



### 137. Creating Equality Through Access to Educational Media with Dr. Jose Morey

**Dr. Jose Morey:** [00:00:00] Realistically, the higher paying jobs are the STEM jobs, and if we don't inspire kids from underserved communities to go into those fields, then that inequality will continue to be perpetuated.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:00:12] 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.

So, today on our episode of Learning Unboxed, I'm really excited, because we get to have a conversation with one of my favorite people, Dr. Jose Morey. Jose is going to talk with us today about his work sort of changing the diversity and opportunity in science, particularly for students. A lot of work with some of our littlest learners, which is near and dear to my heart. So, welcome to the program, Jose.

**Dr. Jose Morey:** [00:01:11] Thank you, Annalies. It's a pleasure to be here.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:01:14] The pleasure is certainly all mine. And so, just for a little background for our listeners who come to us from all over the world, so Dr. Jose Morey is an MD and is also known as the first intergalactic doctor, which we'll get him to share with us a little bit more about what that means. He is also a leader in technology innovation. And Dr. Morey is also the Founder and CEO of Ad Astra Media, a STEAM edutainment company that provides role models of educational STEAM content to encourage more diversity in STEM, and STEM and STEAM fields.

And so, that work is pretty all-encompassing, which is one of the things that I love about working with Jose. So, let's get started with digging right in here, Jose, in particular, talking about this whole idea of, what does it mean to be an intergalactic doctor, because I know everybody gets super excited about it, they're like, "What is this thing?" And I think that that's a great place to start. So, how did you come up with the work that you're doing, because your career is pretty diverse?

**Dr. Jose Morey:** [00:02:14] Yeah. Well, thank you very much, Dr. Corbin. I really appreciate it. So, it's funny that you start with the intergalactic doctor, because that's usually something that a lot of people want to know about. The way it came up, actually, I'm a physician by formal training. I was born in Puerto Rico and moved to the States. After I studied medicine, I started studying artificial intelligence, and combine the two worlds of technology and medicine and that ended up allowing me to work for IBM Watson as associate chief health officer.

And then, after I left IBM, I started working in all sorts of technology fields. It opened up a lot of opportunities in my career. I was able to work with the Hyperloop, Elon Musk's kind of high speed rail project. I've been able to work with NASA on several projects that are ongoing, as well as with the UN and The White House Office of Science and Technology Policy. And that combination of me being a physician and MD, with working on really kind of cutting-edge technology from carbon recycling to additive manufacturing, is someone ended up writing an article about me and referencing me that I was, essentially, in their words, the first intergalactic doctor.

That's the way it came about. But I had no idea, actually, about this article. I didn't sit for this article, I had no concept about this article until a friend of mine sent it to me, and he was like, he was joking, he's like, "Hey, Intergalactic Doctor. How are you referrals up on Mars?" And I was like, what are you talking about? It was an old buddy from med school, and he's like, "Haven't you seen this article?" I guess it came up on his news feed or something, and I saw it, I read it, I thought it was funny, I didn't think anything of it.

But then, later, I think it was maybe two years later, after the article came out, I was sitting being interviewed for Univision, Spanish network television station, and the interviewer at the time, that was the very first thing that came up. And this was like a year or two years after the article. And they're like, "So, tell us about being the first intergalactic doctor". And I was kind of taken aback, Annalies, like I thought it was a pretty obscure article, I didn't think anyone would bring that up.

But since then, it's just kind of something that picked up popularity. So, we decided to use it and we actually turned it into a cartoon character. And now Dr. Intergalactic, he writes our books, he's in our comic. We've done animation with him, with Cosmo and some other projects. So, we've used him as, essentially, a storytelling mechanism or tool to be able to reach kids. And that kind of played in—my work experience played into what I'm doing now, because in all these fields, I mean, you've been in science and in this field for a long time, and your company is very unique in the team that you've developed, but that is not typically what you see outside, right?

