



149. Raising Our Teens Into Thriving Adults with Traci Bakenhaster

Traci Bakenhaster: [00:00:00] And so, that's really what this program is all about, it's preparing these students for when they do age out, when they do leave, being able to be prepared for that, know exactly what to do and how to do it successfully, instead of just kind of being thrown to the wolves, and know they have a support system they can always go back to.

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. So, let's talk about how we reimagine, rethink, and redesign our educational system.

So, in today's episode of Learning Unboxed, I'm excited as always because we're going to be having a conversation that so many of us, especially those of us that are parents, out in the world are facing, and that is, how do we get our kiddos from childhood through those troublesome teenage years into adulthood. As we know, young adults are facing ever complex and changing world. Meaning, important life choices are becoming extremely difficult. And are faced with questions like, Do I go to college? Do I get into the workforce? What career do I go into? What if I pick the wrong career? What major should I choose? Am I really prepared to be on my own?

And so, that gets us to this amazing organization, that's here in Central Ohio, called Raising the Next Gen, which helps high school students make smart career and college decisions to become successful adults, regardless of whether that student is college-bound or workforce-bound. At PAST, we love the conversation about so many choices in life.

And joining is the Founder of Raising the Next Gen, Traci Bakenhaster. So, Traci, welcome to the program.

Traci Bakenhaster: [00:02:0] Well, thank you. I'm so glad to be here and grateful for you having me.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:19] We're super excited to have a conversation and, so far, listeners who come to us from all over, let's set the stage a little bit because your background is super fascinating. And I could, certainly, share your story but I would rather you share your story. So, explain to our listeners why on earth would you create an organization called Raising the Next Gen? What is this about to you?

Traci Bakenhaster: [00:02:0] Yeah. So, it's kind of funny, because the name kind of came out of just, "Okay. I want to help teens. I want to help young adults." And I'll talk about what got me to that point in a second. And

raising Tim, like, "Well, they're the next generation," and that's what we're doing, we're raising them. We're raising them as a society, as parents, as organizations. And so, it's our job to be able to help support those students and help them be successful like past generations before them. So, that's kind of where that name came from.

As far as my background, yes, it is very diverse and kind of weird and random. I know people who look at my resume go, "Wow. You've done a lot." And like, "I know." And it's all over the place but it works out so well for what I do now. So, as far as professionally, I mean, I've worked in higher education, career tech. I've worked in industry. I've been a hiring and training manager. I've worked in the Chamber of Commerce space. I had many, many different hats across those different areas and industries.

And, academically, I have all the way through master's degree. I have two associates, bachelor's and master's, because I'm a forever nerd and I love to learn. So, that's always fun. I'm always getting more trainings and certifications. I'm running out of space on my wall for all my certifications and trainings that I do, just to stay on top of my game as I can for students and families that I work with.

Personally, though, so kind of what led me into this space was, I was a single mom at 21. And even though I did know some of the things that I teach students now, because I had to learn it the hard way. My parents, you know, they were very big on chores for me and independence and all those things, so I was able to learn a lot. But there is still so much I had no idea about. And then, there I was at 21 years old - barely 21 years old - with a child. And that whole situation in itself can be like, "Whoa. This is intimidating."

I knew nothing about money. I had no idea what I was doing with my life. All I knew is, "Okay. I have this other human being now to take care of and I'm going to do it the best way I can, but I don't really know what that looks like." And so, a lot of trial and error, a lot of bad decisions, especially financially. And as I started to kind of figure those things out and got the resources and support there to start to learn how to do those things better, I started to transition to higher education. During that time, I worked with youth all over Central Ohio.

And I came out with the realization, no wonder I had so many issues and run into so many problems and changed my major a zillion times and took out all the credit card debt because I didn't know any better. And these students were heading down that exact same path. And so, I decided that, "Well, I'm going to do something about this." I didn't know what that looked like for me. Entrepreneurship was never something I had considered. But I was like, "No. This is a need and these students need this, and my background has prepared me for this." So, that's kind of when it started to go from there.

