of the of the Zoom, of the Zoom lessons and classrooms and looked at the level of engagement and the rigor of the learning and so forth. Having said that, one, the learning loss is palpable everywhere, and two the degree of kind of alienation, dislocation, disorientation among our high school students, in particular across the board is, you know, is worse than I've ever seen in the past in the past 25 years. And teachers and leaders are fried from having to navigate, a very complicated year and a half, which included not just the pandemic, but the kind of national racial reck- and reckoning in the middle in the middle of that, and the kind of drive to get everybody on board with vaccinations and to meet to meet everybody's needs, and then trying to read verbal cues, nonverbal cues from students and teachers who were wearing masks all day long. Super, super challenging. And, yeah, I think I think I think the sort of impact of that is going to be felt for felt for a long time.

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Sarah Tantillo 59:03

Yeah. Yeah.

G

Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 59:06

Yes, absolutely.

S

Sarah Tantillo 59:07

Definitely. Um, okay. I feel like some of the other questions I was gonna ask, we answered along the way. So I'm gonna, I'm gonna ask you to talk a little bit about what you're up to now. Just sort of like, we're, what are you doing nowadays? Because you both told us about the early days of chartering and how you got started in that and I know you've done some other things and Gloria, you said you were you're doing starting a school in Puerto Rico

S

Sarah Tantillo 59:35

I love scaling actually, you know, I, I love LEAP. I think I always gonna be connected to the you

know, still the board chair and still, you know, I have an endowment of almost \$6 million I created for this kids that I work diligently. I work for them. You know, that's why I stayed at Rutgers and I used the university. We haven't really talked about partners and stakeholders, but the goal of the university for me was really critical. I don't think I could have done this well if I hadn't had Rutgers involved because now we have early college, you know, we're graduating so many kids and we're doing so well. So I decided that I was going to upscale because but upscale in places that I wanted to work on not just, you know, opening school to open more schools, I just want to be able to help kids. And, and I really felt that I owe it to my island, you know I'm from Puerto Rico. So and, you know, poverty in Puerto Rico is like 45%, the schools are in disarray. I mean, three years of no schooling they've been through, you know, I mean, they've been through what I call, you know, a hurricane, to Maria, to earthquakes to a pandemic. So talk about a generation of kids that will be left behind for many, many years. So when that happened, and I begin to see the numbers, I said I'm going there. And I, you know, it took me sort of two years to create a law there, I knew how to do it, both bipartisan effort, you know, and, you know, we went through the hurricane to the earthquake, to pandemic and then of course, four governors, to get a law passed. And I did that I got the law passed. Guess what, I just opened one and we just opened this fall and [inteligible] school in San Juan for poor kids out of a neighborhood called Sabana Llana, which is the most poor area in that whole region, it's a regional school with so you know. We're opening in 27 trailers, because there was no money for facility but but, you know, I got \$20 million to open to build a new building. And you know, so I learned a lot about development and buildings, and I have become so you know, excited by this idea, and I'm gonna open more, certainly, I probably do three or four more, much faster. Now, because I know how to do this now. And of course, you know, I'm doing some of that work also, I opened one in Brazil, I opened one in Accra and one in, in Paraguay. USAID has given me a lot of money to, to build around the issue of ethics, equity and education. Right. And so I'm partnering with the University of [inteligible] now to do a big, a bigger project. So I'm excited, I still continue to involve Rutgers in the work I do, because, you know, it's the institution that supports me. But I, you know, I formed my own LEAP social enterprise to grow this projects. And that's what I'm doing. I'm having a ball.

S

Sarah Tantillo 1:02:18

That's fantastic work.

G

Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 1:02:20

I love my work. I could not be doing better things. And I, you know, this is what I'm going to do for the rest of my life. I committed to the kids. And you know, this is a social justice mission for me. I really believe that kids need champions like me. And you know, it's my calling, and it's the work that I'm going to keep doing. And so I love you guys for in with this, because this is so important. So important work.