Often, in these projects, even at entry level, but it got worse as I got into the executive level, diversity doesn't really exist now in science and tech. Oftentimes, I'd be the only person, definitely, usually, the only Hispanic that was on the project, and sometimes, the only person that had any kind of diversity background at all on a project. And the reality is technology is where income is generated the most, the STEM fields, that's where the highest salaries are.

Those are the jobs that don't get affected by climate change or pandemics, where the jobs, they can easily transition to being done over Zoom, as opposed to having going to go into work and exposing yourself. Besides medical, but having to do things like going to the grocery store and packing the shelves or working at a fast food place, and having to be there, and having to make sure that the economy is still functioning, being transferring goods.

Realistically, the higher paying jobs are the STEM jobs, and if we don't inspire kids from underserved communities to go into those fields, then that inequality will continue to be perpetuated. So, that's really the magic or the impetus behind developing Ad Astra is we want to create content that's inspirational, kids from all walks of life, regardless of what they look like, regardless of their skin color, regardless of their gender, their gender identity, their neurodiversity, regardless of if they have any kind of disability, that they can see themselves in some sort of field in STEM.

And we want to do that with popular media, because that's how kids start creating concepts of who they can be and what they can be. They start dreaming. I think the perfect personification of it is that viral image that went around recently of the little boy who thought the movie, Encanto, was about him. He saw himself. He saw

another little boy with darker skin, with the same hair that he had, he's like, "Oh, this movie must be about me". And that's what we're looking to do.

When I came out, I was like, that's exactly what we're looking to do. We want to create stuff that kids see themselves in, but when they see themselves, they see themselves as the doctor, or the engineer, or the environmental scientist, so that when they start dreaming about what they're going to be, those are the things that they see themselves and that's how they direct their lives. So, our mission is it's multi-decades to see the outcome, but no one else is doing it and it needs to be done, so when something-

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:07:35] It absolutely needs to be done. No question, whatsoever. And what I love about the way you've crafted the entire sort of Ad Astra ecosystem, I guess, if you will, is the fact that, because you've done it through media and through the notion that we can use media to not just teach, but to entertain, and quite frankly, from the PAST perspective, we're talking about engaging kids where they are.

That's one of the things that I really, really love about this, your point being that the media, it's highly accessible in many, many respects, right? And so, when you get sort of into that technology space and the notion that long term, it can be a portal through which you can actually pipeline kids into that dream, that's absolutely fabulous.

And full transparency for our listeners, part of the work that PAST has specifically with Ad Astra Media is we partnered with Jose and his team around a series of books, Good Night Little, and we'll get him to share with us just a little bit about that here in a minute, but it was really about helping our littlest learners, our preschool kiddos, see themselves in potential STEAM and STEM careers, which we, at PAST, just truly, truly love. And we get to play in that space because we were working on the activities of the modules to go with these books and these characters that Jose, this team, had already spent so much time working on.

So, let's dig just a little bit, Jose, into the variety of content that you're creating, because you talked about Dr. Intergalactic, and there are comic strips, and there are books, and it's music, I mean, it's going a lot of different directions at once, which is pretty cool. So, talk to us a little bit about some of those offerings and sort of the why. That's the thing that is most curious to me is like, so why Good Night Little? Why Care? Why the comic strips? You have very particular intentions with each one of these.

**Dr. Jose Morey:** [00:09:27] Yeah, for sure. And it all comes from experiences within our team and within life, in general. The Good Night series, so we're a transmedia company, so we produce content in all forms. We produce digital, we do animations, 2D, 3D. We've done some AR work and we're starting to do more VR work with individuals. And then, we have print content, both books and comics. The reason why the scope of the content is because when you're trying to reach underserved kids, there's still a digital divide to hit to get inspiration, that not everyone has access to broadband, not everyone has access to the internet.

That's still a reality within even the "richest country in the world", the United States. So, being able to create content that can reach kids where they are regardless of their socioeconomic status is our core. And our team is like that as well. The Good Night series came out of really old golden books. I'm sure some of your audience probably read these golden books. It's what I kind of grew up with.