Annalies Corbin: [00:05:12] And so, creating this organization with the mission to help others live or go a different path, not that your path was bad, but your mission and your aspiration was to save others some of the pain and anguish you had to learn the hard way. I think many of us have experienced some of those components along the way.

So, talk to us a little bit about the program itself. So, you create this nonprofit, you have this amazing mission to sort of change course for young folks. But what is it that you actually do as an organization? And how is it that the community engages with you, or the families, or the schools, or whoever it is that actually engages with you in the organization itself?

Traci Bakenhaster: [00:05:55] Yeah. Absolutely. So, it's really interesting because, actually, I hit both boxes where I have a for-profit side and I have the nonprofit side. On the for-profit side, I work with families. Individually, they hire me in to work directly with their student in a one on one capacity. A new program that I'm actually launching right now to help more students and be more reasonably cost - because one on one coaching can be a little more pricey for families and I don't want that to be a barrier. I want to be able to help

students of all backgrounds - I'm launching a subscription model service, where it is a DIY self-pace online courses. There's a whole community for students to engage in with other students. It is a very, very cool platform and it's a month to month subscription. As long as you pay the subscription, you get access to all the stuff. So, that's a really cool model.

And in that same space, a lot of what I'm doing as well is working now with school districts and organizations. So, I am starting to get contracts where school districts are bringing me in or organizations are bringing me in to do workshops or classes or trainings with the students on all these different topics, whether it's financial literacy, or communication, or helping students figure out their strengths and their direction. So, that's kind of where that for-profit space lives.

And then, on the nonprofit side, that one functions like a typical nonprofit where it is free services for students that are in foster care or consider that risk. Still the same exact kind of curriculum, just a different delivery model. The program we have there is called Adulthood 101 Program.

So, being able to have both aspects, so it's funny because it feels like, "Oh, my gosh. I've got two separate business organizations going." But, really, it's the same thing. It's just two different ways of being able to deliver the services.

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:37] Yeah. Yeah. Absolutely. And I actually think that's really innovative from a business model standpoint, so, you know, a whole another conversation for another time. But I'm super interested in sort of the places that you made around that. I really like that.

Let's dig in a little bit to the Adulthood 101 piece, because many of our listeners know and they've heard me talk about it, we do a program with at risk/high needs students in foster care. So, we do a summer long workforce development program for kids that are 16 to 18 years old that they are in that cusp, but many of them are getting ready to age out of the system, some age out while they're in our program. But at the end of the day, there's a lot of questions around what happens next for that particular group of students that are going to move off into the world and be citizens in our community. And we need them desperately.

But to your point, and oftentimes, especially with kiddos that find themselves in that situation for a thousand of different reasons, many of which we cannot fully understand or comprehend in many ways. And because of that, they come with a pretty rough set of skillsets, I guess, is the way that I would put it. Because it's oftentimes so disruptive and have had so many disruptions. Amazing humans with incredible capabilities, but often they get lost in the shuffle and some of the skills they need get lost along the way.

So, I love this notion of Adulthood 101, because this is something that's so desperately needed. So, talk to us a little bit about sort of what that is. Mainly, I'm interested in the topics that you chose. I saw the list and I'm like, "Okay. Those are spectacular. Why this?"

Traci Bakenhaster: [00:09:18] Yeah. Absolutely. So, the Adulthood 101 is for the exact reason you talked about, with teenagers, especially in the foster care system, typically most of them are going to end up aging out where they're going to get adopted, they're not going to have families, they're going to age out. And as soon as they age out and they graduate, it's like, "Hey. Goodbye. Off to life you go." And there's no support any longer. They have nobody in their circle, in their network, and they don't know how to actually be adults but they're being thrown into the adult world.

