



Tom Burden

Tom Burden: [00:00:00] I think what I struggle with seeing in the current school system is that we're grooming kids to be perfectionists, and basically, like nowhere in nature or in the universe is there's anything that is like perfect.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:22] Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. This is Annalies Corbin, Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation and your host. We hear frequently that the global education system is broken. In fact, we spend billions of dollars trying to fix something that's actually not broken at all, but rather irrelevant. It's obsolete. A hundred years ago, it functioned fine. So, let's talk about how we re-imagine, rethink, and redesign our educational system.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:56] Welcome to Learning Unboxed. This is your host, Annalies Corbin, and I am, as always, super excited about our conversation and my guest today. Joining us is Tom Burden, who is the founder of Grypmat. And we're going to get into a whole host of pieces, look at him go, holding that up, sort of about how he came to that. But just for a bit of context, for our listeners, especially for our school folks that are out there, Learning Unboxed is all about case studies and positive disruptions.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:31] And what I love about Tom and Tom's story is the way that he has utilized his experience through Grypmat and the development and design of that, his journey along the way, which we will get into, to have an impact on what happens with young kiddos because Tom has been a frequent visitor to the PAST Foundation and the Innovation Lab, and he has stuck his toe in the water with us as it relates to kids, and kids learning to be absolutely innovative and creative. So, Tom, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

Tom Burden: [00:02:04] Yeah. Thanks for having me. Being at the PAST foundation is always a huge joy. The kids are always super excited, and it's always fun to like share my story with them and see how their brains, their like fresh minds are adapting to all the new and exciting curriculum that you're bringing to them.

Annalies Corbin: [00:02:24] Yeah. And the kids are always very excited for you to come because you always do the really cool tricks with the Grypmat, and they're wowed by that. So, before we get into the cool, wow stuff for our listeners, how about if you give us the sort of 50,000-foot view of sort of the origin or the why of Grypmat. And then, we'll get into what the thing is, and then how you utilize it because I think that the why is the piece that inspires so many people.

Tom Burden: [00:02:53] I was a F-16 mechanic in the Air Force, I'm just tired of my tools sliding off the aircraft. At the time, I was going to college for mechanical engineering, and I wanted to solve this issue. It was like a really painful part of the process of my job. So, I made a decision. I'm going to solve it no matter what.

And I had all these crazy ideas of like having a magnetic vest and like sticking the tools to me in like having strings to like hold onto the tools and like have them be stretchy, so you reach where you're working.

Tom Burden: [00:03:30] And later, I was sitting in my mom's car and I noted she had the non-slip mat on her dashboard, keep her cellphone in place when driving. And at the time, I never seen any material like that. And I was like, wow, we can make these larger for tools. I was like, mom, where did you get this? And my mom, she's an extreme couponer. So, she goes to a bunch of stores all over and she's getting things for free or super cheap all the time.

Tom Burden: [00:03:59] So, she's like, I don't know. She gave me a list of like five stores and I was like, mom, it's going to take a lot of time trying to find this. And I ended up finding it at CVS. Just continued with the process and started prototyping in my basement for three years, and then finally came up with the Grypmat. So, this is our medium size. It's flexible, it's non-slip. And yeah, it's perfect size for tools.

Tom Burden: [00:04:30] And yeah, I guess the why of why I did it was, I was—I guess what I explain to people is like when they're trying to find like their purpose or what they want to do is find something that's really personal to you and find something that's like very—like what's your unique ability? So, my unique ability is finding efficiencies with physical products. So, something that's very personal to me is I was a F-16 mechanic. This was like what I do every single day. And finding something that you're really passionate about.