So, I remember reading Good Night Little Bear, and the team sat down and were like, "Oh, wouldn't it be great if we did something like this, but just showed diverse STEM careers and getting the kids to dream about what they could be themselves or what they could be in the future?" So, every different book has a different STEM career, and we have a different, diverse character.

And in the long term, we want to create as many as we can possibly create in it, but then eventually, we want to turn this whole into a little classroom, and they're going to go on little missions, almost like a Magic School Bus kind of thing. So, that's kind of long term for that project. And then, the other aspect is when you're creating content for kids, they change over time, how kids learn over time. You guys are world-renowned experts on this.

So, the type of content that four to six-year-old likes or three to five-year-old likes is going to be very different than the type of content that someone that's in the bridge group or someone that's in 11 to tween age group. And then, as you get older, the content has to change, has to mature, so that's the concept of why we create content at different levels and different perspectives. The graphic novels we have are more geared towards older kids.

We have a diverse group of kids in that as well. Each one of them has a power of STEAM, science, technology, engineering, arts, and math. They all come from diverse religions, ethnicities, neurodiversity, genders, gender identity. And essentially, they go up into space and they learn about their power, but they also start using those powers to fight ignorance and ignorance that comes in all forms.

And we actually have a villain now who's the personification of ignorance, Dr. Prang, and they fight him, and the things that the kids face throughout. And we, as adults, face throughout our lives ignorance of things like antisemitism, misogyny, racism, those kinds of things. That just comes out of ignorance, and we're trying to fight that with knowledge, essentially. And then, the Care series is really about mental health.

So, knowing that one of the things that tends to hold all of us back, but something that we don't talk a lot about with our children is mental health. And specifically for young boys, where there's this concept that men have to have some form of super masculinity that ends up being toxic in a lot of place that ends up, at the end of the day, holding and dividing us. Because then, you're, oh, well, these fields are for men, and it shouldn't be for women or shouldn't be for men that don't act like we do.

So, it's trying to break down those barriers that then end up leading to a lot of negative things throughout all of society that have affected people in our company and have affected probably many women that we know and that are listening right now. And those are the kinds of things that we're trying to fight specifically. But we have our Space Racers content that's now on Amazon Prime.

You have our first two seasons there. We're now on Hulu and Roku. We're going to be working on our first live action, The Summer, a short film that we're going to be doing around space and science. And we have some other kind of shows that are being developed in collaboration with other animation studios that we're super excited about, and we even have some metaverse projects that are starting to be developed now as well, some digital worlds that we're starting to create for people.

So, there's a lot going on, and there's a lot of content both on our website as well that's free for people to use. So, we are a social impact company. We are generating revenue and we are becoming sustainable, but we also are firm believers in you have to give back just as much as you get. So, we have a lot of content that's freely available for teachers, for homeschoolers on our website as well.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:14:37] You're busy.

**Dr. Jose Morey:** [00:14:38] Yeah. We're running a company with it. Running a company is being busy.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:14:43] Yeah, my goodness. That's a lot of stuff. It's a great diversity of things that you're doing, though.

**Dr. Jose Morey:** [00:14:49] Sure. Yeah. But again, it's not like, I'm—we have a creative team. It's not like I'm writing everything and I'm animating everything. I get to do this, I get to sit with amazing people like you, and then work on collaborations, work on trying to build—this, it takes a village. We can do our small part, but there is a bunch of folks that need to do their part. Like if it wasn't for you, we wouldn't be able to do our educational modules. So, we need your skill set and your know-how to be able to do those kind of things. We can bring our skills to the table, but we can't be everything.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:15:28] Yeah. And nobody can. Well, let's dig into that just a little bit, because a huge percentage of our audience are educators. They're teachers, they're administrators, they're community members who are really looking to sort of change the direction and the potential impact in their communities through high-quality education, especially at a time, in this sort of quasi-post-pandemic, not really, a world that we're living in, just by what everybody wants to talk about, the reality is there was a tremendous amount of disruption that's taken place, and we have this incredible opportunity to, quite frankly, this is Annalies speaking here, not go back to what was.

