



## Mike Coonan

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**Annalies Corbin:** [00:00:16] 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 reimagine, rethink, and redesign our educational system.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:00:51] So, today on Learning Unboxed, we have another treat. This is the second episode that we're doing about Yellowstone National Park and the amazing opportunities that the park service has historically made available to folks. And certainly, with everything that's going on these days, it's just refreshing to hear about the really cool things that we can look forward to. And so, today, we are speaking with Mike Coonan, who runs the Yellowstone National Park's Youth Conservation Corps. So, Mike, welcome to the program.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:01:22] Welcome and thank you for having us.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:01:24] So, let's sort of start for folks who may not be familiar because we have listeners from all over the world. So, let's let's help folks understand, what is this place called Yellowstone National Park? And why do we all view it as one of our nation's greatest treasures?

**Mike Coonan:** [00:01:39] Sure. Yellowstone National Park is our nation's first national park. It was set aside way back in 1872 on March 1st. So, we have a birthday. You can send us cookie. And we are approaching 150 years old. And we are a historic area with some very incredible landscapes. And those landscapes include old faithful. In fact, half of the world's geysers. We have over 10,000 hydro, geothermal features. And that's a major reason why they set aside Yellowstone. 2.2 Million acres of land to be set aside, to be protected, to be the first national park.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:02:18] And our job with the Youth Conservation Corps or YCC is help upkeep some of that land. Obviously, we can't do it all. It's 2.2 Million acres. If we think about it, it's about the size of Rhode Island and Delaware combined. We're not the largest park. That's up in Alaska. We are one of the many national park units and we're all in the many units that do have Youth Conservation Corps, I'm just going to say, YCC programs? And of course, our program, like our park, is a little different.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:02:50] I'm going to be biased. I've been working with this program for over 10 years. So, I think it's an incredible program and I think that it is worth it. And what I see is the change in the park, and also, the change of the people that work in the park. That's our staff, as well as the students throughout the years that have been part of this program. So, it's a little bit about Yellowstone.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:03:14] And the other thing I always like to, and if we hear any elk giggling, the other side of being the first national park is we really set aside the land and we also preserve the landscape for the most part, which includes the plants, and therefore also the animals. So, they're all under the protection of the National Park Service. And it's our job to preserve and protect it, but also, make it accessible for you, all your listeners. And it does take a lot of upkeep.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:03:43] It does indeed. And as some of our listeners know, my backstory as an archaeologist, I've worked all over the world. And then, from time to time, I get to talk about it because we do an interview in one of the places where I worked. And what I can share with everybody is that the opportunity to have students in a place as magical as Yellowstone, or quite frankly, any of our national parks, our state parks, even your community park, getting kids outside is a game changer for many, and the opportunity to actually have students participate in some type of residential, if you will, opportunity that's more than a day or even an afternoon.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:04:18] When I would bring kids in the park and we would excavate at the Marshall Hotel, for example, that was a thing I still hear. Like you said, for the kids who go through and be part of this program, I don't know about you, but I certainly still hear from the kiddos that came and spent weeks excavating in the park with me, and had nothing to do with me, and everything to do with the place that they were. So, share with us, Mike, what is the Yellowstone Youth Conservation Corps? What is this program at its heart? And then, we're going to get into the nuts and bolts about, how does it actually work? Yeah.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:04:51] Sounds great. And we'll have to set aside. First, YCC is a national program. So, there are YCC programs in the inner city, Washington, D.C., and some of those national parks. But you hit the key point that really sets our program aside. We are the only full-residential program when it comes to YCC. So, even though Tetons will have a program to our south, our Grand Canyon or Rocky Mountain National Park, most of these programs, or Yosemite, the other white park, we're going to have a non-residential YCC program, meaning they don't provide housing or supervision for nights or weekends, and that's what really, I believe, sets our program aside is we will house and be a residential program.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:05:36] For the last five or six years, there'll be 34 teenagers for a month living, working, playing, and growing. And that's kind of our motto. Work, play, learn, grow. And we try to do all those things to the tenth level. So, besides doing the work, we are about community, and that's the groove, that's the play. We also set aside an hour each day, Monday through Friday, for education.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:06:03] That could be team building, it could be leadership, but it's also having archaeologists talk to our students about career development, and that is another thing that I really believe sets us aside, is not only do I get to work with these teenagers, sometimes, we'll use the term enrollees, we'll hire, like I said, 34 teenagers for a month, but then we do it again. So, for the last 10 years, we've done two sessions, a month each. So, we are working with over 60 youth for a month at a time. And what's excellent is about four or five years after being part of this program, now, we are hiring some of those former students to be on our staff, and that is incredible, ain't it?

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:06:49] That is awesome. Yes. That's the win, right?