Tom Burden: [00:05:09] And to me, like a hack of finding something that you're really passionate about, sometimes, that's hard to do. Find something that you really do not like. Something that you hate. So, I hate seeing inefficient processes in the military. So, I was like, my unique ability is creating physical products. I want to create a physical product to combat this issue of this inefficient system in the military. So, yeah, that's kind of like the big picture of like what kept me going, wanting to keep pursuing it. I mean, it was like three years working in a basement, which was a long time. I call it the dark age.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:50] It is a long time, but in the greater scheme of things, not really, if you think about sort of the time span of innovation, of most innovations. And one of the things that I love about what you were just saying is that you tapped into your talent. You have this talent around recognizing dysfunction and systems and wanting to be able to sort of right that wrong, I guess, if you will, the disconnect of that system's approach. But your super power was that you could literally work at and come up with a solution. And we tell our teachers, we tell schools, we tell community folks this all the time: tap into the thing that you're passionate about.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:31] And if you can use that passion for the greater good — whether it be for yourself, for your students, for your communities, for consumers, for aviation mechanics — you can, in fact, change the world for the better. But oftentimes, I think people get so stuck in the box they feel like is theirs, whether they own it or they put themselves there or they were placed there. Oftentimes, folks have a really, really hard time of stepping out of what they perceive they're supposed to be doing to be able to think creatively. You didn't have that problem at all.

Tom Burden: [00:07:07] Yeah. I mean, there was a phase that it was kind of like, I did get some backlash from others. Some people have said, you can't have anything sit on on the jet. You shouldn't make these new products. And I just kept asking for certain things until I was given an answer or I just kept asking, if someone said, no, this can't be done, then I would figure out if that is like their responsibility to make that decision. Like I remember, I was trying to make the grip mats form-fitted to the jet so I would get a lot of measurements on the aircraft, the thing is, I needed to ask permission to get measurements.

Tom Burden: [00:07:54] So, what happened was the first day I went there, I was wearing normal clothes, I wasn't in my uniform, but it was on a Tuesday. And every Tuesday, it was like dress down day where you could just wear your civilian clothes. And I asked, and they're like, yeah, sure. So then, the next day, I'm still in my civilian clothes and everyone else is in the uniform, and I thought I was going to get tackled. I had to take in measurements on the jet. And they were like, what are you doing? I was like, yo, I got-

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:23] What are you doing? And who are you?

Tom Burden: [00:08:25] I was like, I got permission yesterday. Like here's my I.D. Like I'm part of the weapons shop. Like this is my supervisor. And then like they just took my ID, and took a couple of things, and like left, and then they came back and was like, yeah, you're good. I was like, Thank God. So, yeah, there was definitely like a lot of like resistance. And I guess what was interesting is just with my persistence, it just kind of got people to the point where there is like, all right, like we're just going to let him dry it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:09:10] We're going to let this guy with this crazy idea run with this, and we're going to see what happens. It's interesting because over the years, as we've been thinking about how best to teach, not just innovation, but the design and development components of innovation. It's been one of those pieces that's been really, really difficult because people are generally afraid to embrace that creative side or that innovative side.

Annalies Corbin: [00:09:43] And part of it is it's not, I think, from a lack of confidence and, hey, I can be innovative, but there's this great fear of putting something that is somewhat of you out into the world. So, did you, at any point, have that same type of internal battle or for you, was it just like, I've got to solve this problem, so I'm just going to pound until I get it done? Well, what was that for you?

Tom Burden: [00:10:10] Yeah. There is definitely like an issue of understanding regulations or materials that could be on the jet. There is a lot of, especially with the military, you can wrap yourself up with so much analysis paralysis of like what can and can't be done that you could just be sitting still forever. So, it's like-

Annalies Corbin: [00:10:31] So, what did you say? You said analysis paralysis?

Tom Burden: [00:10:35] Yeah. So, I just constantly try to figure everything out. I think, honestly, one of my strongest points of what I do is that I was a C-average student in high school and in college. So, like the concept of perfectionism, like I don't really have that. And also, like I think what I struggle with seeing in the current school system is that we're grooming kids to be perfectionists. And basically, like nowhere in nature or in the universe is there's anything that is like perfect.

