



Jerry Valentine

Jerry Valentine: [00:00:00] We really got to change the narratives and something that I really take pride in doing is stepping into the room and being that change, just by being in the room. And whether we win or lose, that is the win, is that I'm in there and being heard or being seen.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:19] 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.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:45] So, let's talk about how we reimagine, rethink, and redesign our educational system. So, today on Learning Unboxed, we have a very special treat. We are going to revisit an ongoing conversation that we've been having over the course of all of these episodes tied to entrepreneurship and social enterprise. And today, we have a very special guest. Jerry Valentine is joining us. And a little bit about Jerry, so Jerry is a social entrepreneur from Cincinnati, Ohio, and he's a very active community member and a volunteer over many years.

Annalies Corbin: [00:01:26] And as part of Jerry's journey, he has successfully completed community hackathons, startup accelerator programs, GiveBackHack in Columbus. He also participated in SEA Change, which is where we sort of got to have some background experience with Jerry, as he jump started a business venture called Renter Mentor, which we will also talk about today. And it's because of all of Jerry's participation in all of these sort of different programs, which we've talked about, all of these programs here at Learning Unboxed. I thought, what a great opportunity to pull them all together and actually talk to somebody who has a very robust experience in the entrepreneurship space. So, Jerry, welcome to the program.

Jerry Valentine: [00:02:09] Thank you for having me. And I appreciate the introduction. I'm ready to unbox some stuff.

Annalies Corbin: [00:02:16] Alright. Let's unbox. And so, as I sort of mentioned, Jerry, one of the things that we talk about on this program all the time is how to take a lot of the opportunity and the experience that comes from startup opportunity, from GiveBackHack, from hackathons in general, startup weekend, all these different sort of social enterprise-based endeavors that just give participants the chance to think super far outside the box, limits are very, very different, and how that then might translate into amazing opportunities for students. So, let's start with, why don't you set the stage, because all of our listeners are not from Ohio or even from us, they're coming from all over the world. So, how do you define social enterprise? And why do you care about this concept?

Jerry Valentine: [00:03:10] Social enterprise to me really means solving a community issue through business, and basically, business for good. And for me, the whole idea of trying to solve the issue really started off with my first business venture, which was a nonprofit called Get Out Network, which was all focused about K through 12, STEM and art enrichment education for K-12 youth.

Jerry Valentine: [00:03:41] There is where I saw the importance of just the STEM discipline, not just learning it as part of an education curriculum, but as you all at the PAST Foundation ties it, linking for learning and for life, and how you apply STEM to your everyday life. And that was how I got into, like I said, the space early on of just trying to figure out, how can I give back?

Jerry Valentine: [00:04:10] Especially with underserved, underrepresented population, how can I make sure that I'm giving them the same experiences that I was privileged enough to have through education and things like that? And long story short, within that journey, I started working at the Housing Authority here in Columbus and I got exposed to the affordable housing crisis. And there, really kind of allowed me to put the STEM enrichment on hold a little bit in order to attack this problem myself.

Jerry Valentine: [00:04:46] And the reason being, my thought process was, how can I teach this demographic or this population? And they don't have housing, and they're going through these issues. I didn't know it was such a big issue, not just here in Central Ohio, but across the nation in terms of just the lack of affordable housing in the United States. So, really there, I kind of started thinking about, what can I do to start attacking this issue in a way that I can apply what I've learned from a technology standpoint?

Jerry Valentine: [00:05:23] And that's kind of how that journey started. I discovered the problem in terms of, really, this is an industry that was lacking innovation. So, just being able to start that journey really by going into the startup space, because I'm not a technical founder, I'm just kind of the idea guy. So, my next step, after figuring out, okay, this is what I kind of want to attack next, how can I get exposed to some thinker, like minded thinking spaces? And that's when the social enterprise community in Columbus really came apart.

