



Shaesta Waiz

Shaesta Waiz: [00:00:00] When you're in that aircraft, it doesn't matter who you are, where you come from, it's just your passion, your ability to fly, to operate that aircraft.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:15] 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: [00:00:49] So, welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. And as always, I am super excited about our guest and our conversation today because we are going to talk with the most amazing young woman in STEM that I think I've had the privilege of meeting in a really, really long time. We're going to be talking today with Shaesta Waiz, who is the founder of a nonprofit organization, Dreams Soar. And here's the thing that we should all just be blown away and amazed by with Shaesta.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:19] She flew around the world solo in a Beechcraft Bonanza A36 aircraft in 2017, becoming the youngest woman to circumnavigate the globe in a single-engine aircraft. And if that's not cool enough, the purpose of her global flight for STEM was to inspire the next generation of technology, science, engineering, math, all those STEM folks and aviation professionals, particularly young girls, which is the foundational mission of Dreams Soar. Add to all of that, that she flew 24,000 nautical miles in a 145-day journey, visiting 22 countries across five continents.

Annalies Corbin: [00:02:04] And Shaesta is truly a rock star in my mind. And the other thing, just to sort of give a bit of global context for this, and then Shaesta and I are going to talk about this in great depth, is that she was born in an Afghan refugee camp and that she and her family traveled to America in 1987 to escape the Soviet-Afghan war. And as part of her journey, she wanted to be able to go out and show girls around the world that if you dream it, you can be it. And so, Shaesta, welcome to the program. Thank you for joining us today.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:02:38] Thank you for having me, Annalies. I'm so excited to speak with you today.

Annalies Corbin: [00:02:43] We are so happy to have you on. And for some context to our listeners, a couple of years ago, I had the privilege of meeting Shaesta for the first time, and we joined together to sort of create and pilot a program trying to help facilitate the work that Shaesta is doing around getting more girls in STEM, in particular, in aviation. So, we started building out some programming. Shaesta came to Columbus. She met a whole bunch of kids.

Annalies Corbin: [00:03:08] We did this amazing Girls' Soar day, if you will, out at OSU, Rickenbacker Airport. And then, since then, we've been doing more things together and just really, really starting to help push the dreams or agenda of getting more girls and women in STEM and aviation in particular. And so, Shaesta, I want to start with, give everybody the sort of 100,000-foot view about why this sort of mission and vision is so personally a passion project for you.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:03:41] Well, Annalies, I have to start off by sharing, in growing up, I really didn't challenge myself when it came to my education. I was in a school district in Richmond, California. And in this specific school district, it was just a lot of poverty. The school district didn't have a lot of resources. We had tons of substitute teachers. It just wasn't very stable. And for me, it almost seemed like school was somewhat like of a daycare. Like you go there from a period of time in the day, and then you go home, and that's the end of it.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:04:24] So, I didn't feel a challenge or a sense of belonging when it came to education. And I was just kind of getting by, doing the bare minimum, not really doing my homework. It wasn't until later in life, I have five sisters who are six girls, where eventually, my family moved out of this school district to a nicer school district, where nicer, what I mean by that is we had resources, we had a library, we had teachers that we knew that were with us from the very start.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:04:55] But the biggest shift was the students, my classmates. And I remember being involved in class projects and everyone talking about college. And I just felt so much like an outsider, like I didn't even know what really college was about. I didn't have this connection with education. I didn't know what I would want to do if I were to even go to college. And I'll never forget it. It was during lunch time. I was sitting with my friends, and they turned to me, and they're like, what about you?

