Karen (00:00):

I've had a chance to have multiple conversations with David Adams, CEO of Urban Assembly over the past two years. Each time I learn more about Urban Assembly's work to promote, social, emotional, and academic achievement of all of their scholars via the activation of robust partnerships with industry leaders in the New York City area. In this podcast, we'll build on those conversations as David is joined by Giselle Gonzalez, a senior at Urban Assembly School for Collaborative Healthcare. We'll dig deeply into how Urban Assembly has created multiple avenues for meaning making that engage the full staff, the full student body, and the broader community. David and Giselle, thank you so much for joining us for this podcast.

We are excited to get started and dig into learning a whole lot more about Urban Assembly and the schools that you all have been together in New York, and about the experiences. David, as I hear you articulate what's going on with Urban Assembly and what your passion is, I hear you describe the problem as the public education space really doesn't always do a good job of engaging and taking advantage of what's in community and that that's really important. If we're really concerned about equity, then this idea of really helping young people make meaning of their lives, their communities, and see how all the stuff fits together is so important. David, can you just tell us for a minute about why it is that you put those three things together and have come up with this magic mix of what you all call these Urban Assembly Schools? How do they really dig in to help young people make meaning?

David Adams (01:48):

Well, Karen, thank you for taking time to spend time with us here at The Urban Assembly and Giselle. You raise a really great point. This question of how do adult inputs into children's lives prepare them to be ready for college, career, and community, this notion of adult inputs, what inputs do students need to be successful, and then who provides those inputs? So here at The Urban Assembly, as you mentioned, we have 23 schools across New York City. We work across the country to think about how to organize schools around these principles of social, emotional, academic development. But we've really focused on this idea of how do we maximize not only our school, but our community's input into young people?

We were founded by Richard Kahan and he was the king back in the day, 1997, of this notion of private-public partnerships. How did the private sector and public sector work together in order to solve problems? So one of the core ways that we've organized Urban Assembly Schools have been with this notion that industry community has as much investment in schools as schools have in the industry and the community that they serve. When we understand that maximizing inputs into students by creating as many adults, caring, loving, knowledgeable adults as possible, then we will create an opportunity for our students to then give back of that input, of that investment into their community, into their college, into their careers, and then benefits all of our society.

Karen (03:15):

Great words. But now I'm excited to turn to Giselle and say great words, but how does this work? Talk to us about the school that you're going to and why it feels different to you. How is it doing all the things that David just said?

Giselle Gonzalez (03:30):

I'll just start off by saying, first of all, like I said before, I'm so happy I went to Urban Assembly School. I'm proud to say that I am soon to be a graduate from Urban Assembly School. They often tackle the mission, like David mentioned, to just be there for all their students and be there to create community

and a sense of culture for Urban. I believe that if you go into any other high school, you just don't get the same feel that urban culture creates with meaning with empathy and just creating their students a whole sense of community and being there for each other and create social awareness and being able to just, like I said, be there for each other.

Karen (04:08):

Who's the 'we' in that? When you say 'they' do a great job of creating community? Who is the 'we?' Is it just your teachers? Is it something different about the students and how you all interact with each other? Is it other adults that are in the building? Is it the adults who are working with you? Who is this 'we' that seems to be so important to what makes Urban Assembly School special?

Giselle Gonzalez (04:28):

It's definitely the staff at Urban Assembly. The staff helps create the culture that I mentioned. They bring other people to help create that culture and also, the staff embed that urban culture into their students, their freshman year. We create that by having different clubs and different things that create that. So mainly the staff, the students, it's a mission that we all come together and do. It's not really as people separately, it's just we all come together and create that culture together as one.

Karen (05:01):

Giselle, I noticed that you're very intentionally using the word 'the staff' and not 'the teachers.' So often, when I talk to students, they say 'the teachers.' Who are the staff?

Giselle Gonzalez (05:11):

The staff can include the teachers. The staff includes just anybody who helps contribute to urban culture. Is not really a label I can put on anybody, it's just who contributes to urban culture is I contribute the staff.