**Mike Coonan:** [00:06:54] That's a win, man. And there's a long history within the Yellowstone Youth Conservation before, I started in 2010, but we see through the rosters and some of the other staff that their former students were staff members, and that's been part of the legacy of the Yellowstone Youth Conservation Corps, is able to hire some of the former students in the program to help run the program, so they can relate to the other teenagers, the teens because they were one.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:07:21] And it changes every year. Sometimes, it's 20% to 25% percent of our staff were students in the program for the last several years. If they're a good fit and they have that, we want to give them that opportunity. And then, some of them have taken it further and making careers out of the National Park Service or other federal lands. Don't forget, US Forest Department, different agency, they also have YCC program. And yeah. Being able to hire or recommend and write letters of recommendation to see these former students of the YCC program make careers out of land management, I mean, outdoor educators.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:08:03] We have former students work in wildland fire. So, Megan is running a chainsaw wildland fire and she was a student here in Yellowstone, and she was a student. We have trail workers that were students and staff members. And then, we have several of our permanent staff that were either staff or students themselves in this program. We had Millie that was at Tetons, she just moved. She's been a permanent education employee and she was SCA, Student Conservation Association, so she was an intern in the program. The next year, she was a staff member in the program. And a couple of years later, she's now made the National Park Service her career.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:08:43] That is really, really awesome and it's spectacular. And I think that the other thing that I love about the program, that scaffolded growth opportunity and the care, clearly, you care about these participants who come through, and you want to see them grow and expand. And whether they ultimately go on to be part of an environmental or cultural conservation effort, they leave the program as stewards, right? And that's a huge thing.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:09:12] And I also want to sort of key on one of the things that you said just really quickly in passing, but I think it's really important, the kids who come into this program, these teenagers, you pay them. This is a paid work opportunity. So, I don't think we can underscore that. And how old do the students have to be to apply? And do they apply from all over the world or is it regional? What's the nuts and bolts of the actual, hey, how do I get to do this thing?

**Mike Coonan:** [00:09:39] Yeah. And it's a little different every year, but we do have certain mandates. So, the Youth Conservation Corps was actually created by Congress, and my facts might not be 100% accurate, I think under President Ford, was signed into as a pilot program and that was very successful in a lot of areas. We started our YCC program in 1984 in Yellowstone National Park. And it was every other year until after 1989 after the '88 fires, and we became annual program. So, every summer, and then the other kind of benchmark is 2010. We went from a one nine-week program to two four-week programs to increase the numbers. So, for the last couple of years, we've had over 700 applications for those approximately 60-

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:10:38] Wow. That's some serious competition.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:10:42] The Congress set up some bylaws, that we hire 15-18 year olds, so you cannot be 14, you cannot be 19 and be part of our program. It's a Youth Conservation Corps. That's what Congress set aside, 15 to 18, so that's who we hire. You do have to be a US citizen to be part of our program. So, to hire, to get paid, we pay a federal minimum wage, which is interesting because some people from some states, some states will have a minimum wage of \$10 or more per hour, we're going to pay federal minimum wage.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:11:17] But there's also that balance of, they will experience, and live, work, play, and grow. Sometimes, I will still, the motto, which I believe is from Habitat Humanity, sweat equity. So, they work in this park. So, they get ownership of this park. And then, yeah, they get a paycheck. We also charge them rent, room and board, but in the end, they'll walk away, if they save it all, over a thousand dollars, four weeks of living, working, and playing in Yellowstone National Park, which you can't really, in my opinion, put a price tag on.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:11:52] Yeah, I would agree with that, and what an amazing thing. So, let's say the 700 kids who apply and 60-some odd kids get in each summer, those are some seriously tough odds, by the way, but proof-positive of how much folks really want to engage in it. So, they make it into the program. They get there. What's the experience like? And part of the reason I'm asking the questions that we are is because not everybody's going to get to experience that program.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:12:26] And even if there are parks and opportunities closer to them, the other thing that I really sort of want to run home with, I guess, is there's a lot of teaching and learning that happens every single day, whether it's by curricular design or it's by happenstance. And you have all these years of experience in being able to sort of, I want to use the word monopolized, as well as take advantage of that moment that comes, right? And how could we translate that moment into other opportunities every day that teachers in other places, or schools, or students may be able to sort of run with. So, what does it look like once I'm in the program? What are we doing? And how do you, as the resident educator in that moment, take advantage of the opportunities?