It wasn't working. We know it wasn't working. It was largely obsolete. So, we have this opportunity. And one of the things that we've very deliberately done with Ad Astra, particularly with the Good Night Little series, is that we were trying to not just build high quality activities and modules, but we wanted to make sure that we were very, very deliberately testing them and engaging them prior to those being released.

I do want to talk about that just a little bit, Jose, because one of the pushbacks that happens often from educators when new great cool content comes out is, well, this is fine and it's fun, but it doesn't have this high level or quality of sort of educational fidelity that we want to be able to take, then use and adopt directly into the classroom. And we, you and I, talked about that when we first got started with this endeavor around, how do we ensure that that's not going to be the case and that there can be broad adoption of the material, the content, the stories, the opportunity that Ad Astra is putting out, and that we can, in fact, sort of change what's happening?

And one of the ways that we're doing this has been by sort of thinking about testing and asking questions as we're building the modules and engaging teachers and practitioners with us at every step of the way. So, share with us just a little bit with our listeners, Jose, sort of from your perspective about why that sort of appealed to you and how you're leveraging that. I'm thinking about what's kind of going on in a couple of the states that we've been talking about working in some bigger distribution. So, share some of those conversations sort of from the Ad Astra perspective, if you will.

**Dr. Jose Morey:** [00:17:45] Yeah. Well, the concept that we had and when we approached you, vision for our continents that we're on the entertainment side, and we captivate the kids with interesting characters, and stories, and things that they can see themselves in. But because we live in this transmedia world, we want this to go beyond just the way they receive it at home. So, our perspective is that informal science education and informal science kind of captivation.

But this needs to translate into things that can be then taken into the schools, because we want the kids to be able to see the reflection of who they are and these characters at all times. We want to be having that positive reinforcement of, hey, you can be in science, hey, you can do this, scientists do look like you, they do speak like you, they do come from your backgrounds.

Because we know that kids, specifically in early age groups, there tends to be a pretty good diversity on how kids like to do science and who likes to do math, but we tend to lose kids, especially as they grow up into middle school and high school, specifically, we lose a lot of girls, we lose a lot of LGBTQ+ friends, we lose a lot of BIPOC kids who don't see themselves being able to do these things.

It's usually social things that causes that, it's not the skills. The skills never change. Their skills were on par or better than everybody else, but there's all these social dynamics that make them feel like, "Oh, these aren't the people that I'm supposed to be a part of". I'm supposed to be doing other things. Science and math are supposed to be other people and not us.

So, we want to have our characters that go into educational content so that the kids can see themselves. So, that's why working with PAST and the way you guys craft, you are teachers, you come from that background, and not just from an education background, you come from a humanism background. Like the concepts in the way that you develop it are at such high level for every age group.

It's just the perfect blend of high educational understanding that's being developed by educators for educators, and that we're just bringing our storytelling and our diverse characters into that so that whether it's hands-on educational modules that can be done in the classroom or within a home school setting, or hybrid setting, or in the future, I'm sure we can also have digital types of education, that we can put anything on those as well.

So, that's where I feel like it's a perfect combination, because we're not educators, we're storytellers. So, combining with your expertise and your skill set, I think that's when you start, and that's, in general, how you develop great innovation. You bring different groups to the table, they have different skill sets, and then you develop something very new and very novel that ends up getting a lot of great feedback from everybody.

And we're talking with different groups in Virginia, the WHRO, which is NPR and PBS's affiliates here in Eastern Virginia, about getting our content to every public school throughout Virginia. We're talking to distributors up in the tri-state area of New Jersey, New York, and then we're also talking with distributors in Puerto Rico, both the private and public sector there, and also with distributors down in Texas.