Tom Burden: [00:11:15] But in the school system, you can get perfect, you can get an A. Because I had an intern who, he was like a 3.9 GPA, and like just to tease them a little bit in the interview, I was like, "Why wasn't it 4.0?" Now, as like a 2.9'er, that was like a joke. But a 3.9'er, he was like, honestly, it bothers me, and I should have done whatever I could to get a 4.0. And I realized he was becoming a perfectionist, and it was slowing a lot of our processes down because what happens is like I called the C-plus theory of like a lot of times, especially in the startup world, you could get what I consider a C-plus in like two hours, but to get that A-plus might take two weeks to a month.

Tom Burden: [00:12:08] So, in reality, you lost a month. So, when it comes to the startup world, it's not about you pick option A or option B, it's like how much time did you take to pick up whatever option. Because like just pick option A, test it out. If it fails, fine, we're doing option B. But like that's not how the school system like trains

kids. It's really like, stop, slow down, pick the right decision, it doesn't matter how much time that you take unless if there's like a time test.

Tom Burden: [00:12:43] But what happened was I feel like I found this one day, we had a trade show. And he goes, what's the perfect trade show? And I was like, I never thought about that. Whenever I think of a trade show, it's like what's the best I possibly can do in that trade show? And I was like, well, what do you think is a perfect trade show? And he goes, we sell out all of our products. And I go, okay. So, we sell it by the end of the week. Yeah. So, by the end of the week.

Tom Burden: [00:13:18] Okay. What would happen if we sold out everything by the first day? Would that be a more perfect trade show? He's like, yeah, I guess I would be better, right? I said, "If we sell our everything on the first day, that means we mis-estimated our sales and our inventory, and that would be a huge failure." And he was just like, oh, my gosh, like there's not like I couldn't tell him what his A-plus was.

Annalies Corbin: [00:13:48] And he was desperate for you to help him find it, right? So, that was just part of his push back. And that's actually a really intriguing analogy. And I appreciate very much of you saying that because it's one of the things that I hear frequently when we're talking with schools or communities about why aren't the traditional sort of trajectory of education is not the one we should be using, why it's not currently relevant in its form today because we do get a lot of push back.

Annalies Corbin: [00:14:25] I talk frequently about the fact that imagine if we sort of took and we meshed these ideologies that come out of startup, and R&D, and full-on embedded industry internship or apprenticeship. And what would happen if you took all the best of those elements, and you mixed them all together, and said, this is what school should be, right? Which is a lot of the work that we do at the Innovation Lab. But the push back I get all the time is that we forget, A, to let kiddos fail, back to your point.

Annalies Corbin: [00:15:03] There's so much learning that happens in that moment and there's as much, if not more, in that modification of figuring out what didn't work and how do we swap that again? So, it's one of the things that I do truly appreciate about your story and the journey. What happened, Tom, along the way that landed you at Shark Tank? It's a piece of your story everyone wants to talk about it. So, we might as well just put that out there. But at some point, you go from your mom's basement to a national stage.

Tom Burden: [00:15:38] Yeah. So, it was actually my basement, but-

Annalies Corbin: [00:15:41] Oh, it wasn't mom's basement. Okay. Clarifying. Good to know.

Tom Burden: [00:15:46] Yeah. Mom's are dad's bar in my basement. But yes. So, the very first trade show was at Oshkosh, Wisconsin. It's the world's biggest air show. And went there with 600 Grypmats. And that was the first time I was ever going to sell it. And at this point, so this was like summer of 2016. And this is about three-and-a-half to four years in, which was like crazy because—so, one thing I say for people who have a startup or something new, especially that person who's like I call the garage founder or the basement founder, someone who like doesn't have any resources, doesn't have any like, network or money, what you think will happen on day one most likely will happen on year three because you're like, oh, I got this cool product, like everyone should buy it, right?

Tom Burden: [00:16:46] And then, like it's going to take about three years like to get to that spot that you think that you'll be at right away. And that's what happened. Like three years later, like I'm at a trade show and it really starts to sell. So, the crazy part is, so I had 600 Grypmats. I loaded up this truck and trailer, and I had so many Grypmats in there like I couldn't see out the passenger window. So, I went from Toledo, drove up to

Kalamazoo, Michigan to pick them up, and then drove from Kalamazoo, Michigan around the lake over to Oshkosh, Wisconsin.