Which is why we see all the statistics we do around that population. I think the current statistic is 20 percent immediately become homeless, 50 percent are on the system, or end up with a drug addiction because it's just

where they're at. And to me, that's not fair. These students, these kids, they didn't choose this lifestyle. They didn't choose their circumstances. And so, that's really where this program came from, being able to really specifically help this niche of population.

And so, the Adulthood 101 program, it is an afterschool program model, so we meet with students immediately after school for at least two hours once a week. Ideally, we'll be meeting with them more, but we are just now starting this program. So, we run our first pilot this year. And so, being able to do probably once or twice a week with these students, but it's for an entire year. So, not even just an academic year, it starts a little before the school year, runs until after the school year, because we want as much time as humanly possible with these students to, one, not only give them more knowledge and skills, but also to build strong relationships as we can with them, so they know they have a support system, they know they have people that care about them.

And I think building that relationship with them will help reduce that jumping around. A lot of time teens are bouncing from one house to the other because they're running away, or "I don't want to be here anymore," and they bounce to the next one. Where, if they have a place where they feel connected and that they belong, we have pretty good confidence that that's going to help stick them around longer.

So, we wanted this to not just be a one off program, so it is year-long. Ideally, students would do it every year throughout high school. And, yes, as far as the topics go, we start with kind of foundational career exploration because, really, that's the foundation of everything. If you want to be successful in life, whether it's with money or a house or whatever, it all comes down to your career path and actually having a career. It's really hard to live to a life of success if you know you're working part-time in fast food for your whole life.

And so, being able to help these students see what's possible, that was one of our biggest goals in this program, is to show them all the possibilities and show them that they are more than enough, and very highly valued, and worth something, because a lot of students don't have that. And so, being able to show them all those different options and directions. And then, also prepare them. "Okay. Cool. Now, you know it exists, now you start to find what your path looks like, and we help you build it and get there."

And then, along the way, we're talking on all kinds of different things. College exploration is a part of it, just to show them, again, it's a possibility, it doesn't mean it's best path or the best option. But that way, they know it is a possibility for them. But a lot of it is those life skills. Personal finance is a huge piece of it, showing them how to get their first apartment, how to find housing and assistance. Even basic etiquette, what is etiquette, what does that even mean. And so, being able to take them out to a fine dining experience afterwards. I mean, it covers all kinds of etiquette but being able to have them experience something they not get to experience before.

So, there's a lot of different topics in this. A lot of it around just helping them grow and be human beings that are, not only more confident, but also better for society too. I mean, they're going to be able to give more to society now with these skills and this knowledge, and be able to contribute more, and be able to build the future that they really want to have.

And so, that's really what this program is all about is preparing these students for when they do age out, when they do leave, of being able to be prepared for that, know exactly what to do, and know how to do it successfully, instead of just kind of being thrown to the wolves, and know they have a support system they can always go back to.

Annalies Corbin: [00:13:17] Yeah. That's make a huge, huge difference. We see that, certainly, as well. So, I appreciate that. And I think that the topics that you're covering, those are the ones that we hear all the time. So, the students themselves, oftentimes, if you dig just a little bit, they will tell you, "Well, I don't do how to do X, Y, or Z." And sometimes they say it out of frustration. You know, throw up their hands, "Well, clearly, I'm stupid as everybody is labeling me to be." And that's a defensive mechanism. It's not real. They don't really believe that about themselves. But if you dig a little bit, you can find out, "I don't know how to do this or I don't know how to do that, but I'm really, really willing to learn."

To your point, if there's a metaphor or connection that he can see to a safe space and somebody who actually cares, and that will be there no matter which foster home I'm at this week. Because some of these kids, literally, it's not once or twice over the academic year. Some of them, they can be moved for many times in an academic year and not even stay in the same school. So, to be able to have some programming or an outlet that's consistent is super, super powerful.