Jerry Valentine: [00:05:23] And we participated in GiveBackHack, was really my first ever hackathon that I had ever really done, so it was a very great experience. And what that allowed me to do was not only enter and meet, like I said, the social enterprise, business people, the startup developers, the data sciences, really kind of innovative business and entrepreneur folks that you would normally get at a regular, I'll say, I guess, meeting or some type of conference of that sort. So, that was kind of how that journey started, from there.

Annalies Corbin: [00:06:49] Yeah. Well, let's dig in just a little bit, because I love the fact that you started this by talking about your interest at risk, I need to use in STEM and all those opportunities. And then, over time then, as part of your journey, you recognized that you needed to, I assume, and please correct me if I'm wrong here, but part of going from starting a nonprofit and that educational sort of STEM or STEAM space, to suddenly, I'm going to participate in a hackathon, says to me, hey, I'm looking to grow some skills, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:24] That entrepreneurship sort of mindset. And you are recognizing that, for me, to truly, truly be able to serve these students, I have to be willing to recognize all the things I don't know and grab these opportunities to learn something that I don't have. And I do want to dig in just a little bit, Jerry, because part of the premise of this program is, how can we take sort of the best things that are out there in the world?

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:24] And not just in the world of education, but also business, and industry, and community, and think, if we were to peel these elements off and we wish to infuse them into a more, I don't want to use the word traditional, but I'm going to use the word traditional, because I'm grasping for words here,

sort of educational experience for students today. As we rethink on the heels of a global pandemic, this opportunity to, what should education look like for our students? I have been advocating for years that the elements that you're just talking about, those should be infused in our everyday teaching and learning.

Annalies Corbin: [00:08:22] They shouldn't just be a weekend thing. They shouldn't just be a summer thing. They shouldn't just be because I have a single innovative teacher. But what was it that you recognized that you needed that had you learned it all along the way, it would have been a completely different trajectory? I'm really curious about those elements of entrepreneurship and that experience, GiveBackHack, that could have been applied to your life experience prior to that had you had that. What are those elements? Because that's the nuts and bolts that everybody's wrestling with, that experience that you had.

Jerry Valentine: [00:08:59] That experience with GiveBackHack, I'll say the single most thing that I got out of it outside of the networking opportunity was design thinking. The design thinking methodology is something that was new to me, that GiveBackHack taught me. And it was things that, as you said, I was doing all along, but I had never seen it really formally talked to me how they did it. And really, when I think about the other, even SEA Change and all that, it was just all different iterations of design thinking.

Jerry Valentine: [00:09:34] I feel, that is something that's not taught in schools. And I was fortunate enough to go to a great college, great high school, and even a great middle school where I was exposed to advancing technologies and opportunities, where some folks in my neighborhood were not in these schools, and were going to the local schools, and they don't have plans. They don't have science and are doing science projects.

Jerry Valentine: [00:10:00] They're just reading the books. They're not actually doing labs actively. So, those were some of the things, like I said, design thinking, I think, was number one. And then, just overall, just realizing that there is a need for more exposure, too. I had never developed platform or technology, anything like that before. And just doing it and trying it once is the same thing. Talking to a developer, and just saying, okay, what is this? What is the actual thinking?