Shaesta Waiz: [00:05:29] What is it that you're going to do after high school? And I'm like, well, I hope I get married and have children right after high school. And they were shocked because this was something that wasn't common. The norm was either get a job or go to college. And the way that that made me feel, it resonated with me, because I thought, I feel like an outsider, I feel like I'm so behind. And I may not go to college, but I have four younger sisters.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:06:01] And I would never want them to feel the way that I feel right now in this conversation. And if I don't change things for myself, and figure out what college is about, and what are the SATs and financial aid, if I don't figure it out for my sisters, then they might follow into my footsteps and have the same experiences once they would get into high school. And I think that's where the seed was planted.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:06:25] And from there, when I started to just figure out next steps, college, I learned a lot. And I took that information, and I thought, well, wait a minute, if I feel this way about college, there might be other peers of mine feeling the same way. And so, I started a club called the College Bound Club, and it was just for students who didn't know what college was and they had an interest.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:52] And this in high school or in college that you started this?

Shaesta Waiz: [00:06:55] Yeah, this is the high school. I'm sorry.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:57] So, still in high school, yeah. Okay.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:06:59] Yeah. College Bound Club. Then fast forward to when I got to college, I saw the difference that my passion had on my sisters, and my peers, and in high school. And it was just such a good

feeling to be able to give hope to people and give them information. And that carried on into college. When I was in college, I started what is known now as the Women's Ambassadors Program. And for those who don't know, I attended a university called Embry-Riddle Aeronautical University. I did my bachelor's and my master's there. And I started the Women's Ambassadors Program, which essentially is a big sister program where current students mentor the incoming female freshman class.

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:46] That's fabulous. Absolutely fabulous.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:07:49] And that made a difference. And I thought, well, wait a minute, I'm a pilot, what is stopping me from getting into an airplane, and going around the world, and sharing this passion for education, for specifically STEM? Because I grew up thinking, oh, it's just so scary. Like I'm not good in math. I don't know much about science. But once I related STEM, science, technology, engineering, mathematics to my passion, which is aviation, I started to understand it more. And so, I just had this need. I need to utilize my passion, go around the world, and talk to students who normally wouldn't be exposed to aviation or STEM, and share this beautiful field with them and hopefully get them inspired.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:35] Which we know that you have. And we're going to dig into the way you've inspired others here in a minute, but I want to sort of step back just a minute and sort of get a sense from you of how does a young, passionate, inspired woman in high school who's not sure even what the whole deal with college is, or how to get there, what that's going to look like, how do you go from that young woman to finding your way in college, but in the field of aviation? I mean, Embry-Riddle is really hard to get into. And more importantly, it's very, very centrally focused. It's very specific. So, how do you go from a young woman who doesn't know a thing about college to a young woman who is now studying aviation? Where's the back story? Help us make that connection with, yeah.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:09:25] Yeah. If I worked and figured out what college was about, if it was for me, I don't think I would have been as driven to figure out the information that I did, but because I was doing it for people that I love, my sisters, that really kept me motivated to ask questions that are common to others. But for me, it was all new. And my parents, they grew up in Afghanistan. They could barely speak English. I couldn't go to them and ask these questions.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:09:56] And so, what I learned is the more that I asked, the more knowledge that I gain, the more empowered I felt. And the more I realized that there are a lot of people like me out there and they're maybe too shy or too embarrassed to ask those questions. And it's just like, I felt like the more involved that I got, the more I felt like this is my purpose. I don't know what my purpose is, but this is it for now. And I felt so empowered. And so, that really kept me going.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:10:30] And I realized that if I am helping others, I strive. If I do it for selfish reasons, I fall flat on my face. But if I'm doing it for others who really need it, it's what keeps me going and it motivates me to ask those questions and not get embarrassed. And really, education and knowledge really is so powerful. It's lifted me up so much and that's carried through going to Embry-Riddle. Embry-Riddle was the only college that I applied to, because I thought, this is where I want to go, I need to figure out how to get there.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:11:13] And to be quite honest, everything in my life, I feel like, is so random, but I grew up terrified of flying and the reason for that was because we lived very close to an Air Force base. And you would hear these massive C-17s taking off and you would just hear the sheer roar in the engines as they would fly over. And as a kid who knew nothing about aviation, that terrified me and the only exposure that I had to aviation were aircraft accidents on television.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:11:47] So, I was very afraid of flying. And when I was 17, after graduating from high school, I received a scholarship from my high school specifically to me. They chose me and it was a scholarship that the terms were, to get this money, you need to go to college, and we're giving this to you because we believe in you, and we want you to go to college, and you've done so well in high school. So, that empowered me.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:12:16] And after high school, I went on a flight from California, where I grew up, to Florida. And there I was, 17 years old, sitting in the back of a Delta Airlines flight, really afraid of flying. And when that jet took off, it was like all of my fears just stayed on the ground and it was just beautiful to be up in the air. And suddenly, the city that I grew up in, this town, it looks so small from my window.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:12:45] And I just had this perception of the world, and it just seemed so exciting that this is what new pilots get to see every day, and I thought, this is what I want to do for the rest of my life. Yeah. It's just been an amazing journey. But I have to say, it was a lot of being brave, getting out of my comfort zone, and really trusting my intuition, and believing in these things that would come to me like getting on an airplane, and flying, and having this feeling that I want to become a pilot.