One of the things I am curious about is, a lot of what you're teaching in Adulting 101 is, I assume, some of the bigger, broader components that are tied to the organization as a whole are very foundational. And, yet, we know that when working with kids, you have to make it current and you have to make it now, and you have to make it about them. And that's about all things that we could possibly teach kids. So, how do you do that? How do you keep the program and the content current, real, and engaging for kiddos because everybody struggles with this? What's your strategy?

Traci Bakenhaster: [00:15:01] Yes. Exactly. So, my strategy, one for myself, personally, is being on top of everything. I mean, I am assigned I don't know how many newsletters and things I get to stay on top of what's going on in the world in these categories and in these spaces. Staying up with my own professional development is a huge piece of that. But the other aspect is going to the kids, talking to people and learning what are the trends right now, what's happening, what's going on.

Something I'm actually currently working and building in my business right now is an Ambassador program, where I have teenagers that are helping with future programming. And I'm getting their ideas and they're helping with marketing. And so, it's kind of like an internship experience for them. And in return, they get all of my services and no charge to them. So, it's kind of that tradeoff of, "Hey, you can help me help you by being able to help other students."

And so, I think that is the most important thing is to bring the student's voice into it and make it as interactive as possible. I think that's the biggest challenge sometimes of teenagers. Because we, as adults, we get it. I hear parents all the time - I think one of my favorite things to hear is - "Oh, my gosh. I didn't even know my child didn't know how to address an envelope." And it's, "I'm a failure as a parent." It's like, "You're not a failure as a parent." But it's so simple and basic to us that we don't think about those things that they have no idea what that even means or what that looks like because they haven't had to do it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:16:17] Right. Yeah. Absolutely. And the world is different. These kiddos have grown up in a world of email. "Why would I mail a letter? What are you talking about? Go to the post office? You buy stamps?" My son, a teenager, "Well, where do you get stamps?" And you're right, as a parent, you don't necessarily think about there is no teachable moment, you know, X years previous where that should have happened. And so, time lapses in the skillset sort of gap is just there.

Traci Bakenhaster: [00:16:48] And I think technology has been a big factor. I've talked to a lot of families and, like, it's a blessing and a curse. Like, this generation that's growing up right now, they know nothing but

technology. And so, if it's not ready available and right at their fingertips, they don't know what to do. And they're not sure how to figure it out.

And in my job, I'm millennial, and so I kind of have a little bit of both. Like, I came in, the technology was there, but not to the level that it's used in. So, I still have the old school of writing checks and all the things, that even though I wasn't thought in school, I saw my parents do those things. And now, you're not seeing all of that stuff. But it's things that are so relevant and still need to know how to do it. These students are being exposed to it and they just get overwhelmed. Like, "Okay. I don't know what to do. I don't know where to go for this." So, showing all the basics and, I think, meeting them where they are is so important.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:37] Absolutely. I completely agree with you on that. I'm also super curious about some of the trends that you're seeing since you're so in the weeds with these kiddos, and adopting programming to meet those needs. So, talk so us a little bit about two or three trends that you're seeing right now that you think that educators, in particular, but families as well and communities really should be paying attention to.

Traci Bakenhaster: [00:18:02] I think the biggest thing is, obviously, just the mental health issue in general. I mean, I hate to say that's a trend but it is a trend and it's a really big problem. And two factors, one, when the actual reality of mental health has skyrocketed for teenagers. But for students, it's trendy now to have a mental health problem at the same time. So, it's one of those areas - I'm a youth group leader for our church with eighth grade girls - and the cool thing is, "Oh, yeah. I have anxiety medicine. And I have anxiety and depression." And it could very well be they have that. So, it's kind of interesting because I know years ago, people didn't want to talk about mental health.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:41] Right. A stigma, right?