Tom Burden: [00:17:31] So, it's like at least a six-hour drive. And I get there and I forgot to bring a dolly to like help unload everything, and it's just me. So, I see this guy who's across from my booth and he has a dolly. And I said, if I help you unload your truck, can I borrow your dolly. He goes, yeah, sure. So, I'm unloading my Grypmats and he comes over to help me, and he goes, he's like, what is this? So, I pull one out and shown them to him. He's like, wow, I've never seen anything like this.

Tom Burden: [00:18:02] And I go, yeah, it's brand new. I'm launching this at the show. And he goes, wow. He's like, I'm normally in the automotive industry. This is something that we could use on cars. And he was at the show selling just like bug wax. It was like Rain-X for bugs. So, like when you hit a bunch of bugs with your plane, they wipe off. So, first day, I sold 13. And I remember before the show happened, I'm like I've been getting a ton of feedback from mechanics like these are going off the shelves. It's going to be great.

Tom Burden: [00:18:41] I was like, I could probably like drive at night over to Kalamazoo, Michigan, pick up more Grypmats and come back. But after the first day, I was like, man, I sold 13, I really hope I can just like see out my passenger window by the time we're done here. I was like, I remember at the time, I called this girl I was dating, she lives out in Vegas now, but I was like, I don't think this is going to work, like I remember telling someone like, yeah, it's not going to be as big as I thought it would be.

Tom Burden: [00:19:19] So, one thing I will say a lot is no opportunity will be lost due to my emotion, which means like because I know something doesn't work doesn't mean that I'm not going to try harder, just as hard. So, I would go in early. I would stay in late. I was actually crashing afterparties to like bring up this little tripod to hold a Grypmat, and like selling it at the afterparties. And like, I'm going to afterparties, where I don't know who's throwing the party, I don't know the people who are at the party. And I'm just like trying to sell it.

Tom Burden: [00:19:58] So, super awkward when you're like crashing a party and you're trying to sell stuff. And yeah, sales started to snowball and people would be like, hey, I saw someone post this on Twitter. I saw this, someone was trying to sell it at an afterparty. I was that. I was like, that was me. And then, I remember, so the second last day, vendors would come by, and they'd be like, looks like you're doing well, but last day, a lot of vendors won't be here. They'll come in late because we probably won't sell anything because it's the slowest day.

Tom Burden: [00:20:39] And they just kept telling me like I'm going to have low sales that day. And I remember on the way there, I was like screaming in the car. I will sell a hundred Grypmats. I will sell a hundred Grypmats. And by the end of that day, I sold 101. And then, right after I got done figuring out how many I sold, the guy that I borrowed the dolly from that said it could be used in automotive, he came across the aisle and he said, hey, I see you got some extra Grypmat, so I'd like to be a distributor.

Tom Burden: [00:21:13] Can I buy everything that you have left? And because what was going to happen was I was going out to load everything back up on the trailer, and then drive it all the way back to Kalamazoo, Michigan, to drop them off and down to Toledo. And I was like, let's do it. And I used his dolly to load my Grypmats in his trailer, and he lived like an hour south from there, which was like on my way back. I remember that day, he gave me a check for \$10,240.

Tom Burden: [00:21:48] And I remember, I thought it was fake. And I was like, I think the bank was closed because it was at the end of the day and I had an old roommate in Milwaukee. And I stayed there and I was like talking to them about what do I do with the check. Do I just deposit? I was like going to try to cash it so I

could get the money out if it was a fake. And then, I just deposited that, and I was like, yeah, deposit the check. And I was like, wow. Like who has this kind of money just to like throw out a product that you don't even know is going to work.

Tom Burden: [00:22:32] And just from like the last day of like really selling a lot and having high traffic, he saw that, he was like, I know I could sell this. So, yeah. So, just having that kind of hustle, like really snowballed into like getting more sales. Like I would say out of trade shows, I would say the Grypmat team is probably the most effective, like dollar per dollar that you spend on a trade show because I've made all the wrong mistakes of paying—there's a lot of rules of having a trade show and like there, it's kind of surrounded by a union that you had to pay the union a ton to set anything up.