Annalies Corbin: [00:13:18] That is an amazing story. And I know you hear that all the time. And I've heard you tell pieces of this story, full disclosure for our listeners, before. And I'm fascinated every single time by the telling of the story, in part, because I mean, it was a brave thing to do on so many levels. I mean, to literally just take this leap and know in your heart of hearts that it was going to work out for the best and it was going to make a difference.

Annalies Corbin: [00:13:46] And so, I do want to fast forward a little bit and you're through college, you become a pilot, you do all of those components, and then walk us through sort of the next piece of the story that says, hey, I'm a young woman, and what the heck, let me fly solo around the world, right? And granted, the reason for the mission, if you will, to inspire others to be brave, to have passion, and to recognize that they, too, to be part of the great STEM ecosystem that is, but along the way, I suspect that there were many more pieces to it than that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:14:33] So, walk the listeners just sort of at that sort of high level about why that journey, why do it that way? And the stops along the way that allowed you to tell the story and inspire others, you were getting a lot out of that as much as they were getting, but at the end of the day, when you look back on it, sort of what was your purpose and mission that you then now still carry forward? Because I do want to get into your current work on our conversation.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:15:05] So, typically, when you become a pilot, there are three categories of flying that you can do. And this is very general, but it's either join the military and fly for the military or fly for the airlines. And the third option is to fly business or corporate aviation, which any major corporation out there typically has a flight department, a sports team. And so, that flying where you fly that corporate's jet or business aircraft, that's called business aviation.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:15:42] So, it's these three broad categories. And to be quite honest, I didn't see myself in any of these three buckets. And it wasn't like, I thought, I don't want to be an airline pilot, I don't want to fly for the military, I actually gave it a good shot. I interned with a huge airline in the west coast of the United States, and I had an amazing experience there. And I worked a lot with pilots and I got to jump seat in the cockpit of this airline.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:16:18] I also went out in Alaska and spent about a week with the Air National Guard there to learn about what military flying is all about, and that was very insightful. And then, I went on tours and

attended very big business aviation conferences that were taking place around the United States. So, I really tried to do my homework and figure out where do I belong, and I couldn't find myself belonging anywhere. And so, one day, I took a step back, and I thought, okay, if money wasn't a factor, like take everything out, Shaesta, what do you want to do?