Traci Bakenhaster: [00:18:42] Yes. And now it's gone the complete opposite where, now, it's cool and you're part of the group to have that. But the challenge is knowing when it's actually something that is a really big risk. Because when we're seeing mental health rates have gone up, that's great. That means awareness is going up and all those things. But when the suicide rates and all that stuff are continually growing up as well, that's where I think it's just really important for families and educators to be aware of what those signs and symptoms are and just how to really connect with their students. And I think that's one of the most challenging things in today's world because of all the technology and the cellphones and all the stuff.

And actually having those moments to say, "Okay. We're going to put away all the technology and just be together." Even if it's "Let's pull out an old school board game and play Monopoly for hours." Having that connection, I think, that is one of the biggest trends that I'm seeing in a negative sense is just that disconnect between families. Where families don't have no clue whatsoever what their students is doing, what even worst to whatever it used to be, because they're just not connected with them and they don't have that relationship like they used to.

And not like a friendship. You still want to be a parent but also know that your kid knows they can go to you about anything and not feel judged or that you're going to go off of them or any of those things, which, I think sometimes in today's world, that patience is a challenge. It's like, "Oh, my gosh," I get irritated immediately or I just want to go into lecture mode instead of actually listening.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:05] Yeah. I do think that that happens quite frequently. But I also think and it's a really great point that you raised, it's confusing for parents. It's very confusing to know what do I do, when do I intercede, when do I don't, when do I just say, "Oh, just calm down. This will be fine." Versus, recognizing we

have moved beyond fine and I can't figure out when we cross that line. So, those are really tough things that you're tackling. And I think it's fascinating the approach that you're taking to sort of get everybody there. So, I'm going to say bravo to that because this is not an easy thing that you're doing.

So, share with us a little bit then about the way you sort of think about the conversations that you have across the ecosystem work. So, largely you're focused on high school kids. But I suspect what happens a part of this, especially when you're engaging directly with families who may have had brought you on or a school district business, we want you to work this particular group of kids, whether they're in school or out of school, workshops, take your pick, who are high school kiddos. But then, I suspect you get questions around, "Well, this worked really well for my high school kid. But what about my kid in middle school who's really, really struggling. We lose so many kids in middle school. They disengage" or "And I've got a third grader that X, Y, or Z." So, how do you translate the high school component of the work into those sort of other spaces for people? Because that conversation, I think, it's pretty tough, too, ain't it?

Traci Bakenhaster: [00:21:43] Yes. It definitely is. And I think it's something that all the topics can be taught across all age groups is just the delivery. I'll use financial literacy because I think this is a great example where I see a lot of schools that have financial literacy components for, "Oh, it's a freshman in high school." And yet, they're teaching content - I'll be kind here - it's not quite what I would teach financial literacy-wise. A lot more economics and not quite actual personal finances financial literacy.

But when it is, they're teaching it to ninth graders, who, they're not adults yet. Some of them may not even have jobs yet. They don't have the same grasp and concept of money as the junior and senior would. So, even just that shift in itself is okay. High level concepts and actually real world scenarios need to be taught to the older groups. And then, lower it down as you go, it's more basic things. Like, even down to elementary.

So, for my son, it's a simple model. "Okay, buddy. You have a chore system. You have what you can earn money." It doesn't have to always be money either. So, for him, he loves his Switch. He loves his Nintendo Switch. He loves that. And so, we worked out a system, "Okay. Well, you earn time on your Switch by doing these activities. If you don't do these activities, you don't earn the time." And so, it's kind of funny, that motivator of what actually motivate them to do said chores or said things but they're actually getting what they want in return. And it teaches so many valuable life lessons at that age that they don't even realize they're learning. And I think it's so important to start early.

But when we have money, we have a system we use. It's a three bucket system. Any money come in, whether it's an allowance, whether it's, "You got good grades in your report card," or Christmas presents or birthday or whatever, we have a system, ten percent right off the top goes to our give bucket. And that could be, for some people if they're not religious, give to an organization or a cause they believe in. For us, it is church. We give ten percent to the church.