Tom Burden: [00:23:17] So, for example, if you bring anything in that you cannot carry or it has more than two wheels, you have to pay a union worker to bring it in. So, usually, the union workers are getting paid like 60 to 80 dollars an hour at a minimum of like four hours. And then, you have to have a minimum of two people. So, just to like bring something in, do the math, that's a ton of money. So, everything's on two wheels. We can't have tools to like put your booth together.

Tom Burden: [00:23:49] So, we have between nuts and hand-assembled. So, I feel like just again, and again, and again, like hustling really hard with the trade shows got us more exposure, got us some sales. And then, there will be what I call Shark Tank scouts, people who get people signed up. One called me and was like, hey, we want you to be—or they said, "You'd be a good fit, so you should sign up online." So, the thing is the scouts, to my knowledge, they don't really give you like a heads up or like they don't give you a leg up. You just sign up like anyone else.

Tom Burden: [00:24:26] So, what happened was after all the trade shows, we did a kick starter to launch three new sizes, and that's how Shark Tank found me, was through kick starter. So, what happened was the day that you could sign up, they reached out to me, and I was talking to her on the phone, and she goes, what you need to do is create a video explaining your story and your product. And then, also do a written application. She goes, your kick starter video explains everything that we would need for the video, so if you give me a verbal commitment, I can submit your video application right now. You'll be the very first one. So, I was like, well, it's probably not going to get much better than that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:25:14] Yeah. Might as well, right?

Tom Burden: [00:25:15] So, yeah. So, by the time we got going from other trade shows, in about roughly 10 months, we had about \$400,000 in sales to rewind a year before that. I just came home from a deployment and we just were our first order of group mats was coming in from the factory. And they asked me to be a part of the show and sell like a scout reached out to me. And we had no sale. And I was like, I don't want to be that guy on the show. It has no smell. So, I said no to them. And I, I was always wondering if that was the right decision. And then fast forward to now was able to apply again. And yeah, turns out it was the right decision.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:01] Yeah. Yeah. It was the right decision.

Tom Burden: [00:26:07] Yeah. So, really quick, when you apply there's roughly like 60,000 people that apply. And then, the top like 1,000 will get their own producer. So, you'll get an email every once in a while, like, hey, you made it to the second round, you made it to the top 10,000, you made it to this stage. And then, when you get to top 1,000, that's when you get your own producer and they're trying to whittle it down to about 150.

Tom Burden: [00:26:32] So, they'll film about 150, then 120 will actually like air. So, you can film, get to do it, and everything, and still not air. And I know people that that's happened to. Man, that would be a nightmare. So, really persistent on like, the Shark Tank Group, what they really want is a story that's going to inspire people. So, if you have that story, what I kept pushing was the whole military side, veteran. And without that, I don't know if it's the same playing field, yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:13] It's hard to know. Story is an intriguing thing, right? Because story can lead you to lots of places, but it can also be really distracting if you're not careful. I want to spend the rest of our time digging in a little bit around two pieces that I think are probably fairly tangible as they relate to sort of the what or how as folks move into innovation, and innovative thinking, and entrepreneurship. So, the first one is that you already mentioned that your journey as a student wasn't that student that was out there that was seeking perfection.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:54] And because of that, that you allowed yourself the space to not be that student, whether by design or otherwise, you had a really different mindset. But did that mindset necessarily fit well within school? And the reason I'm asking the question is I really sort of want to get at sort of the what prepared you to be successful in this journey versus the spaces or the gaps that if you could go back and redesign that K-12 system to have prepared you or prepared you differently?

