



Podcast: Student Affairs One Thing

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Summary: We chat with Dr. Jason Laker, a full professor in the department of counselor education at San Jose State University.

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B E G I N T R A N S C R I P T

Stuart Brown: Welcome to Student Affairs One Thing, a podcast that asks a simple question of seasoned student affairs professionals - what is one thing you have learned that has helped shape your professional career. I'm your host Stuart Brown, the developer of StudentAffairs.com, one of the most accessed websites by student affairs professionals. On our pages we have the most cost-effective job posting board, listing hundreds of open student services positions and a wide range of webinars.

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On today's episode. I am very pleased to have Dr. Jason Laker, a full professor in the department of counselor education at San Jose State University. He previously served as associate vice principal and dean of student affairs at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, Canada and was the dean of campus life at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota. Welcome to the program, Jason.

Dr. Jason Laker: Thank you. Very much the pleasure. Appreciate the opportunity.

Stuart Brown: So Jason, what is your one thing?

Dr. Jason Laker: The one thing is if you don't do this now, you'll never do it. That phrase came to me 30 years ago. I was finishing college at Central Michigan University. As you well know, you don't major in student affairs. People major in whatever. I was studying broadcasting and got really involved. That's sort of the typical backstory. I was an RA, health educator, student government. I even ran for city council in that town. I was involved and very much on a climbing type path. And so once I decided to go into student affairs, as many do in their undergrads, next thing I wanted to do was have a strategy to just really move along and advance.

And that was my general way of thinking. But in any event, I did my job search, there was no internet back then, you know, you mail things, you go to Kinko's and make photocopies. Seems like so long ago and far away and I happened to get an offer to be a residence hall director at Fort Lewis College in Durango, Colorado. So that's in the southwest corner of the state, in the mountains and I had never been west of the Mississippi. I just mailed applications out and did a phone interview, so I'll never forget, it was very visual, receiving the call of offering the job. And they asked me, it was a Friday, they asked me to wait til Monday to tell them. I guess they get a lot of nos. People haven't heard of the place or as far away or whatever and I must say I was a little bit wiggled out, like they said, it would have been out that way. I was from Detroit, it was more, more city type and I felt kind of nervous, you know, thinking about that and then it just hit me, if you don't do this now, you'll never do it. And the truth is, I'm not the type to go buy a Harley and head west, you know, like that's just not my style.

But having a little crappy apartment and a little meal plan and a grand a month, that's less risky, but still scary to go so far away into a place I didn't know. But I did it and it was rewarding. You know, first of all, a completely new experience, a different part of the country, different group of colleagues in the professional groups. I met my wife there - it's gonna be 30 years next year. We had our first kid there. So all these things came from deciding, you know, there's a saying, "courage is being afraid and doing it anyway," and that's really how it felt for me. I realized in retrospect it's not the biggest risk it would seem, but at that time it certainly felt that way. And because of that, it's like, that's your professional socialization, that's your first job, you know?

And so the habits we start, it reminds me of like those faculty when I get tenure, then I'm gonna tell no, you won't because you're being socialized for six or seven years to behave a certain way and if you comport yourself accordingly, you will continue to behave and people who know me wouldn't describe me as someone who behaves. But anyway, so that became a longstanding habit and practice for me and over this, this will be my 30th year in higher ed. And I look back. I worked in Canada, that was another one. What do you mean? You know, like apply for a job in Canada. Got the job and I went and or before that at the catholic university and I'm a Jewish guy from Detroit and I'm working with monks now in Minnesota.

So, but you know what, each of these have made for adventures. Also, fairly recently, just in the last six years or so, I had the opportunity to go to Pakistan with a state department grant and just to be perfectly frank, as an American and a Jew, I was nervous to do that because of stereotypes. So I went and met the most incredible people and I'm still engaged with them. In fact, I'm speaking at a conference virtually. But still, so anyway, my one thing, if you don't do this now, you'll never do it and that I guess in translation to listeners is trust that voice.

You know, we're not here to be small and we're not here to be boring and there's a lot of conventional wisdom, so to speak and expectations of stereotypical pathways more generally. I've had a really storied and interesting life and career because of following that practice of trying things. If you don't do this now, you'll never do it. And eventually that just becomes your norm.

Stuart Brown: There are two points to that one. Like you said, it gives you that opportunity to expand your professional horizons. It's very easy to say like you, okay, I'm a Detroit big city person. That's what I know, that's what I'm going to stay and that's fine for a lot of people, but it might not expand those viewpoints within the profession. And number two, by taking chances, you grow as an individual. And I think what you said, perfect example, you grew as an individual going to the west, the midwest, a small school and you can use those experiences to further your career.

Dr. Jason Laker: Yes, it is all too easy to stick with a habit. So, to your point, if someone stays relatively close to where they grew up, that's fine. That's not really the point of what I'm saying, right. It's knowing why you're doing. If you do it, be intentional and so you choose to remain there. In my case, I choose to go, you know, pursue those unknowns, having some faith that they'll, even if they'll be costs and scary things or upsets or whatever, and there certainly have been, but the rewards and sometimes the rewards pretty immediate, you know, the particular job or the salary is good or you meet great people and sometimes it kind of creeps up on you later in the form of things like wisdom and discernment. You're meeting people you didn't know were the right ones you needed to meet at the time and then you later come to learn that.

So there's just so many treasures to be had by being intentional of going away from the comfort. And when you hear that voice and you like, you've done the evaluation, the technicals are there and the job, there was a salary, you know, like there wasn't really that big of a risk, but at that point, and that's the point, there's a lot of anxiety and people generally, and certainly in our field, is that sometimes you have to be afraid and do it anyway.

Stuart Brown: One of my personal mantras, and I've told people this for ages, if you have the time, the finances, but even if the finances are a little shaky, if you have the opportunity do it because you might never have that opportunity again. And then you'll just be thinking back about the what if's.

Dr. Jason Laker: And I have to also thank you. You've been, you know, we've known each other, don't know each other well, but we go back a long time here many years and I think you've been a great emcee to the field, you know, and what you've created and it's always something I've appreciated and admired and like having to do with taking chances. It's not something I would have wanted to do. But I'm so glad that you did it, you know, and I've certainly benefited from your work, so thank you as well.

Stuart Brown: Well, thank you Jason. I want to thank you for sharing your one thing. Like I said, that is one of my personal goals and I hope for my staff and colleagues over the many years that I've been in the field, I've been able to impart that on them to really do what you're saying because I just think it is so important to be able to take some risks and do what you can do at the moment.

You've been listening to Student Affairs One Thing, a podcast and that asks a simple question of seasoned student affairs professionals - what is one thing you have learned that has helped shape your professional career? I want to thank today's guest, Dr Jason Laker, a full professor in the department of counselor education at San Jose State University. My name is Stuart Brown and I am the developer of StudentAffairs.com, one of the most accessed websites by student affairs professionals. I hope you will join us again next time for another episode of the Student Affairs One Thing.

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