Jerry Valentine: [00:10:30] And seeing that, oh, this is math, this is logic that we're teaching here or that you're doing. Those things where I realized that not only can you apply it to business or technology, but also like. When I think about taking care of plants and/or even art, and how you have to be calculated in drawing with certain lines and certain mediums that there's a lot of different things that you can apply this design thinking to benefit your everyday life if you're exposed to it properly. And I think that's what we need more of across the board.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:11] Yeah, absolutely. And I completely agree, and we talk about this all the time, and we teach a number of courses on design thinking, and that's exactly the reason why. And it's really interesting to me, because I have talked to any number of students and teachers from around the world, and oftentimes, design cycle, design thinking comes up in the conversation, and one of the things that I hear frequently is, I know what that is, I've had some experience with that. But when you really start to dig in, and I think that's sort of the essence of what you were trying to say, you had been exposed to it all along, but it had never been formally presented to you in such a way that you could replicate it with fidelity.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:56] I'm guessing, and I'm maybe putting words sort of in your mouth, so please correct me if I'm wrong. But when we have these conversations sort of collectively, if you will, with the folks that we talked to were in lots of places, that is exactly one of the things that I discover. Lots of folks think that they really know what that is and how it works, and yet when it comes to applying it to real-life situations, rather than just the theoretical from a classroom perspective, that's sort of where the rubber meets the road different sort of plays out, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:24] And I would assume, for example, when you got into, I'm going to use SEA Change as an example, that is a business accelerator, and I'll have you just sort of give a little high level about what that was as a participant for our audience, but SEA Change rolls up their sleeves, and says, we're going to go from the concepts and a lot of experience you might have had in the GiveBackHack sort of weekend experience, and we're going to really, really intensify this whole opportunity. So, share with us a little bit about that, because I suspect that the difference between those two things is the theoretical, and, oh, my gosh, apply deep in the weeds sort of experience.

Jerry Valentine: [00:13:02] Absolutely. So, just a quick overview of GiveBackHack and SEA Change, GiveBackHack, it's a weekend hackathon that it's all about solving a social issue. And that is where I first pitched Renter Mentor and was able to basically win some seed money and some other income resources. And one of those resources happened to be entry into SEA Change, which stands for Social Enterprise Accelerator.

Jerry Valentine: [00:13:34] And really, what that does, it's GiveBackHack intensified, where we really are going to dive into the design thinking process in a way that you couldn't over a two-day hackathon. So, it was a 15-week accelerator. And that is when I realized what it allowed us to do outside of iterate with your cohort, which I think is the most important thing, is practicing in front of folks, getting their reactions and their opinions on what your business model is and just your overall kind of pitch to it.

Jerry Valentine: [00:14:15] But the second thing, it allowed us to kind of really prototype. And for us, prototyping came in a form of an Excel spreadsheet and building that as our first database. And then, it also led into another segue of the business, which was the consulting side. At first, this was just an idea, a technical idea that I had. But for those in the technology field, it takes time, it takes money to build technology, and it takes, really, a strong team to really execute it efficiently.

Jerry Valentine: [00:14:53] And I didn't have that at the time. I was truly accelerating. All of this happened within, I'll say, GiveBackHack was, I think, the April, and then we literally sprung into SEA Change, I believe, in May. So, everything happened very quickly for myself and the current team that I had, but it really did allow us to iterate and build on to the business, where the consulting services end up being added.

Jerry Valentine: [00:15:25] And that was really the first kind of my okay to make the leap into full-time entrepreneurship. So, I think those are the biggest things that I got. And also, mentorship. I won't take that away. I think that is another key component to all of this, is that I was able to get great mentors out of really both, GiveBackHack and SEA Change, which changed the game, because as we talked earlier, I needed skills. And with those skills, I needed more mentorship, more people that have actually developed technology and are in the space in a way that I am not.

Jerry Valentine: [00:16:07] So, I'll say, those were the three things that I really got out of participating in those. And the fact that they were tailored in terms of, they were all about social good and doing business for good, was the differentiator, because everyone in the room, it wasn't like I was getting put into a room of VCs, and maybe like, what's your numbers? We want to know just what are you going to make next year. It was just really about, what is your social impact onto the community? And that is, I think, bar none, what has helped me, that initial traction in the beginning definitely has been great for my business.

