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WGLT Sound Ideas Interview with Deborah Halperin, November 4, 2015

Deborah Halperin: Yeah, I love the energy working with young people. And when they are motivated by— they have this great idea, they saw a TED talk, they read something in class, and you know the idea isn't to push that down, the idea is to kind of create a framework around it where they can use that energy and motivation to turn that into action, to kind of define the scope of it a little bit, have them imagine what that idea might look like when it's real and find them the resources and the tools they might need to turn that inspiration into action.

Charlie Schlenker: Young people are sometimes not good listeners, so defining a problem to solve is perhaps a challenge. How do you get them to focus on that?

Halperin: I think teaching anyone, young people, but anyone to effectively listen to the community is one of the most important things that I can train someone to do. That just because you have a fantastic idea, that you are so so sure the community needs or the world needs, if you aren't listening to whoever your consumer is going to be, it's gonna miss the mark. And people feel that just because they are so super passionate about something it can't fail—

Schlenker: Well it can.

Halperin: —it actually can! And boy do we have examples of times that we have put what we think is best for community above what is actually best for that community. They know what's best for them, so the idea is to find the intersection between where students' kind of heart and passion is going with what opportunity is open at that time in the community that they are trying to serve. You know, our idea's really to kind of come alongside that community.

Schlenker: What are some great ideas that turned out to be clunkers because the community didn't embrace it?

Halperin: We did a large study on the lack of spaces for bilingual early childhood. So, 0-3 maybe preschool spots that would be for Spanish-speaking families. As there are more Spanish-speaking families in our community, are there enough spots in early childhood where they can enroll their children? So we could count how many spots in the classrooms, finding out that there weren't that many, and as the population starts to rise, there's going to be a gap. So we did all this research, we thought we were doing all this great—finding all these great materials and these best practices, and then when we finally talked to families that spoke Spanish with children 0-5, they said, "Yeah, no thanks. We don't like dropping off our children at places where strangers would watch our children, we like to watch our children. We watch each other's children, we take care of ourselves, so thanks for this nice shiny report, but good luck with that." And so (laughs)—

Schlenker: No demand, huh?

Halperin: Yeah! So, you know, we probably don't have enough spots in town if families wanted that service, but that's not the service they wanted. So there was this disconnect between what researchers wanted to research and what that service population was really looking for.

Schlenker: On the flip side, what are some examples of kids who had passion and an area and ended up listening to the community and fine-tuning their original thought into something that really worked?

Halperin: Well I think the Tool Library was a good example of that. Matt LaLonde had this great idea for a tool library and one of his research methodologies was to walk around, walk around the west side and talk to people who are working on their homes and see if they were interested in this type of service just down the street, would that be of value? If you needed something for the project you are working on today and you didn't have it, would having a tool library in your neighborhood help you finish it. Would you walk into a place and borrow a drill? Or is that something that people would not think to do? You know, it's not a traditional research method to walk around all day, but it got us the information we needed and we were able to provide, you know really shape, the type of service the Tool Library was going to be so that it could be useful to exactly the type of person we were hoping it would serve.

Schlenker: Did it turn out differently than other tool libraries in different areas because of the community input here in Bloomington-Normal, on the west side of Bloomington?

Halperin: Well tool libraries are really a fascinating thing. The core of them I think is the same, regardless of the community you go to. But what we are really learning as we are developing the Tool Library is people don't need hammers, they don't need the basic things. They need specialized tools and there has been interest in automotive tools and there has been this interest now in—someone donated a sewing machine to us recently, that right it's kind of a tool, it's not the tool we were thinking, you know I don't know that every tool library has a sewing machine, but we have one now because maybe that's something that people want to use and if you don't have one, maybe that's a great thing to be able to check out. I think one of the great things about these community projects is we're always listening, we're always adaptable and if there was this growing need for tents or cake pans, I think we'd be willing to go in that direction because after all it's designed to be a community service, so it should be responsive to the community it aims to serve.

Schlenker: There are some things that young people wouldn't automatically think of because they're young, they haven't honed what adults would think of as "political skills" or "coalition building skills". How do you get them to become aware of the need for that sort of thing and then to go forward with it?