Karen (05:23):

David, how do you make that happen? How do you get a staff that isn't just the classroom teachers, but has this common mission and is really working towards this common purpose? Is that intentional on your part?

David Adams (05:37):

Well, absolutely. So I think one of the things that Giselle's talking about here is having a common operating picture around the roles that adults should be playing in developing a sense of culture in our schools and that means the deans, that means the teachers, that means cafeteria workers to the extent that we can. We want to create a sense of who we are, how we're modeling who we are so that young people can see in the staff, what are the attributes for solving problems that we want them to develop? Giselle, you work as well as this peer group connections and the relationship between you and the underclassmen is that the senior classmen actually reproduce this notion of culture by direct mentoring and developing in their underclassmen some of these ideas of, "What does it mean to be an Urban Assembly student at the School for Collaborative Health?" So it's an example of how these things are operationalized. People have a responsibility for developing these skills, attitudes, and culture that it means to be part of the school.

Karen (06:33):

Giselle, you mentioned that you're at the school that's focusing on health. Talk about what that means.

Giselle Gonzalez (06:37):

So I'm doing my medical certification this year, my senior year and so far, it's fantastic. I'm learning different things every single day. I'm learning how to draw blood, learning how to do EKGs, learning how to do blood pressure, pulse, height, your vital signs, and it is just a great program. I can't express how grateful I am for this and I'm doing this before my 18 years of age. I'm glad that I'm doing it with a teacher that I already have a relationship with, so I can express with her and confide in her and being able to ask for help. It's not with somebody who I just met off a regular course. I already seen this teacher for four years almost, so I'm glad that I'm able do this in Urban.

Karen (07:20):

David, how do you make these partnerships work? You mentioned earlier this idea of partnership coordinators. What is this partnership coordinator role and how do you coordinate this rich experiences for all of your students in different careers? Each of your schools has a different theme to it. How do you do this?

David Adams (07:37):

Ms. Hamilton over were at The Urban Assembly School for Collaborative Healthcare serves at the partnership coordinator. One of her roles is to organize these industry partners. There's also a board whose job is to organize these industry partners to invest into the school, to invest into the kids so that our children and our students are graduating with these kinds of experiences necessary. So I think it's a unique feature of the work that we do at The Urban Assembly and it really reflects this notion of college, career and community. As Giselle said, her mother went to the same school, and so this notion of, how are we developing young people who not just pass the test of life, as Dr. Marisa Elias says, but are able to really take these skills and be effective in all that they do?

Karen (08:18):

It's amazing that you've pulled this off. I want both of you to talk. Giselle, you've already said just how significant and important it is that you're coming out, not even 18 yet, with all these skills and all these experiences and just ahead of a game from other high school students. How does that fit in to your commitment to really create equitable learning opportunities for the young people in your Urban Assembly Schools? Why is it so important that we think about these bold strategies when we talk about educational equity?

David Adams (08:52):

I think Giselle said something really important, like what is the role of exposure in teaching our youth that they have a responsibility to contribute to their community? So many people and young people go through school and they're just trying to find relevance. Karen, you talked about this, this relevant-based education like, "What does this mean to me?" We've got challenges in our home or in our community. There's a lot of things going on in young people's lives, and so when you give them opportunity and give folks like Giselle a space to say, "I will graduate ready to contribute to my home, ready to contribute to my community, ready to give the skills that have been developed in me back to the folks who expect something for me," that's an identity. That's a shift in what we're asking of our young people. In fact, every single young person, and I know, Karen, you believe this has something to contribute to the world.

Our job as in public education is to uncover that, unleash that, and make sure that they know what those skills are.

Karen (09:52):

It's really powerful, I want to pick up on that point, David, and come back to you, Giselle. When we were chatting earlier, you said, "I may not go into this field, but it's really been important for me to do this." So when we talk about what this kind of real world experience has done to make learning relevant for you, can you give us an example of why doing it this way and having these real world experiences is different from just sitting in a classroom?