So, we have a lot of ongoing conversations to get our content into some of the largest school districts in the country, which is really exciting. And once this content gets out to the kids, that's the goal. The goal is for them to see themselves. And the feedback that we get from teachers, the feedback that we get from the distributors, everyone, once they hear about us, so like with what you've been, like this is amazing, like we want to work with you.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:21:43] And it's a lot of fun. And I would also add for our readers, at least the Good Night series, and I know many of the other sort of elements that you're working on across the entire ecosystem that is Ad Astra is, oftentimes, multilingual, and that's super, super exciting. And that was the other thing that we were absolutely jazzed about, is because we know that not only do kids need to see themselves in characters for engagement, but they also need to see, and be, and experience those characters across a variety of cultural sort of personas.

And that includes language. It includes the day-to-day understanding of what that particular culture group brings to the scientific endeavor. And you're able to do that because of the way you couch and craft those things. I did want to share with you one of the things that we've seen, because as we are working on developing the activities and the modules, not only are we testing them, but we're literally testing them on our own children within the team and the staff, but also within direct content and connections with the community. And we do see some really interesting sort of things.

So, for example, when we were working on a Good Night Little Doctor, so there's a little boy, this cute little boy, lots and lots of fun, who was really intrigued by Good Night Little Doctor. So intrigued that when we were doing this in the late, late summer, last summer, that when Halloween came around, this child wanted to be a doctor. And not just did he want to be a doctor because of having been exposed to Good Night Little Doctor, but he wanted to be, you're going to love this, Jose, he wanted to be a doctor with a beard. Yeah.

**Dr. Jose Morey:** [00:23:30] That is awesome.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:23:30] That is cute. And he was, and I saw photos, the family sent us photos so that we could sort of see what this Little Doctor was off in the world doing. So, this little boy, not only did he want to be a doctor with a beard for Halloween, and he was all of that, but at Christmas, then he asked for stuff so he could see inside his body. And I thought that was amazing, and this little boy is only about two-and-a-half years old.

So, in that really sort of young sort of space, we're trying to figure all of these different pieces and components out. And so, it's exactly some of the stuff that his family got him for Christmas, were these little puzzles that were all about how you put a human body together and all of those different pieces. And then, the most recent sort of example of the iterations, and this is what I love about this opportunity, is a child got introduced to this particular career, this concept, they could find themselves in there, figure out how they could be that thing, and then be able to sort of scale that themselves by asking for more.

I want to learn some more very organically, but, most recently, I saw a photograph, actually the family sent, of this child with a stethoscope, because they were one of the things also in addition to puzzles of the inside of the body, whatever the tool, so lots of those things, you can order online and whatnot, but this child actually was standing at a beehive with a stethoscope on, trying to hear the bees inside. So, now, this is an iteration of utilizing the tools and the technology for a completely different application. And in my mind, Jose, that's the win.

**Dr. Jose Morey:** [00:25:12] Oh, 100%. That is so amazing. Yes, that is the win.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:25:18] Yeah. And I love that. And one of the other things that we've been able to do with a variety of the different sort of pieces is because we're testing these all the time as we're getting them ready to ship off to your team to do their incredible magic, to get them ready to actually go to families, go to home schools, go to schools, whatever it is, we also get to use these materials and these maker mania events that we do at PAST, which are an awful lot of fun and we do them for young kids, elementary kids, mainly.

And we've got these kids that we see month, after month, after month, they come back over, and over, and over again. And we hear their families tell us all the time, they like to come to these events, because they get to play. And they get to play in an unfettered environment with a variety, a great diversity of people, and they can find something that appeals to them. And what's really fun for me is that we get to see those same kids go from Good Night Little Doctor activities to Good Night Little Veterinarian, to Good Night Little Astronaut, to Good Night Little Aviator. And you see that same kid having that wow opportunity every single time. That, to me, is really powerful.