**Mike Coonan:** [00:13:14] Yeah. There are a lot of opportunities and we do have a captive audience. Part of our program, one, in Yellowstone National Park, as you may know, there's a lot of opportunities that do not have cellphone service, but we actually take away their phones. We check them in like a library book.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:13:32] We do that, too, so I understand why you do that.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:13:36] So, it also gives us a captive audience. So, we really have those 34 teenagers' attention, whether it's at dinner or breakfast, and this, and that. But part of the community is we need everyone to be bought into that community. So, they're assigned to work, we call it KP, Kitchen Patrol, so they're going to help clean their meal, and then the next group will help prepare and clean for them. And that's a continual process. So, there is a community living aspect that, I think, maybe it doesn't exist as much as it did decades ago.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:14:07] So, no one is handing them food. No one is cleaning their toilets. No one is doing their laundry. They become independent. And they also realize the importance of teamwork that if everyone pitches in, no one does the dishes, you have a pile of dishes, which in bear country is a problem. But you learn a lot. Like you said, there is a lot of things they learn that are not part of our set aside curriculum and I think community living is one of those things that really becomes a life changer for them.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:14:43] Being a middle child of five, I felt like I grew up with community living. I had to do dishes, and this, and that. But my reward is hearing a parent, what did you do to my child? They got up and did dishes without being asked. Because after a month, when it was their turn, they knew it was their turn, and then they did it because other people did it for them. And that sense of belonging and, I think, core programs nationwide were kind of an equalizer.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:15:14] It doesn't matter, your beliefs, your background, your race, we're all in this field, and we're all living together, we're all working together, we have all these common goals, and it kind of creates this

incredible community environment, almost a utopia. So, it's intentional, we set it up, but they really take ownership because they're here for a month, day in, day out. We do have expectations, so you can be fired, you can quit off our program. If you break the rules, you'll be fired like any other job.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:15:48] And that carries over to the non-workspace. So, after 5:00 when they're not working, they're still living together. There were still expectations of the community, even on weekends. So, every student will go backpacking on a weekend. Every student goes on a park tour. They really get to see the Grand Canyon, Yellowstone, the bison, the elk. If they're lucky, they'll see bears, or wolves, or foxes, or coyotes. I don't know if you've ever seen a mountain lion or a bobcat within our program, but maybe. I found my first bobcat this winter, and it was great, but they're rare.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:16:26] They're like ninjas, they're there, but you—so, they do experience so much more than a job, and that is part of the beauty of our program. And because we're residential, we have not 40 hours a week, we have 120 hours a week for four weeks, where we get to experience, and learn, and explore. And we really hope, at the end of the program, that everyone realizes what it means to protect, and to own these lands, and why they're so important in the national treasure, I mean, Yellowstone is a national treasure, so are the other ones, but I really enjoy Yellowstone National Park to the nth degree.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:17:10] So, if you were sitting down with a group of teachers or community members from another place who are listening to this, they do their research, they've studied up, they talked to former students, and so they have a pretty decent understanding of what goes into building a program like this to take advantage of all those growth opportunities, learning to work together, living in a community, all that sort of stuff, and they wanted to be able to start a program, what would you say are the two or three biggest considerations or those aha moments? Because even though the program has been around for a long time, you've been actively engaged in teaching and leading this thing for 10 years. I have no doubt you've learned some do and don'ts along the way, especially when you're dealing with teenagers, right?

**Mike Coonan:** [00:18:03] Yeah, I think a couple, I don't remember exactly what year, but we kind of run through our literature. We didn't really have a mission statement, something to stand behind. We had a motto, work, play, learn, grow. So, we built a mission statement around that. And we just want to make sure everything kind of comes back to that. So, I have a purpose, have a partnership, our partnership with Yellowstone National Park. And we have that work aspect as partnerships with multiple divisions within the park.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:18:31] But this could be state park, a county park. It could be another federal land agency in the area. And with a little internet research, there are national programs. Almost every state has a corps program. So, whether it's the Iowa Minnesota Corps program, or Wisconsin, or the CCC is in California, the California Conservation Corps, and they have a specific outback-country program that is nationally known as an excellent program. We're an excellent program and we're nationally known.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:19:07] But there's other programs and we do that. We're intentional about that. We do spend our last day with the students about career development. We talk about these other programs. So, there is a clearing house, and I believe it's actually run by the US Forest Service, 21st century corps for the corps network. These are two different programs, but they will list and they will list by state, different corps programs, different opportunities. And then, really, the idea is, hands-on learning is so important off our program.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:19:40] We will use hand tools, and some of these hand tools include a crosscut saw so that our students do not run by OSHA standards and by wisdom of chainsaws, but we will use a crosscut. And some of our crosscuts are from the 1930s, and we all would sharpen them and we let teenagers use them. And