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:46] Yeah, absolutely. And so, let's talk a little bit about the qualities, I guess, if you will, from that entrepreneurship sort of lens. And really, where I'm trying to go with this, Jerry, is I want to talk about the challenges and obstacles that generally make entrepreneurship, whether it be social enterprise or

otherwise, but make the whole concept of entrepreneurship harder for diverse populations to get entry into, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:15] Because at the end of the day, one of the things that we need to be socially aware is we have to get a diversity of participants in solving our problems, and yet there are boundary limits that make it really, really difficult. And I would argue one of those great difficulties is that we are not introducing social entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship generally early enough in our K-12 journey to get students jazzed about the fact that you can, in fact, help solve the problems of your community, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:48] There is a mindset shift that has to take place. You have to believe you can and you have to be given those opportunities, and yet there are still obstacles standing in the way for folks to actively engage and participate in meaningful and successful ways. So, let's talk a little bit about why you think that is, and sort of from the experiences that you've had, where you see opportunity to change that dynamic.

Jerry Valentine: [00:18:11] That's a great question. The first thing that I will say right off the bat is a lack of the mentorship. There is not enough. And I'm not blaming anyone, because I really believe it's a fourfold problem between there's not enough Black entrepreneurs going back into the community, and pouring back into, and giving back in that way. The education system, like you said, isn't introducing them early enough.

Jerry Valentine: [00:18:40] And also, when it comes to the tech and innovation space, unfortunately, we're lacking access to advancing technology, which is then therefore falling into the skills. And because we are lacking the access and the skills, we're not assuming that these spaces are for us. That is one of the things that I've noticed in both, really, the social enterprise, and in the tech space, startup space, there's not many of us entering those rooms.

Jerry Valentine: [00:19:20] There's not many of us participating in those hackathons and those accelerators. And that, to me, is unfortunate. And SEA Change was a free program, and to find out that people aren't applying, or that I've never heard about this, or this is not for us, you're different, those things, is we really got to change the narratives, and something that I really take pride in doing is stepping into the room and being that change, just by being in the room. And whether win or lose, that is the win, is that I'm in there, and I'm being heard or being seen.

Jerry Valentine: [00:19:59] And I think that is the first step in sort of, I think, solving this problem that we have with getting more Black and Brown entrepreneurs and innovators, is that we need to start stepping in the room. I didn't know what to expect coming out of GiveBackHack. I had an idea. I came in there by myself with a pen and paper with my idea, went down, and I ended up, never would have expected it, being a top team picked to kind of move forward and things like that. So, I think that is the thing, is that we have to start stepping into the room in order to bring those changes.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:39] And I love that expression, Jerry, that let's start by stepping into the room, right? And it's a big step. It is a really, really big step. And for our kiddos, because we see this in the young people that we work with, sometimes, that is the scariest part of the entire endeavor, is just having the wherewithal and the confidence to step into the room. So, thank you very much for that, and certainly, for the work that you're doing, because that will make a difference.

Annalies Corbin: [00:21:11] We know that it's critically important, you can't be what you can't see, but I also argue, you can't do what you don't know. And we have both problems right now as it relates to youth. And this ultimately then gets you back into that sort of space of helping kids find their way, whether we STEM, or

STEAM, or any of the other sort of journey components. So, let's dig in just a little bit, Jerry, and share with the audience now.

Annalies Corbin: [00:21:36] So, you went through those experiences and you had this great idea, because you recognized, quite frankly, this is a global need, around affordable housing. This is not unique to our community. It's not unique to Ohio. It's not even unique to the US. And yet, you created an endeavor to try to solve this problem. So, we haven't really talked about sort of the nuts and bolts of what Renter Mentor is, so share with our audience how you went through this process and this idea, but now, this thing is standing. What does it do?

Jerry Valentine: [00:22:07] Absolutely. So, our mission at Renter Mentors, we are a social enterprise company that helps connect people to affordable housing. Our services assists landlords and tenants through housing processes and connects them to supportive services. So, what does that really mean?

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:07] What does all that mean? Yeah.

Jerry Valentine: [00:22:25] What does that mean? Right? Like I said, the first step in my entrepreneur journey with Renter Mentor was starting the consulting services. As I stated earlier, I worked for the Columbus Metropolitan Housing Authority for about four years, so I was able to gain a lot of credentials and-

Annalies Corbin: [00:22:45] Street cred, I assume, right? Yeah, because you're in that space, right?