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:28] It's that stuff right now, especially given what's happening in the world that everybody is wrestling with, what's the next iteration going to look like? And I think that it's really critically important that we tap into real people with real success and innovative stories to say what was the magic and how could we translate that magic into an experience that's equitable across the sort of K-12 spectrum. And I know that's a really deep question, Tom, but I have had you in our space and watching you interact with kids, and in particular the things that you tell kids, I'm thinking about the lemonade stand.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:03] I don't know if you remember this or not. But for months those kids would come back and talk to me about the things you said to them when they were trying to convince you to buy their lemonade, right? And so, they got a huge amount out of that experience. And in the moment, you may not have even realized it was happening or that it would be so lasting, but the reality of it was that that was probably more meaningful than most of what they did the nine months prior to in school. So, my question is why?

Tom Burden: [00:29:32] I think something that was beneficial for me was that I didn't have an expectation for the outcome. So, someone who actually lives in Columbus, Ohio, I went to grew up with high school and everything, and he is like, my entire life. I felt like I was here and he was here. He supports education, everything. And he has like a very good job, but what I'm seeing is that he could do much more, but he has the expectation of like getting the initial success the very first time.

Tom Burden: [00:30:15] So, my expectation of me going out and doing something, my expectation is that I'll probably have to try harder and more times to get the average. So, if I want to get as high as he would get, I know I'm probably going to study way more, and then try way harder just to get the same thing. So, the problem is like when he goes out to do something outside of his like norm is that if he doesn't get that A-plus the very first time, he's out, and he can't.

Tom Burden: [00:30:47] So, it's very difficult for him to explore a new avenue because it has to be perfect the very first time. If he were to ever do a kick starter and like not raise 113,000 like I did, he would look at it as like a failure. So, the thing is, it's like yeah, I did one kick starter and it was successful, but I was working on it for years at that point. So, a lot of people would think, like the very first week, I'd do a kick starter and it's as

successful as Tom's, where like what they don't really see is that I was operating like at C-plus level the entire time of like trying things, it's not working, just keep—

Tom Burden: [00:31:33] So, I guess like the point of like failure, I was looking at it more of like a testing or like a learning phase where a lot of people take that super personal, super close to heart of like the failure point. So, I think that is kind of why that I was able to make things work was not being so attached to the testing phase and how the testing phase went where a lot of people are attached to like didn't work out, I failed, I got an F, I'm out, I'm done. So-

Annalies Corbin: [00:32:07] You have persistence, but that was a piece that you embraced that your friend doesn't necessarily have that mindset of being serially persistent. Maybe that's one way to think about it, right?

Tom Burden: [00:32:20] Right. Which is crazy because if he would have like a pinch more persistence, it would be exponentially growth, very rapid, but because he learns and adapts so fast, but he's only willing to give it one try before he needs to redo it. I think like another important piece was in high school, I was in a vocational school and it was called Tri Star, and I learned machine trades, and I went on to learning CAD, where the machine trades, Mr. Maker was the teacher. I mean, he did have a point of like, here's a bunch of projects we had to make, and I honestly don't even remember my grade.

Tom Burden: [00:33:06] I think it was an A, but he like just wanted to see progress and it was more on like the personality of the student. It wasn't like you make this block out of steel, and have all these holes, and like he wouldn't like measure them and check for accuracy. It was kind of like an overall like grade on like personality and productivity. So, I think that that class really did help with like not really focus on like the results, but focus on like how to create things. Was I picking up how to use a mill, use a drill press? Was I using it properly? How is I working with other students?

Tom Burden: [00:33:54] So, I think that was pretty important, too, like not so much like, oh, this hole is drilled like ten thousandth of an inch too far, therefore, you get docked. So, I think if you like the current school system as the way it is to basically streamline or mass produce it, and it's more difficult to take every child by case-by-case and see how they're learning, but I do see, obviously, the PAST Foundation as like recognizing the issues and really taking the bull by the horns of like how to properly do it. But yeah, I think—does that answer your question?

Annalies Corbin: [00:34:43] It does. I mean, I think that because we do, we wrestle with this all the time. And then, like I said earlier, when I think about what does that next sort of iteration look like, it's really that sort of that combination of taking the pieces and components that are now, right? Mass education is streamlined, in part, to get more folks through it. At the end of the day, it's trying to meet all the needs and to be equitable, but the reality of it is that's not necessarily what we need anymore.