And then, we split the remaining amount. So, 40 percent would go into our save, and the other 50 percent will go into spend. So, that way, it's a simple model. He understands it. He knows, "Money comes in, this is what I get to do with it." And it's just making that habit.

And even just playing some games. There's a Dave Ramsey version of Monopoly, and it is fabulous, because it talks about debt and those things. And he kicks our butt every time we play. It's hilarious. And just doing those kinds of things. But then, as they get older, working in more parts and pieces to it. So, sitting down with our meals goal, "Okay. Let's sit down and actually have you sit down with us as a family as we do our family budget and see what the cost is of things." Or have them, as they get older middle school, early high school, "All right. You're going to plan out the meal for us this week. And you're going to do the grocery shopping and

we'll go with you. We're going to walk through this, so that you're learning these skills and these things." But it's just building on that based on what your child is maturity-wise.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:35] Yeah. Absolutely. I love that. And I love those strategies that are super implementable, regardless of sort of what you've got going on. And people's lives are varied. They can be super complex as we know. And working multiple jobs at the same time is not uncommon phenomenon. And so, it can be really, really tough. But those simple pieces don't have to be big or long or take a tremendous amount of time. And you can build them in the moment. And so, I appreciate that very much.

One of the ways I always like to sort of close out the conversation we've been having is recognize the fact that the majority of our listeners are teachers who are educators, whether that's formal or informal, are coming from a variety of different places around the world. Sometimes community members that are looking into bringing transformative educational opportunities into their own communities.

And I always imagine them sitting back, and we've been listening to Traci talk about these amazing things that she's been doing. And that individual thinking, "Okay. I really love a lot of this. I don't have this organization in my community. But I, as an educator, can take some of what I just heard from Traci, and incorporate it in just the day to day way I think about teaching and learning in my own classroom, no matter what my topic or my subject is." But it's hard to get started sometimes, that big white piece of paper that's got nothing on it. So, what do you tell that teacher that says, "Okay. I'm going to do some of the things I heard you talking about. How do I get started?"

Traci Bakenhaster: [00:26:04] And I think the biggest thing is, just like with entrepreneurship in general, sometimes it is just starting. Like, "Okay. I have no idea what I'm doing or what direction I'm going." It's just you go. You just say, "All right. I'm going to step into this," and you take one little thing. "Okay. If I want to focus on cooking, perfect. How can I work cooking in our science class?" And starting to kind of just take those little steps, rather it's something simple of, "Hey, we're going to look at ingredients today and actually talk about the ingredients that go into foods and relate that back to chemistry," or whatever that course is.

I think it's just breaking it down. Because everything that we're doing and everything that's adulting, basically, has relativity in the classroom. We just have to try to make that connection. And I know sometimes it can be challenging with standards, education standards, and all those things. But we just have to get really creative.

I know that my goal as I expand my programming is to be able to use microfilm in school districts to be able to give them that kick start and say, "Yeah. Here it is. I have the curriculum. I have the activities. Here you go." And now you can stand it up and start doing these things at your school as well.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:06] Yeah. Absolutely. So, just go. Get started. Roll up your sleeves, it doesn't have to be big. Simple.

Traci Bakenhaster: [00:27:13] Yeah. Exactly. And so, that whole concept of done is better than perfect. Because if you're just always waiting for perfection, to have it all together before we start to do it, we're never actually going to take the step into it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:13] I love that. Thank you so much, Traci, for taking time out of your day to share your story and share about Raising the Next Gen as an organization, Adulting 101. I just love all the different program pieces that you've got going. So, thank you for the work that you do in our community. And thank you for sharing your story with us.

Traci Bakenhaster: [00:27:45] Absolutely. Thank you so much for having me. And I just wish everybody the best of luck. And just get out there and do it. We can all do this. The more we do it together, the better off everybody is going to be.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:54] That is so true. So true. Thank you.

Traci Bakenhaster: [00:27:57] Thank you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:59] 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.