S

Sarah Tantillo 1:02:45

So inspiring Gloria. Thank you so much. Yeah, great, Norman.



N

Norman Atkins 1:02:52

Yeah, it's interesting. It's interesting. I just had dinner last week with a student who was one of those first 72 came through.

S

Sarah Tantillo 1:03:00

Who was it?

N

Norman Atkins 1:03:02

It's a guy named Ralph, you know, you know him.

N

Norman Atkins 1:03:06

And, you know, he's, he's, it's, he's 35 years old, and is working at Bank of America. And he's, he's working remotely from Mexico City, because he because he can. And, you know, it's just really, it's really, it's really very meaningful to stay connected to the students and teachers and people who we, who we built these schools with all those all those years ago. I'm trying to share the lessons that we've learned broadly through various efforts and trying to like recognize that, you know, when you're when you're when you're a charter school, and when you're a small charter school starting out, you can really start by building just an incredibly positive, joyful culture. To that high expectations for all students, particularly students who are often marginalized and cast aside is what's what's crucial and that whether or not all students can and should go through a four year college is kind of an become a kind of an interesting debate, but essentially holding the highest expectations as if all students should have the choice, right? Whether or not they can go to and through a four year college I think is really important and accounts for a lot of why the best charter schools are successful and then third, not taking instruction for granted. We can all we can all come to this with our stories and our best intentions. And we can we can love the students and believe in them but without like really good, high quality instruction, rigorous materials, high expectations, and systems to ensure that students are going to be able to move forward not fall through the cracks, not gonna lead toward success. And so a lot of the work that I've been trying to do since the founding of Northstar was around building systems to train teachers and principals, trying to build instructional systems and curricula, and trying to figure out essentially how to make sure that the the way in which we're teaching math, foundational reading, are effective, and follow the learning science, and that we, that we help students figure out their purpose, and that we start to consider giving students pathways toward meaningful jobs and career so that they're not only getting diplomas and degrees, but also jobs that lead toward choice filled lives.

S

Sarah Tantillo 1:03:06

I know, Ralph.

S

Sarah Tantillo 1:06:06

Yeah, that's great. And Norman, what's your organization called now that you're working?

N

Norman Atkins 1:06:11

The organization is I'm the, I'm the board, I'm the board chair of Uncommon Schools, and a relay Graduate School of Education, which I founded and Zearn, which is a digital math program, and Merit America, which is an education employment program, and I'm leading a nonprofit called Together Education, which is trying to help develop more innovative solutions in our space.

S

Sarah Tantillo 1:06:37

Cool. Really awesome. So great. So as I mentioned, I'm working at Great Oaks Legacy Charter School Network as a managing director of humanities there. And in the last 10 ish years, I've written a few books about literacy instruction. And, you know, the book about the charter school movement, which was a labor of love for seven years and came out a couple years ago. Just I'm so glad that we're here and that we're all still fighting the good fight. I just think it's so important. And it's really great to see the two of you tonight. So thank you so much for this. It's really, really great time.

G

Gloria Bonilla-Santiago 1:07:14

I mean, thank you for having us. And we really, this was so important also to bring us together, I love to see Norman. I want to bring you to Puerto Rico Norman. Just to talk to my people there about this because this is new for them, you know, but there's so much that they can learn so I'm going to try to reach out to you.

N

Norman Atkins 1:07:33

I would love I would I would love that. It's great. It's great to see you too. And I really it's it's it's a blessing all the work that you did and kind of creating this event in New Jersey and Sarah, it's it's been it's been it's been a joy ride.

S

Sarah Tantillo 1:07:47

Definitely. It's great. Again, thank you both for your time this evening. This has been a wonderful oral history celebrating New Jersey's 25 years of chartering for the National Charter School Founder's Library. We welcome you to visit the library online at www.charterlibrary.org.