**Dr. Jose Morey:** [00:26:28] Yeah, it makes me very happy that you say this. And those are the types of responses that we get to see, and that's really what I love the most. And when we go to our events and when kids see themselves, when they're like, "I've never seen that before, I've never seen someone that looks like me as a doctor", hear that, it's heartbreaking in a way, but then it's also like validating as well, alright, we are

on the right track.

And I think one of the—I always get emotional, so I apologize if I get emotional on this call, because I always do. I'm a very emotional guy. But when I had a great conversation, great opportunity to speak with Bill Isler, who he was previously the president of the Fred Rogers Production company. And Bill Isler is like Fred Rogers Production company.

Now, he is the Chairman. He's retired. He's no longer active role and just sits on the board. But I was able to speak with him and have a conversation with him in Pittsburgh. We were talking about what we were doing. And his words to me were, "I don't like to speak for someone who's passed away, but I'd like to say, Jose, that if Fred was alive, he would be very proud of what you're doing".

I was like, if we're good enough for Mr. Rogers, I think we're doing okay. I think we're doing okay. So, that's the goal. And kids, when they see it, they just light up. And that's what we're trying to do. We're trying to give kids dreams. That's the core of our company, is getting them to dream about what they can be and understand that regardless of what society is giving them, that they can do whatever that they want it to, because that's the one thing that no one can take away from you.

No one can take away your dreams, so that's what we're trying to do for the kids. And it's amazing and it's awesome that we get to do that. And when you talked about multilingual content, obviously, my first language was Spanish, so everything we started creating was Spanish and English to start with. And then, one of our partners said, "Hey, would you be able to do both languages in some of your content?"

I was like, yeah, absolutely. So, our books have the bilingual Spanish and English. And then, we actually started creating our content in Dari and Pashto, which are the two most commonly spoken dialects from Afghanistan. And the core from that was actually the recent pullout that we had, and we had a lot of refugees coming over to the United States, but not just the US, it's really all over the world, but they've been displaced.

But the team got together like, "Well, what can we do to try to help?" So, I said, why don't we just start translating our content into? And that was the first dialects we did outside of Spanish. And it's so rare that—we put our content through Amazon, and Walmart, and Target, and you can get our content anywhere, any e-commerce, but Amazon actually doesn't even have those dialects. It doesn't recognize them as language. It's like we have to kind of find workarounds to allow us to be able to actually print in Dari and Pashto.

And we have bilinguals that have Dari and English, and Pashto and English, and families love it, because no one is paying attention to them, no one's creating content for them. So, when they see it, they're like, oh, they're in a strange country, they hardly speak the language, and they finally see something that gives some kind of a sense of home, right? So, just very simple things like that. And eventually, we want to translate to all languages, but we're still small

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:27:53] That's a lot of work, yeah. It's good, but it is super, super meaningful. And I appreciate that component so much, because, and we say this all the time at PAST, it's not just enough to see people that look like you, you have to be able to see yourself, that sort of if you can see her, you can be her sort of thing, that's in media right now a lot, which I appreciate. And it's fabulous, but it's not enough, right? Because not only do you need to see yourself, but you also need to be able to see the possibility of what could be, right?

And for that, you need to be able to have a great opportunity to explore a variety of different skills, and career opportunities, and things, which is one of the reasons why, again, I love the content that you're doing, because

a kid can go from a Good Night Little Doctor to a Good Night Little Veterinarian, to Good Night Little Astronomer, and can really just sort of move through all of these different sort of lenses of exploration, and through that exploration, see a variety of different people, little kids in that case, who are in that role to potentially be able to identify with from a different and a variety of opportunities.

And so, that's one of the pieces, quite frankly, that really appeals to be in that space as well. So, Jose, I want to thank you very much for taking time to talk with us today, and most importantly, to thank you very much for everything that you do, because the work that is happening as a result of Ad Astra Media is spectacular and it is going to make a difference in the world. So, thank you for joining us today.

**Dr. Jose Morey:** [00:31:59] Appreciate it, Annalies. Thank you so much.

**Annalies Corbin:** [00:32:02] Absolutely.

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 at Annalies Corbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.