Halperin: Right, right sometimes they don't know what they know yet and that's why I think those of us who work at a college or university, or are on staff for a non-profit, are a local leader in some way, need to create a network around young people who are motivated to help them make those connections that are going to make their ideas—so they can develop those ideas

and actually see something coming to a result. I think that social capital that we could all bring and say, “you know you should talk to this person” or “someone tried that” or “you need to look up what happened the last time someone attempted a similar effort”, and if we can kind of guide them, not give them the answers, but challenge them to make those calls and do their research and talk to people and make those connections, it really helps them.

I think the process of discovery is really exciting to them, I don't think anyone thinks, “I have this amazing idea and it's going to fall into place beautifully and resources will just drop out of the sky”, I don't think any young person thinks that's going to happen, but they really do need, appreciate, value all of those connections and I think this town is really great about helping young people with those ideas. Folks here are so generous. When I say, “If you wanna build that x, y, z thing, here are the people you should probably talk to” and if they follow through and call that person, that referral, and they say, “Deborah said I should probably talk to you, I have this idea”, they come back and just say, “Wow! They were so helpful. They gave me this link and this information and I'm gonna visit them next week and we're going to walk around”. I just find people are so kind and generous with young people and our idea that step forward and say, “I'm gonna try something.”

Schlenker: How then do the young people then internalize the idea of layered partnerships and coalitions too and how have you seen them take it where perhaps you haven't lead them?

Halperin: We had a student take my grant writing class, she was an English literature major, not a lot of community experience, she took the grant writing class then she partnered with the Shakespeare Festival here because that was one of her many loves through her major and we wrote a grant to bring a hip-hop Shakespeare artist to the regional alternative school because one of the things my student was really passionate about was exposing students in high school to Shakespeare and the arts.

So we weren't quite sure where this idea was gonna go, but we kept making calls and we kept exploring best practices and we got a meeting with the regional alternative school and they said, “Yeah that sounds interesting to us, we think our students would really enjoy that” and they weren't able to provide as wide of an arts program at their school so maybe they thought that that would fold in nicely. We found a couple of artists and their experience and that folded in nicely. We were able to write a grant, we got some money, that was great. And then the school, the regional office of education was excited about all of this innovative work that was happening. They decided they could give credit to the students that took that summer camp and a kid was able to graduate on time.

So my English lit major who had never written a grant, didn't know where the regional alternative school was, ended up creating this interesting program by pooling resources and working with the festival and working with the school and working with the regional office, and she has since moved away out of the community, but that summer camp arts idea goes on. So it happened again this year, even though she was nowhere in this community. So I love when students, in a very short time frame, can kind of bubble up ideas, and they become kind of the—

I think everyone that she pooled together to work on this idea were happy to help, but it kind of took that student to get everyone looking in the same direction to say, “yeah I can stretch a little bit in that direction” or “yes, I can offer some advice or resources in that way”. We didn’t intend to start a summer program for credit, for at risk youth at an alternative school, that was not necessarily the plan, but we started with a simple and good idea and kind of took it for a walk and this is what happened.

Schlenker: How do you export this model to other people, to other places?

Halperin: You know I think what makes what we get to do here in this community really special is it’s a two degree of separation community, it’s not six degrees, I think it’s two it might be one and a half, that when students have ideas when they’re inspired, you know it takes us a couple phone calls or emails and they’re usually connected to people who are willing help them, and that’s what I think makes this work really exciting and how we can produce results really quickly and we can send students then back to their home communities or maybe hopefully they stay and they feel like change agents, they feel like they know what they need to do because they have had success so the next time they have a great idea they can think, “Okay who am I trying to serve? Have I talked to them? Who else cares about this idea? Who can I talk to?”

I had a student who got into the Peace Corps. So from Kazakhstan and he’s working with a women’s empowerment group and he sends me an email and says, “Hey that stuff you did, it works here too!” (laughter) He said, “That workshop thing you made us do, I get it! It works here too! You know that when I go out and talk to people about what they want and I listen and do that, boy! You know, things happen.”

Schlenker: Deborah Halperin of Illinois Wesleyan University is on the Board of Directors for the West Bloomington Revitalization Project. She’s a TEDx speaker in the upcoming sessions at the Normal Theater. Thanks so much for joining us.

Halperin: Thank you.

Schlenker: I’m Charlie Schlenker.