Shaesta Waiz: [00:16:59] Like what is your perfect ideal job? And I came to this conclusion that I want to fly my small plane around the world and share with others the importance of education, the importance of stepping outside of your comfort zone, and being introduced and exposed to careers in STEM and aviation. And more specifically, I want to do this for women because I feel women are not represented in the STEM fields and in aviation. There's a big gap.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:17:34] And these fields are missing a great deal of talent because women are not a part of it. And so, I initially had this idea, but I thought I could never be brave enough to get into a plane and actually fly around the world. But the more that I advanced in my flight training and the more flying that I did, I learned a very big lesson. And that is, at the end of the day, the aircraft, when you are pilot in command, the aircraft doesn't know if you're a man, if you're a woman, if you're from Afghanistan, if you're from Ohio, if you have blue hair, black hair, the color of your skin, those factors that hold us back, it's irrelevant.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:18:24] The only thing that's important when you are flying is your ability to fly that aircraft. It's such an unbiased environment. And knowing that, it empowered me to be who I am, and race my background, and race who I am and what I look like, and just go for it. And so, the more that I learned this lesson after every flight, the more empowered I felt. And I got to one point where I told myself, I can fly around the world. There have been seven women before me who have done it and I don't know what's separating me from them.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:19:05] Like we all have this passion for aviation, we're all human, we're all women, if they can do it, I can do it. And so, that was really the purpose of this flight. That's how it all started. And sure enough, I mean, I wish I could tell you, Annalies, it all happened like overnight, but the reality is that it took four years of hard work, of dedication, of fundraising, of putting proposals together. I mean, it was just nonstop. I had dedicated my life to this purpose to empower the next generation to pursue careers in STEM and aviation. And I'm so glad I never gave up with those four long years. And it all happened in 2017.

Annalies Corbin: [00:19:52] Yeah. And it's an epic journey and there's a lot of information out there and the Dreams Soar website provides a fair amount of information about the details of the flight and the adventure. And so, I want to kind of not go there, but encourage our listeners, please go there, because actually, the story of that 145-day journey is it's fabulous, so hopefully.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:21] And there are lots of stuff to sort of dig into, but I want to sort of step back away from that singular set of 145 days and really talk about, Shaesta, the impact that that journey, that adventure, that ordeal, because there were components of it, there were a bit of an ordeal, the bravery, and everything that came out of that, and sort of look at it sort of from the lens of everything that happened since then, and the work and the passion you've had to take that adventure and bring it home, if you will, in a real global sense, and to make components of that very, very accessible to students around the world for the work that you're doing now.

Annalies Corbin: [00:21:07] So, let's talk a little bit about after that was all completed, and now, sort of the work that you're doing specifically. So, share that with our listeners, because a lot of our listeners are folks in the community, parents, but it's a lot of teachers, right? And it's a lot of folks at science museums and libraries

that are gathering the stories that we're telling and trying to figure out how they can bring those stories or elements of the work for the folks that they're hearing into their own communities. So, share that with us.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:21:41] Right. Absolutely. So, yes, if you can visit dreamssoar.org, you read a lot on there. We also have a YouTube page highlighting the global flight around the world. But when I landed 145 days later on October 3rd, 2017, we had reached 3,000 children. And this, Annalies, was not like a big conference room. I mean, this was 3,000 kids face to face, giving them hugs, shaking their hands, speaking to them face to face. It was that type of interaction.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:22:22] And around the world, what we had were planned outreach events. So, it was very important that the goal was not for me to set a world record and fly around the world. The goal was how you reach as many children as we possibly can. So, along the way, we hosted outreach events where it was structured to give an instruction to these children about STEM, and the different careers in STEM and in aviation. And through the flight, we had reached 3,000 children around the world and it was a total of 30 stops where I would go down and interact with these children.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:23:00] And once we finished the trip, Dreams Soar, the nonprofit, we visited an additional nine countries. We hosted an additional 29 outreach events around the world, and in total, we've reached over 12,000 children, again, introducing STEM and aviation, which it's not that big of a number, but I think that the intimacy, and the time and energy that we put into it, I mean, we really feel like we've made a great impact and there's so much more to do. So, that's kind of the successes that came from the trip.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:23:39] And for me, it's been very important to inspire the next generation and it's another thing to empower them. And I know when I went through college, I struggled a lot financially because aviation is very expensive. And I just remember pouring my heart out to all of these scholarships. And when I would hear back and I would get scholarships to support my flight training, it felt so good to know that people are believing in me and people are investing in women in this industry.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:24:12] So, our next step was for Dreams Soar to offer a scholarship, which we did in January of 2019 right before coronavirus kind of hit the United States, we're able to award a 5,000-dollar scholarship to a young woman from my alma mater, Embry-Riddle, a 5,000-dollar scholarship to empower her to keep going and to get through her flight training. And now, coronavirus has really changed so much, especially for aviation. I mean, if you think about it, people are not flying as much, especially internationally.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:24:54] So, it's been an interesting year both for the nonprofits as well as for the aviation industry, but we have been working really hard to—I can't talk much about it because it still at works and I've signed a non-disclosure agreement, but it's a very exciting Dreams Soar 2.0 that's going to empower children from around the world. We hope so. And so, we're busy working and we're just taking this time that it's not so busy in the nonprofit aviation world to really figure out how can we make a greater impact.