Jerry Valentine: [00:22:48] Yeah. And it was a part of my job to really process and learn these things. I was really on the ground level working and hearing the problems. So, the first thing that, through different iterations, we sprung up consulting services, where we help landlords really navigate through the different affordable housing systems. Like for example, Section 8 is the biggest thing that I specialize in, also known as the Housing Choice Voucher Program.

Jerry Valentine: [00:23:21] And we not only recruit different landlords into this space to open up their homes for folks looking for affordable housing, but we also educate them on how to do the whole compliance process in the meantime. We also have been fortunate enough to be able to work with the settlement house system here with Central Community House and disperse temporary rental assistance for families in need.

Jerry Valentine: [00:23:50] Right now, we have distributed about \$200,000 in housing payments, so about 83 families in the last two months. So, we're excited about that. But the innovation side or our tech platform, which is what I really thought the business was at first, when I just realized this was just only a solution to it, we've built a multi-listing platform or a property listing platform that is strictly catered to serving low to moderate income residents that are looking for housing.

Jerry Valentine: [00:24:28] And we've done that by putting certain filters that will help landlords better identify what type of properties they have, whether it's handicap-accessible, they accept Section 8 vouchers, all the way down to even be an eviction-friendly, which all on the front end for someone who may have an eviction, who may have a voucher, who may need a handicap-accessible unit is all critical in terms of their search.

Jerry Valentine: [00:24:57] All the multiple listing platforms that are out there, Zillow, HotPads, there was only one that really serviced the demographic in which we served. And I thought that was odd, because this was the population that needed, to me, the most innovation in the space to help them better connect more efficiently. It took three years to build out the platform, but as we were able to do that, like I said, the consulting services were able to carry us.

Jerry Valentine: [00:25:29] But we just launched our platform last month and it's great to be able to see something that went from, like I said, I had an Excel spreadsheet, to wireframes, to an Adobe InVision, which there was still no color behind it, but it allowed us to touch and navigate the app through the wireframes to a website, to another website that is doing what we wanted it to do.

Jerry Valentine: [00:26:05] Next step into building out our platform is we are going to utilize the Central Community House, the rental assistance opportunity to build up some automation features, which we think will be able to help us scale our tech platform to different agencies, and plan on growing organically that way through contracting with different agencies and building up our platform by providing different automation processes to those businesses, to those nonprofits or housing agencies that need the space.

Jerry Valentine: [00:26:42] And what we're finding, also, GiveBackHack and SEA Change happened in 2019, we still were not a business. We had raised about \$35,000 that year as no business, just literally my idea. And I think that shows the power of just stepping in the room that you didn't even have to be the business to be successful. But in 2020, we officially established January 1, 2020, so we are a true pandemic business and we were able to grow through the pandemic, because the pandemic showed the true disparities of the affordable housing crisis and grew our market.

Jerry Valentine: [00:26:42] Instead of all the money going to agencies like the Housing Authority, your local housing authority, which is a typical model to give rental assistance payments, they were now going to faith-based and community-based organizations that could get the dollars out quicker, in these organizations. The problem that we learned through there is that you have faith-based and nonprofits that are not used to doing housing assistance payments.

Jerry Valentine: [00:27:56] So, that is where our kind of consulting services really kind of thrived, and we got a lot of opportunities to kind of show expertise and turn certain organizations into housing superstars kind of within a couple of months. So, we're excited for what the opportunity that we have to bring change to this problem, and innovation is definitely one of them. We're trying to make it cool to advocate, to me, housing is the number one detriment of health, in my opinion. That is your foundation. You cannot properly think, grow, and learn without that foundation of a home.