Giselle Gonzalez (10:20):

Well, I feel like being in rural experiences just it prepares me for other things that other people don't really have the opportunity to do. Being straight into the field, having internships that I'm able to use my medical assistant skills on real people, real patients, it gives me a glimpse of what I'm going to be able to do in the real future when I do have my certification. So when my internship starts, I'm going to able to go out and use our skills that we'll be learning over the course of our nine-month certifications.

It's fantastic, in my opinion. I believe if we just learn from straight books and just lectures, yes, we do learn, but you're not putting those skills into your work. When you put those skills into your actual work, you're able to learn and make mistakes, which is okay and you're able to be like, "Oh, wait. Oh, don't do that. You do this," and you're just able to use it properly and you learn. When you go over and do things over and over again on actual human beings, you just learn from your mistakes and you're able to grow.

David Adams (11:24):

Hey, Karen, can I pop in for that real quickly? So Giselle said something that just really deeply resonates with me. In most places and when we want to develop young people or any people, when they make a mistake, we give them feedback and they correct themselves, and then they do it again. Now, to be fair, Giselle, I hope that my arm is not the arm that you make too many mistakes on when you're drawing blood, but the goal is to develop mastery. The notion is not, "You got a 70 on a test, good luck. Maybe do better on your next test."

It's like, "How do I figure out how to get to the 90 or 85 that I'm trying to do so that I have learned that skill?" That's how most learning happens in the real world, because we need people to do the work effectively. So I just really wanted to resonate with what Giselle was saying, because she talked about this new notion of getting feedback, trying again, and moving to a mastery level that allows her to be effective in her role and her position with regards to the work that she's doing.

Giselle Gonzalez (12:22):

Also, having The Urban Assembly School also gives the opportunity to have an internship and go into different hospitals or urgent cares, that also helps greater our experience levels. That way, when we do graduate with our certification, we also have that under our belts to say, "Yeah, I have my certification, but I also have experience," that way, we can be able to get hired faster. That way we could just be able to say, "Yeah, I did this before. I did this on a real live person, not just because I took the certification test and I have my license. No, it's because I also have experience and also being able to do it." What really makes me so happy that I'm a part of this is that my school is majority of Black and Brown students. The fact that Black and Brown students have the opportunity to uplift and prove other people

wrong, and these minorities are able to do things that others don't have the opportunity to, it just makes us look better as minorities.

Karen (13:24):

That's a wonderful point. I know it's very intentionally a part of the mission of Urban Assembly. I know, David, that you and others have also talked about just this broader responsibility to have, not just your Urban Assembly partners who have this kind of mission, but just you're on a mission to have adults, in general, realize that they have to model and practice and invite in young people into this space as learning partners and as relevant partners and as people who are there and committed to make change.

I'm really wondering, David, if we can come back to this really pressing both question about equity, but in particular, this what seems to be just this lingering tension between whether the best thing we need to be doing to support our Black and Brown students is doubling down, drilling down on academic, or should it be social and emotional learning, or should it be real life experience? How are you putting it together, and how do you explain it to people? Then Giselle, you've just been talking so much about how all of these things fit together, but I'm both frustrated and perplexed that we seem to not be able, when we talk about schools. To have this not be an either/or conversation.

David Adams (14:41):

Well first, Karen, I would like to say on the record that I would put an Urban Assembly graduate against any graduate in any high school across the country, with regards to our young people's ability to solve problems. We're moving from 'what' problems to 'how' problems and I want to say this again, because the problems that we're facing in public education, how do we integrate academic social-emotional development and career readiness? Those are not 'what' problems. There is enough white pages written on them. There are enough people who have sat in panels and said, "This is what should be happening," but are not enough people who are taking that 'what,' and trying to facilitate the actual systems and structures to get this working. So I think if we take more time and there are more institutions who are really in schools, who are connected to schools, who spend every day trying to think about, "We've got eight periods, how do we organize these eight periods in ways that integrate these outcomes?" Then, we'll be moving faster for our young people and our society will benefit for the outcomes of that.

Karen (15:38):

So if we're going to really talk about how we integrate social and emotional and cognitive and academic, how do we talk about how to help young people really know where they are on that path of building those skills in a way that really is supportive of them and it doesn't feel like more tests being put on Black and Brown kids that they're going to fail?