they'll learn how to care, use, and safely store, and transport a Pulaski. All these tools that may really seem foreign in the beginning, but I think that hands-on staff selection is probably one of those aha moment, and we have found former students do make excellent staff members because that learning curve and that experience, they can relate to not knowing any of these tools and really essentially be experts at the end of the month.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:20:35] And our staff will be here for over three months working with two different groups. And we have grown into other partnerships. So, we will take Groundwork USA. It's this urban corps program and they have brought us in Washington, D.C., New York, but also, Denver, Dallas, Oakland, California. And we work with them. They'll be here for a week. And again, it will be about 60 of them, a group of four in the group 20 is what we've done for the last several years.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:21:05] And they also have a motto that I would love to steal because I believe it works for our program, as well as their program. And I think that's, their motto is changing places, changing lives. And I love it, and I relate to it, and I believe our Yellowstone Youth Conservation program changes places, changes this place, our first national park, and I've seen it through the years changing the lives of our students. And some of those students will come back as staff members. And I think that's a full circle that I really appreciate, and I'm very intentional about that.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:21:38] Yeah, absolutely. Again, that's just so spectacular. And, at PAST Foundation, our organization, we run summer programs and we've had kids who come year after year, after year. We see them over and over again in a variety of capacities. And we also have kids that ultimately find themselves leading programs as well. And just to sort of reiterate the value proposition that you put forward with that, we see the same thing. We see these kids grow. We see them become leaders and whether they want to go on to become teachers or leaders in STEM spaces, which is a lot of our work.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:22:18] It doesn't make any difference. We see them grow as individuals without hesitation. I can say that we see the same thing. So, great value in that. So, Mike, as we sort of wrap up here, so I guess one of the things that I could anticipate that folks are going to want to know, and granted, we will post all the links, send them to the website, but let's just say it out loud for them, if there are kids or folks who hear this and want to get involved in a program, when do they have to apply? What's that deadline? Is that a year out? Is it six months? Is it six weeks? What are we talking about here?

**Mike Coonan:** [00:22:56] The best way to answer this, I'll start backwards. The deadline is March 1st every year. And I guess I can tease that, on the link that we sent you, the YCC link for Yellowstone National Park, our application will go live, it will be a fillable PDF that they can download, fill out, save, and then emailed back to us. They can print it off, fill it out, and mail it to us. And we're the government, so I think we're the only ones that still fax things.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:23:29] So, you can also fax in your applications, but all those things postmarked by March 1st, your email needs to say March 1st by midnight, and it's fine with the Internet because it's at midnight Eastern Time or Mountain Time. We'll take anything as long as it's the 1st. So, you have to be a US citizen. For the time that they are applying, they have to be 15 to 18. And since we have so many, again, by Congress kind of laws that they set up in the '70s, it's going to be by lottery.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:24:03] So, we're not experience-based. All you need to be, to be successful in our program is a good attitude. We will teach you all the skills you need. We'll provide all the equipment. The attitude, that's up to the students. We can't do anything about that. If they have a good attitude, they'll be fully successful in this program and maybe even more fully successful in life after the program. That is our hope. That's why we're

here, besides all the work that we do for the park, which is incredible because our teams, they are working on trails that are still in food storage boxes, we call them bear boxes.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:24:39] We're doing citizen—science. We save the park money because we're paying our teenagers minimum wage instead of a federal employee. So, we're doing meaningful work. We're a little bit cheaper when it comes to that work. And it is incredible for students that can come back, and say, I built that, I did that, I studied that. It's theirs, and this is their park as much as it is your park, but they have, again, that sweat equity, and even sometimes, blood equity. Sometimes, that's a mosquito bite.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:25:13] But they sweat, they work. Sometimes, they cry, and that's not all that bad. But they do leave this place a better place and we believe they leave this place a better person, a better citizen, and that's all we can hope for. That's why we're here, to make the park better, but also, to make our young citizens better. And yeah, some of them will come back as park rangers, and that's incredible. That's not our purpose, but it's definitely one of the largest benefits, in my opinion.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:25:46] Yeah, I think you're absolutely right. Mike, thank you so much for giving us some of your time today, sharing the story of what's going on with the Youth Conservation Corps at the national parks, Yellowstone in particular. But I also appreciate you giving us the bigger, broader global view of this opportunity within our national and state parks. And I hope that both students, parents, teachers will encourage kids to look at this as an amazing opportunity around the country. And hopefully, you get lots of lots of folks applying to come to Yellowstone this summer.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:26:22] We don't need more applications, but we do need more active people, so if they don't get into the Yellowstone Youth Conservation Corps, find other programs in their home state, in their area, and as a person, you benefit from the work that you do. And then, the places are wild places, are historic places that need preservation. Some of them are being loved to death, we need help at every level. So, if we engage more people into public service, that is awesome, and that's a good thing.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:26:57] Yeah, absolutely. Thank you so much, Mike.

**Mike Coonan:** [00:27:00] My pleasure. Thank you very much.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:27:04] Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media @AnnaliesCorbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.