Annalies Corbin: [00:35:11] There was a time and a place for it, right? And that system functioned as designed for a very long time. But that's not the world we live in anymore. And I think that's sort of partially part of the big, which is one of the reasons I sort of kind of wanted to dig into it, because I do think there's something to be said for thinking about individualized learners, helping them find their space and their strength, helping them understand the difference between talent, and skill, and superpower or whatever terms that you want to apply to those.

Annalies Corbin: [00:35:43] So, I do think that's really important. I want to close our program today talking about sort of another piece that we haven't touched on yet, but I know from conversations with you that it was a piece of this. And certainly, my sense is, watching you with the kids at PAST, that whether you realize that

you do this or not, I think that my guess is it's an experience that's ingrained in you because you had great mentors along the way, right? And that's one of the other pieces that I feel like is often missing is that we forget that to teach and teach well is really to mentor, right? And that's a very, very different way to think about, how and why I do my job.

Annalies Corbin: [00:36:30] So, I suspect that having great mentors along the way made a difference or at the very least, your interest and thinking about the educational system and in the role, the touch points that you have here, there, that that's meaningful because, again, the experience that as I've watched you with kids, they walk away and they're wowed. And not because of the story and not because of the fact you stick a Grypmat to stools and you hold them up as high as your head, right? They love that, but that's not the reason why. They remember it because of the conversations that you have with them, specifically about the things that they're working on. And that's mentorship.

Tom Burden: [00:37:18] Yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:37:18] So, there has to have been some really key mentors along the way or I guess maybe the flip side of my question is I always like to sort of close the program with thinking about what what's that piece of sage moment that you sort of want to share with the world about your journey, or the thing that you've learned, or the thing that you wish you had known as folks are sitting back saying, oh, my gosh, I could be like that guy, Tom. I could transform my classroom and I could produce a thousand young Toms or I could be that entrepreneur in my own basement. And I've got this great idea, but I've never had the courage to try.

Tom Burden: [00:37:57] Yeah, I would say, definitely, like my ground, like the foundation mentor, I would say, would be my dad. So, on the side, he would do general construction, and he would have me working with him a lot. And at the time, I'm like, I got to like work with dad, I got to work with dad, but I was like constantly like getting experience of like hands-on experience of how to work with tools, building things. And really, I mean, there wasn't like an A-plus system there.

Tom Burden: [00:38:38] It was like kind of, all right, that's good enough or yeah, that looks good. Just like getting like a pass, fail, or approval from dad, like all right, cool, we're moving on. Definitely being hands-on and like working with them gave me a lot of experience. Like one thing you would always say was sometimes, my sister would babysit and there'd be like kids out there. And whenever we would pour concrete, he would say something like, pouring concrete, this is something that your teachers at school haven't ever done. Most of them have never poured concrete.

Tom Burden: [00:39:10] And like as a kid, you're like, whoa. Like you guys look up to this like person who's your teacher and you've done something that they most likely don't have an idea about. So, that was like really empowering as a kid. We would do snow removal and he's got a skid loader, and I'd be like really young and driving a skid loader. I mean, when I first started, I would just be like sitting on his lap, like playing with the controller. So, that was kind of getting that different mindset.

Annalies Corbin: [00:39:43] A part of it was having the courage to try new things, right? And I see those things coming hand in hand. Part of sort of shifting from a very traditional, very wrote, very memorization sort of based approach to one that allows you to tinker in real time as you learn. And maybe at the end of the day, that's kind of what I'm getting at is that hands-on, that very applied opportunity brings out all kinds of confidence in folks, right? Because I talk to lots of entrepreneurs on this show or in the work that I do, and the thing that, I would say, is consistent among you all, and I put you in that boat, is that somewhere along the way, you had the courage to try.

