

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Ayers Institute “My Why” Podcast
Episode 5 – July 2018
Title: *Jarred Amato*

SPEAKERS

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FULL TRANSCRIPT

INTRODUCTION:

RM: For some it is a decision made after a moment of epiphany. For others, they can't imagine a time when they wanted to be anything else. They are teachers. They are leaders. They are life changers. These are their stories.

JA: My name is Jarred Amato from Nashville, Tennessee, and this is “My Why.”

Early in my career, classroom management was really hard because the books that we were reading weren't actually interesting. And I think there must have been one day where a student had a head on the desk and I asked “why?” He’s like “this book is boring.” And I thought– I was like, “He's not wrong.” It was!

At that point, I realized it was my responsibility to find a literature that mattered, that our kids could connect to, that would encourage them to pick their head up and read in that class– but then, the next day and the next day and for the rest of their life.

RM: Welcome to My Why: Stories of Inspiration from Educators. This podcast is presented by the Ayers Institute for Teacher Learning & Innovation and brought to you by the College of Education at Lipscomb University, where 21st century educators are prepared to involve, impact, and inspire.

My name is Rachel Milligan.

Today we are joined by Dr. Jarred Amato, founder of Project Lit Community and a high school English teacher in Nashville Tennessee. Jarred is an avid reader, writer, and speaker who enjoys working and connecting with fellow educators to create a vibrant literacy culture in our schools and communities. Dr. Amato has served in several teacher-leadership roles over the past nine years in the classroom and as a two-time Metro Nashville Public Schools “Blue Ribbon” teacher.

Jarred, thank you for being here today!

JA: Thanks so much for having me.

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EPISODE BODY:

RM: You're about to enter year ten, you said. A decade of teaching. That's kind of a benchmark moment. What do you think really got you from those early years of teaching to year ten?

JA: I think I found my purpose as an educator probably in year four or five. I think that the first three, I was still figuring it out. And at a certain point I realized 'why I was doing that' or 'why I was in this profession' which is helping young people fall in love with reading either again or for the first time and connecting kids with great books. And that became my purpose. I knew it wasn't about a test score or about an observation or an evaluation it was like I knew, every day, what my goal was. And that made it really fun and really just freeing I guess.

As an English teacher, you have two jobs, right: Love your kids and then love books. And then you play matchmaker and you connect the two. When you have the love of kids and love of books, marrying those two is the beauty. And it's going to be messy at times, and it's not going to be perfect, and you're going to be figuring out. But that's the challenge and the really exciting part.

RM: I'd love for you to reflect for a minute and talk about, maybe, one or two students specifically: their stories and how literature has impacted them or how the Project Lit Community has impacted them.

JA: So, there's a book *Long Way Down* by Jason Reynolds. In the book— when students finish it, they're really angry because there's no answer. And so, Jason said it and I've said it to my students, "Write your own. Whatever ending you come up with will be the right one, but use your brain and think critically."

And so, David in particular wrote a poem that continued that story. And it was just as good as Jason's— and Jason is an award-winning author! And we put it online. And there are kids around the country now who are reading David's ending and feeling satisfied that they got their answer they were looking for. Jason himself saw it and interacted with David, after the fact. I showed David hey there are kids in D.C. who are reading your poem today.

Like, that wasn't the lesson plan, right. It wasn't on my agenda or wasn't in the scope and sequence. But it happened! And it was awesome. And David is more excited to come to school and I'm more excited to be his teacher through those moments.

RM: I want to ask you about the lessons that you've learned as an educator. One lesson that you mentioned is that you need to block out the noise and focus on what's best for your students.

JA: I think there are just a lot of distractions in education. "They say we have to do this." I always ask teachers "who is they?" Right because I know people at the district level in the state level and most of them are good people. So, I know they are not telling you to do things that are bad for students, right?

But there is noise in the media, in the teachers' lounge, on social media, right? There are a lot of distractions. There a lot of people out there trying to get you to lose sight of what matters and to lose sight of your students. And if you can block that out and you know in your core what you're about as an educator— what you value, who you value, what your goal is when you step into that classroom every day— it's going to be really fun!

But it is hard at times. There are some people who lose sight of their "why." There are some people who lose sight of the goal of education. And as educators, we've got to help each other do that. We've got to

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help remind each other while we got into this thing, why we're still here, and work together to celebrate each other and uplift one another.

RM: What kind of person should become an educator?

JA: I mean you have to care about kids. And I think it's easy for people to say, but you genuinely have to love and believe in the young people you're serving. A lot of times you don't know if they hear it the first time. And so, when you say you believe in them over and over again– and through your actions communicate that you believe in them– there'll be that moment when you don't ever know what's going to happen.

We can never say enough kind words and positive words to work to our young people. They don't hear enough positive things. And I think there's sometimes, as a society, there's this negative perception of young people that's just not true. And so, for us as teachers to remind our young people that we believe in them and that they're wonderful that they're capable of doing anything they set their mind to.

I mean if what if every teacher said positive, kind things to our young people every day? I mean it's simple. Doesn't cost any money. All right– It's not like we have to lower class sizes or change the textbooks. If everybody just did that– let's do that. Right! If we did that and we said, “look every classroom is going to have great books in there.” I mean: those are two simple things that we start with!

RM: Absolutely.

JA: And I feel like you would make a difference.

RM: I would love if you would sum up your “My Why” story in six words or less.

JA: “Empowering students as readers and leaders.”

RM: Thank you so much for being here today!

JA: Oh, it was my pleasure.

CONCLUSION:

RM: As we close today's episode we encourage our listeners to consider your own sources of motivation. What inspires you to do what you do? What is your why? Share your ideas on social media using @AyersInstitute and the #MyWhy. Also, check out the handout including some of Dr. Amato's favorite resources, lessons learned, his six-word memoir, and other helpful information. This handout can be found on <http://eduTOOLBOX.org>.

Connect with Dr. Amato on social media @JarredAmato or @ProjectLITComm and with the Ayers Institute on Facebook and Twitter @AyersInstitute.

I'm Rachel Milligan producer and host for the My Why podcast. This episode was directed by Julia Osteen. Forest Doddington handles editing and technical production. This podcast is brought to you by Lipscomb University's College of Education.

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