Annalies Corbin: [00:25:36] And I can imagine that in December of 2019, when you got to hand out that scholarship, I feel very emotional on your behalf, right? And that's kind of a crazy thing, but I'm sitting back and I'm imagining what that would feel like for you to have come that long journey and to get to the point where you are now handing the same sort of opportunity that, quite frankly, a lot of strangers handed to you, right? That you're handing that to another young woman. That must be incredibly gratifying. And yet, at the same time, I can only imagine the inspiration you were getting from this young woman, because you can see the potential, you've lived it, right?

Shaesta Waiz: [00:26:27] Absolutely. I mean, it's incredible because I've been in her shoes. I know how it feels when you are barely holding on and you have all of these dreams to become an airline pilot or to become a pilot, a professional pilot. And when you get that scholarship, it just empowers you, and lifts you up, and makes you feel lighter. And that was an important next step for Dreams Soar. It was like, we have to do this.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:26:56] So, it took our team some time to fundraise and build that up, and we hope to do it again, especially to a young girl outside of Embry-Riddle, just to give people opportunities in different situations in different parts of the United States. So, more to come on that. But absolutely. I mean, I was just such an emotional wreck when we put the scholarship out and we had a big ceremony, too. And it was an incredible feeling to do that and I want to be able for this organization to continue to do this for years to come.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:35] That's fabulous and absolutely inspiring. So, in addition to that piece of work, you have a children's book. I just want to make sure that our listeners know, you have a children's book called Fly, Girl, Fly! That you co-authored with Nancy Rowe Pimm. So, tell our listeners just a touch about the book and what age group because I'm sure folks will want to get their hands on that, so that's pretty fun.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:28:04] Absolutely. So, Fly, Girl, Fly!, it's called the story of Shaesta Waiz, which I'm like, Shaesta Waiz, how is this possible? One thing that I've learned is representation matters. And I remember going to the library and never really seeing someone, a pilot, a female pilot that looked like me whose story was out there. There are a lot of pilots with a diverse background that are out there, you just never really get to hear about them or stories and books are not published about them.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:28:37] So, my first big goal was we need to get a children's book out there and it needs to tell the story of being born in a refugee camp, and my family coming from Afghanistan, and me being this shy, young girl in class, and just having a sense of like not having a purpose, and that all turning around as I found aviation, and furthermore when I flew around the world. So, it's a beautifully illustrated book.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:29:08] And Nancy Rowe Pimm is actually a Columbus, Ohio native and she's written a couple of aviation books as well as other books. She had been with me kind of following along since the very beginning. My first stop actually on this global flight was Columbus, Ohio, to honor Jerrie Mock, the first woman to ever fly solo around the world back in 1964. It was great to work with Nancy. The book is out on Amazon. It's actually right there. I don't know if you can see it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:40] Oh, yeah. There it is behind her. Yeah.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:29:44] And it's just really to inspire the next generation, whether you're a boy, or a girl, or from any part of the world, all of my profits and proceeds go to the nonprofit for things like scholarships. And so, that's been very exciting. And now, I'm kind of working on an adult's book. I don't have a writer lined up yet, but I've been so inspired by some of the books that I'm reading right now, and I want to be able to tell this story in an adult capacity so that people who are aviation enthusiasts or just curious about the world and the importance of empowering the next generation. I want this book to be written for those adults, those teachers that you had mentioned. So, that's something that's in the works right now.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:35] Absolutely. And so, I always love to close this program by recognizing the fact that our listeners are coming from all over the world and they are in a variety of different circumstances and settings, very much the theme of this conversation that we've been having today. And I can see because I can imagine in my mind and because I've worked with enough schools from around the world over the years to know that folks are sitting there saying, what Shaesta has done is amazing, and the way she's inspired others and kids to be brave at the end of the day, to be brave, to take a leap. How can I do that?