Tom Burden: [00:40:34] Yeah. Yeah. I think like a big part of my life was working with or playing with Legos as a kid. So, that really gave me like strong 3D imagery skills and like how to create things. And then, working with my dad gave me like realistic of like if I can visualize something, how do you actually like put it together? And I mean, the point of Legos, you're looking through Legos, I mean, you can follow the directions and build whatever they want you to create.

Tom Burden: [00:41:06] And then, that really exercise like me understanding Legos and how to make things fit together. And then, got to the point with specifically Mindstorm Legos of like building different robots. What I would do was I would take the like directions of like how to build different things. So, the Mindstorm Legos, there's a bunch of different things that you can make. And there's instructions on how to like build certain parts, like this is with treads, this is with wheels, this is a touch sensor or whatever.

Tom Burden: [00:41:40] And when I would be with my mom, like in the car, I would just look at them, and I would think of how they could fit together. And I would think of how I would want to make different things, like something that would be able to like drive around, throw a ball, and pick it up, and throw it again. And I think the learning I was gaining from Legos, it wasn't so much like a pass, fail. It was just like I was turning into like the the testing phase and to like playing time. And that was, I think, a muscle that I was like really exercising. I actually have a tattoo of Legos on my shoulder.

Annalies Corbin: [00:42:22] Oh, really? Oh, my. A true lover of Legos.

Tom Burden: [00:42:29] Yeah.

Annalies Corbin: [00:42:30] There you go.

Tom Burden: [00:42:30] But I think that was incremental into like one, having my dad just kind of like looking out like pass, fail, like that's good enough, that will work. And also, that combined with being that C-average student, I think those were definitely hand-in-hand. I remember when I was in the second grade, I think I was supposed to go to summer school. So, there were two parts. Second grade, I was supposed to go to summer school. And my dad was like, it's okay, I used to go to summer school all the time. I think I went every year as a kid.

Tom Burden: [00:43:05] So, that made me like okay with like not getting A-plus. I remember specifically when I was in the first grade, she said to the students something about like how we did a bad job on our spelling tests. So, one side of the paper was a spelling test and the other side was math. And she said, there's only one person that got 100%, and she pulled out the paper and it was my name. I was the only one that got 100%. But on the back, I saw that I got a 97% on the math, and it like shocked me, and I was like, I did something wrong on the back. So, first grade, I had this like I need to get everything right.

Tom Burden: [00:43:49] And then, second grade when whatever reason why I was going to summer school and my dad told me like, it's okay, that really like got me to not focus so much on like the results, but focus more on like the actual learning. I mean, I didn't know I was actually focused on the learning, but me being okay with not doing it perfect gave me other routes, like at that time, playing with Legos of like no, the Legos had to be perfect. It's just like I would come up with a task for them to do as long, as I completed the task, then I was okay with the outcome. But in the process, I was learning so much about how to build things.

Annalies Corbin: [00:44:36] That's awesome. You were learning to love learning. And at the end of the day, if we could get every kid to leave school loving learning, then we would be far and away in a different place than

we are currently. So, that's absolutely awesome. Thank you so much, Tom, for joining us today, sharing your story, inspiring us all and making really, really cool Grypmats.

Tom Burden: [00:45:06] Yeah. I love the PAST Foundation. Thank you for everything that you guys do.

Annalies Corbin: [00:45:10] You're very welcome.

Tom Burden: [00:45:10] I love being involved with you guys. I feel like I learn something new every time I go there. And I'm kind of like jealous of those kids of like, man, I wish I had a PAST Foundation when I was growing up.

Annalies Corbin: [00:45:22] Yeah. It wasn't around when I was growing up either. And hence, that was the thing that we created, right? So, I have that kindred spirit. It wasn't around. So, I was like, well, let's build this thing and let's see what will happen when we build this thing. So, it's a good journey.

Tom Burden: [00:45:37] Yeah. You guys are making so much headlines. It's beautiful what you guys are doing.

Annalies Corbin: [00:45:41] Well, thank you so much. And thank you for joining us today.

Tom Burden: [00:45:44] Yeah. Thank you so much. And I'll see you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:45:49] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guest and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media at Annalies Corbin. And join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to re-imagine education.