David Adams (16:01):

I will say that the Strong Resilient NYC Initiative that's being led in New York City in which all students will have an opportunity to get feedback on their social and emotional development, is an initiative that is being led in part by The Urban Assembly with regards to making sure all 1600 schools and 1.1 million students have some feedback on their social and emotional competence. Now, what does that feedback look like, and why is this important? Well, we know in the context of education that the number one driver for development, for achievement is the quality of feedback. We know this from Hattie's research. We know this from watching teachers. We know this from the overall understanding of the educational outcomes.

If we're going to take social and emotional learning seriously, if we're going to sit with young people like Giselle and say, "We want you to graduate college, career, and community ready," we all need to be her manager. We need to be able to take her aside and say, "Hey, I saw the way that you solved that problem. I'm wondering if next time you can do this. I'm wondering if next time you can think about this," and so the goal of this assessment is to create a language, to create some clarity. You heard Giselle talk about problem solving, empathy, communication. These are constructs that we have developed through the notions of assessment, through feedback and through direct instruction.

So our vision for this work is that we have more students like Giselle, who go out in the world, who are cognizant, who are clear about their social and emotional skills of herself and others, and then use these skills to solve problems, because we all know there's enough problems to solve. There are enough challenges in this world that the more folks who are able to see those challenges and then bring themselves to those solution sets, the better we're going to be. I want to say this again, the work-based learning, the internships, the work that Giselle is doing in terms of restorative practice, these are part and parcel of her social and emotional development. It's not just about an assessment, right? It's about how are you living these things out? So I think the better we are moving to those outcomes, the better our city will be, and the better our city will be, hopefully, the better folks will be in terms of looking to our city for inspiration.

Karen (18:06):

I appreciate that clarification. I knew you would give it and I wanted to get it on record, because what you said and the way you said it about feedback, to get better at problem solving, any kind of problem, social, emotional, math, real life. That's what we want, and I see Giselle nodding her head. Do you feel like you were having these things looked at and assessed to give you feedback for you to own how to get them stronger and better, or did you ever feel like you were being graded on these skills?

Giselle Gonzalez (18:37):

Well, at The Urban Assembly School, I don't ever feel like that, which I'm very grateful for. As I mentioned before, I was a part of a program this summer, and I had the opportunity to speak with New York senators over the summer. When I spoke with them, I was protesting against the Zero Tolerance policies. When speaking with them, I was protesting against passing that rule, passing that law because that policy is not fair to Black and Brown students in our communities at all.

So when I was fighting against them and stating my claim as to why that that rule should not be passed on our schools, I was on behalf of my Black Brown students, because it's not fair as to how they will quickly suspend somebody based on no context at all. So when speaking with them, I just kept on giving examples on how would they feel as if their child was treated with that same policy, with no context behind what was being done and with not no words being spoken from the students? Over the summer, when I did this with the New York senators I spoke with, I believe, I want to say, four different senators and all of them did not pass the rule, which I'm happy that they didn't.

David Adams (19:44):

Karen, if I can just take a second to speak to Giselle's experience here. Our public education spaces are really our society's investment into developing the kind of young people that are going to contribute upon graduation. So it's like this little microcosm of society. To Giselle's point, what we are teaching our young people around how problems are solved, are people engaged? Is it a zero tolerance, or is it an approach that's designed to reintegrate young people back into the community? These are questions

about not just our schools, but our society writ large, and so I recognize and I hear some of the concerns that we're having around the language around social and emotional learning.

But I think when you talk to our students, and Giselle is here, we're talking about things like conflict resolution. We're talking about things like managing our emotions towards a goal, and we're talking about things like relationship skills. So I'd like us to continue to focus on those skills, those competencies, those attitudes that allow our young people to contribute to our society and move it forward. So I think it's a really good example here of how communication skills allowed her to not only argue from the perspective, and I heard her say, "State a claim," which is, again, that's clarity of language that creates constructs. That claim helped her to advocate on behalf of our Black and Brown kids.