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:23] And whether it's aviation or anything else, I guess the question that I'm really asking, Shaesta, there's a teacher sitting there saying, I would really like to bring this type of inspirational thing, whatever it happens to be, whatever that industry sort of lens is into my classroom and really inspire students to imagine what's possible. From your own experience, two things. The first one is, what do you say to the adult that's contemplating trying to get creative about, how could I inspire children? And then, with that child's hat on, if there was something you could go back and either have access to or do differently, what would it be? Because I suspect there's a synergy between these two questions.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:32:06] Absolutely. This is a very interesting question and it's something that a lot of our research and work goes into, is how can we make that difference? How can we make that impact? And sometimes, it's as basic as exposure, but not exposure in the sense of which I think the Wright brothers, Amelia Earhart. I mean, these are real heroes that have paved the way for aviators like me to go out there and be brave, but I've learned that some people don't have that relation because it was so far in the past, it's not current.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:32:47] You don't see aviators in this day and age who are doing these types of flying and these types of projects. So, there are a lot of very incredible young people that are doing incredible things in STEM and aviation. And I think it's just taking the time to find that cool science nerd on Instagram from a teacher's perspective and making it more relatable versus your traditional black and white picture, Amelia Earheart, which I mean, that's my source of inspiration, it's just for the younger generation, making it relevant to them in a way where they see, they see through social media, they see through the news, through YouTube, and just incorporating what they enjoy through this inspiration.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:33:37] I think it's been very effective for us. And for the student perspective, I mean, it's just students want to just—like first, we have to really pull it back a little bit because STEM and aviation can seem very intimidating, especially for young girls. It is a very male-dominated industry, but there is a lot going into changing that. And I hope in the next coming years, we can turn it around and have more balance between the genders. But for them, it's just exposure to what's out there, knowing that aviation is not what it used to be so many years ago.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:34:19] It is relevant. It is exciting and it's accessible to everybody. Because like I said, when you're in that aircraft, it doesn't matter who you are, where you come from, it's just your passion, your ability to fly, to operate that aircraft. And so, just showing them that it's not that difficult and that it is possible through the young generation out there right now who are proving that, I think, is going to be very important for these young kids to see and to relate to.

Annalies Corbin: [00:34:55] Absolutely. And thank you very much for that. We talk about that all the time at PAST, find a way to make whatever it is that you want to teach or share relevant, make it locally driven, recognize where your students or your audience is coming from and just really, really dig in. You can do it. So, that's a wonderful piece of advice for our listeners. And so, I thank you for that. And thank you so much, Shaesta, for sharing your story yet again and spending some time with us. We truly appreciate it. I thank you for being part of the show.

Shaesta Waiz: [00:35:28] Thank you for having me, Annalies. It's great, all the work you guys are doing and keep it up. And thanks again for having me. This was fun.

Annalies Corbin: [00:35:36] Absolutely. Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a 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 @AnnaliesCorbin and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.