Jerry Valentine: [00:28:38] And that's kind of, as I stated earlier, where it was like, hey, I wanted to be the STEM educator, STEM advocate, and I was like, well, I can't do that until I feel a little bit more satisfied with knowing that people are finding homes quicker or getting access to affordable homes. I felt that kind of took priority, but we'll get back to the STEM journey. And even through this journey, I'm still able to grow on that, teach, give back in ways like this, where I can share my experiences and things like that. But definitely want to do it on a bigger level like the PAST when we kind of get things settled with Renter Mentor.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:18] Yeah. Well, what an incredible journey and story. And without question, the give back to the community, to your point, it's so desperately needed here and other places. And thank you so much for persisting, right? And I think that's a huge piece of it as well, recognizing this great need and having the wherewithal to say, I'm going to go down this road, see what happens. That's awesome.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:43] I always like to sort of close out the program, Jerry, recognizing that a lot of our listeners, our teachers, our community members, their K-12 sort of schools, as well as our industry partners, and I always imagine them sort of sitting back in their community, whatever that community is, and they've just heard you talk about sort of your journey, and why your journey matters.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:06] And your willingness to be a lifelong learner, quite frankly, is really, really clear in your story. And folks would love to be able to say, how can I take Jerry's experience that he went all the way through school, how can I take that and translate it into something meaningful for my students, the teenagers of my world right now? So, if you were to be able to have that conversation with a teacher or a school administrator, saying, hey, I want to do something with our kiddos, very much like Jerry's journey, what's your recommendation, I guess? Right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:44] Because everybody is grappling with, what does the next iteration of teaching and learning look like right now? You just lived it, right? In the midst of a pandemic, you had an idea prior to you were able to capitalize on, but more importantly, you were able to fill a need in a community in a very, very tangible way, that did help the world have a better understanding of the disparities that we were collectively trying to battle with the same thing that's happening in our schools. How do we engage in a meaningful way, so they want to be there., they want to persist so that they can make the next contribution?

Jerry Valentine: [00:31:16] I think the first way is allow them to share their ideas. And to be honest, in college, I felt like we were so curriculum-based that I was losing my creativity. And I think especially Black and Brown folks, we need to be stimulated, we need to feel heard, and I think the first step is a lot of us don't share our ideas. When I talk to different people in my community and things like that, they sit on very good business ideas, why aren't you going after that?

Jerry Valentine: [00:31:55] Why aren't you pursuing this in some type of way? And it's because they don't feel like they have a platform to share those ideas and be heard effectively. And I think that's the biggest thing, is allow them to share their ideas, step away from the curriculum sometimes, on Fridays, let's brainstorm Fridays, let's create something where we are getting away from the books and we are allowing you to express yourself.

Jerry Valentine: [00:32:24] Tell us how we can support you or how can we help you, and start connecting, and really utilizing what schools are supposed to be a hub of resources in order to help you elevate to where you want to be educationally, and really, as a person, a human being. So, I think it starts with sharing and we got to figure out ways of, how can we do that that's authentic and not fake? And it's fun. I'm just thinking, like you said about my journey, why aren't schools doing hackathons at least once a quarter just to see and get innovative with that?

Jerry Valentine: [00:33:07] I think those are just great ways. We're seeing it in different business cultures that there are colleges. I know Miami University is doing really big things in the startup space, and having hackathons and innovation. I think we have to start doing that earlier. It's too late in college. There's already a gap about the time someone gets into college or not into college. So, if we can start doing that K through 12, those are going to be the things that change the future of learning.

Annalies Corbin: [00:33:39] Absolutely. I totally agree. Jerry, thank you so very, very much for joining us today, and thank you for all that you do. Folks, check out the Renter Mentor and reach out to us. We will pass information on to Jerry. I suspect he would also be a spectacular guest and a sort of co-thinker with anybody willing to go on the journey. So, thank you very much, Jerry, for being part of us today.

Jerry Valentine: [00:34:07] Thank you, Annalies, for allowing me to unbox.

Annalies Corbin: [00:34:10] Absolutely. Thank you. Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a 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.