Karen ([20:59](#)):

I'm 100% with you, David. Somehow, as you're scaling the success that you've had across the country, I'm assuming are leading with those kind of examples of what we should be building for young people. I just want to make sure that as we're having those conversations and we're having the conversation about why, what kind of role all adults can play if they're in any intentional relationship with young people, both modeling and naming and encouraging that these skills be practiced and bringing in feedback? You've talked about how this is really happening for all of your students. That's not happening across the country. So as you think about bringing this model out, just talk for a few minutes, because I know we're going to wrap up soon, how are you taking this to scale as you move beyond New York City, where you actually get to walk in and out of buildings, and you're trying to take it across the country? How do you get these ideas across in ways that they really create the experiences that are comparable to the kind that Giselle and her classmates have had?

David Adams ([21:56](#)):

Well, I appreciate the question, Karen. First, I will say that one of the key pieces that we're doing at The Urban Assembly is working to reproduce some of these concepts at scale. That means serving as proof of concepts for other school day, other organizations across the country, that it is possible. At The Urban Assembly, we're working in district schools, public schools, they're not charter schools. They are working in the same constraints that other district schools are working in. One of the big challenges in the context of social and emotional learning, as you know, is that there's a lack of clarity. Is it about being nice to people? Maybe, or is it about developing relationships?

Well, it's probably a little bit of both? Being nice, helps develop relationships. Using effective communication skills helps you to create your intent, to move towards what you're trying to accomplish. Being able to solve problems helps us be more constructive in community. So the first thing that we look to do as we move this is create clarity in terms of what we mean. So we have a list of 11 to 14 social and emotional competencies. Students demonstrate the ability to manage their emotions, students demonstrate awareness of their needs and emotions that are also linked to adult competencies that allow adults to model these, to activate these opportunities, as well as create experiences for students to demonstrate these skills.

Additionally, to that, we envision social and emotional learning in that the really broad sense of what learning is. Learning is the ability to integrate understandings and knowledge and shift behaviors. So that means social and emotional learning is giving students an opportunity to learn through instruction, learn through extracurricular, learn through behavior supports, learn through adult modeling how to understand and problem solve around these concepts. So in a nutshell, I would say the number one thing that we bring to the space is clarity. We're not going to come in and say, "I want your

student to be more self aware." We're going to say, "Let's make sure that students have an understanding of how to access external supports."

Now, how do we create a school community in which students have clarity around their external supports and how they can use them to solve problems? The last thing I'll say on this is we're not going to go create dependency, so we don't tell our students the just go to adults for everything. We have adults scaffold the problem-solving sequence for young people so that they're better able to do it for themselves. You'll see this in Giselle, when you're talking about 9th graders working with 12th graders. We start with the adults, they build the capacity and the capabilities of the 12th graders, who then build the capabilities and capacities of 9th graders so that we have graduated students who are ready to solve the problems of the world, not just the problems of the school building that they're even a part of.

Karen (24:33):

Wonderful example. So I'm just going to ask either of you any last things that you really hoped you had wanted to say on this interview that we didn't get to?

David Adams (24:42):

Well, listen, I'm super proud of Giselle. I know that we took her out of her school day, and I saw her recently as we prepared for this. I just want to say, giselle, that the future is yours. My legacy, hopefully, is creating spaces for more students like you to bring your voice, to solve the problems that we need to solve, and feel free to reach out to us if there's anything else that we can do to support you in your future.

Giselle Gonzalez (25:03):

Thank you. I really appreciate it.

Karen (25:08):

This episode has highlighted the importance of activating all adults, of lifting up the importance of real life settings and the true integration of academic, social-emotional development and career readiness. So what are the takeaways from this discussion that can help us move from being satisfied that we've helped a few young people beat the odds, to implementing strategies that will actually change the odds for all young people?

Speaker 4 (25:34):

Please visit our website and YouTube channel to hear more of this conversation, as well as Karen's discussions with David and to learn more about Urban Assembly. Join us for episode two, featuring Ron Berger of EL Education and Margarida Celestino, a recent graduate of an EL school.