



## Honest Conversations about Youth Development and Education

On Please Speak Freely, Eric Gurna, Executive Director of Development Without Limits interviews leaders in the fields of youth development and education to shed light on key issues and explore different perspectives. The idea is to get past the platitudes and institutional positions, and have honest, nuanced conversations about things that really matter to young people and communities. Examples of

current and future Please Speak Freely guests are Alexis Menten of [Asia Society](#), [Earl Phalen](#) of [Reach Out and Read](#) (and Founder of [Summer Advantage](#) and [BELL](#)), [Dr. Pedro Noguera](#) of [New York University](#), [Karen Pittman](#) of the [Forum for Youth Investment](#) and [Carla Sanger](#) of [LA's BEST](#).

### Episode #7: Rich Berlin, September 15, 2011

[The original podcast with Rich Berlin can be found here](#)

**Eric Gurna:** So I'm here in East Harlem, New York with Rich Berlin, executive director of Harlem RBI. And chairman of...

**Rich Berlin:** Dream Charter School.

**Eric:** Chairman of Dream Charter School. And so first of all I just want to start off by saying thank you for agreeing to do this. I appreciate.

**Rich Berlin:** An honor and a pleasure.

**Eric:** So I was mentioning before we actually got started recording that there was something quite specific that led me to invite you to ask you to be on Please Speak Freely. And really it's funny, it's that I had the opportunity to be in a meeting with you recently as I got a tour of Harlem RBI's summer programs with some other people. And you and I have known each other a little bit over the years. But it was the first time for a while I got a chance to sort of sit around the table with you. And I felt like you were more inclined to actually speak freely than a lot of executive directors of youth organizations that I know. And you said one thing that made me want to hear more. And it wasn't quite the context to ask more about it in the meeting there. But I thought this might be a chance to do that. And that was we were talking about different programmatic efforts and curriculum that you've used in your programs.

And that you all have designed or brought in from the outside. And someone was asking about what behavior changes result from those programs being implemented. And in my experience people usually have a pretty pat set of answers to that. They have, well, we expect to see this and we expect to see that as a result of implementing this curriculum.

And your answer was to question the idea of measuring behavior changes that result from a particular program or curriculum. This may not be a direct quote. But you said something like, I do this because I believe in it. And I know that if everyone did this, the world would be better. Now, I might have paraphrased that in my notes, but you said something like that. Can you talk about how you think about that sort of thing?

**Rich Berlin:** Yeah. I think that there's a lot of thinking and head scratching and writing and talking about the best way to do things. I think there's probably pretty broad agreement about the best way to do things. And then there's a lot of talking and head scratching and writing and thinking and talking about how to measure the best way to do things to prove you're doing it. And I think people, at least when it comes to youth work, can usually walk into a room and in about 36 seconds you can tell whether someone's doing things well or badly or somewhere in between. And so in places where budgets are limited and staff is already constrained or stretched. And kids are there to have fun and know that there's some good in it for them. The amount of energy devoted to rounding the wheel, I think the delta on that is pretty slight generally.

And so in our case, I think we do spend a lot of time being reflective about practice. We spend a lot of time being intentional about the type of work we do. But mostly we try to create environments where kids feel safe and respected, are doing something that engages them. And you can usually measure engagement by the number of kids in the room.

And where they're perhaps building some skills and working together. Just take the high scope test or whatever it is and kind of line it up. And you do that stuff, and that's good for kids, it's good for people. People do it with their own children. People do it on soccer teams in the suburbs. And do a lot of that. And that sort of moves the dial. I think this work is incredibly important. I don't think it's incredibly complex. And I think we make it a little more complex than it needs to be.

**Eric:** You can often measure engagement by the number of kids in the room. So I assume you're referring to after school programs or summer programs where kids have some kind of choice when it comes to that. Right?

**Rich Berlin:** Yeah, particularly amongst adolescence or early to late adolescence. Anywhere where kids choose to be, there's no such thing as a youth program of choice that is a poor quality that is well attended. You will never find a crappy youth program that is well attended if kids have a choice. Unless actually it's so bad that it can be like a place where they can really safely do anything.

**Eric:** Yeah, there's been some studies on some of those programs actually. Where there was actually an increase in negative behaviors.

**Rich Berlin:** Right. But I wouldn't actually call that a youth program. I would call that some sort of organized gang or something.

**Eric:** It's a building.

**Rich Berlin:** Right. It's a safe place to be all the bad things that a teenager can be.

**Eric:** Right. It's a safe place to be violent or a safe place to smoke.

**Rich Berlin:** But that's not a program.

**Eric:** Right. So that's interesting because if you hold yourself up to the test, particularly with older youth, you have more of a choice. And you hold yourself up to the test of they say they vote with their feet, so if you're doing something engaging and interesting and they come, then you've passed the test to some extent. But then you all went and opened a school of your own where young people have less of a choice about whether to be there or not.

**Rich Berlin:** So the rationale behind our school was this. It's that our programs, if we are immodest and maybe even if we're modest in some regards, we think have anomalous impacts on kids. That young people who start in our program at a very early age and finish in it or go through it over five, six, seven, 10 years. Universally graduate high school, almost universally go to college, almost universally don't get pregnant. And we think universally build a whole set of life and work skills which will serve them very well beyond East Harlem or beyond their days at Harlem RBI. So that's exciting, it's powerful.

I think it helps give kids a chance to raise their families out of poverty. Poverty that they typically grow up in if they're here in our program. And that's a pretty big deal. It's pretty exciting stuff. Kids love being here. We have this incredible community. And maybe I should even say like not kids who go through our programs. Kids who sort of reside in and help shape the culture we create here.

So it's very powerful. Our mission statement at Harlem RBI, the tag line on our mission statement reads that we help kids recognize their potential and realize their dreams. I think in fact that the programs that we run, the work that we do is off the charts on the recognize their potential part. We really open kids eyes to what they can be in the world. What they should be in the world.

On the realize their dreams part, on the we put kids on an even playing field or above any other kid in the world and they can go do anything they want. If they want to be a baseball player. If they want to be a stock broker. If they want to be a teacher. If they want to be president of the United States, they can do that. Well, I actually don't. We felt pretty strongly that our programs didn't do that. And the reason they didn't do that is because they didn't give kids a set of hard skills required to be able to do that.

We help make our kids incredibly resilient. We think skilled in navigating the world in lots of different ways, skilled at avoiding many of the potholes that any kid, let alone kids in East Harlem can fall into. But if you go to a failing school from 8:30 am until 3:00 pm

every day for 12 years, your chances of realizing your dreams are pretty diminished regardless of how fantastic the after school out of school program you go to every day for those 12 years is. Because we don't do reading and writing and maths here.

I mean, we do, but we don't do it the way school does it. We're not going to try. First of all, that's not why kids come here. Second of all, it's not what we're great at doing. And third of all, even if we were great at doing it, we wouldn't have enough time to do it in the appropriate way. So that's why Harlem RBI is an after school out of school summer program. Whatever you want to call it.

But if you have relationships with children for a decade and you're proud of yourself for being a key driver or lever in helping them get to college, which no one in this community does virtually. Or one in 20 kids do in this community. We were not real comfortable with the idea that they could go do that with an eight grade or sixth grade or fifth grade education. Which in many cases was what was happening.

And not wanting to turn our after school programs into something else, we decided that we had both an opportunity and therefore responsibility to do something about that. And that's what school is. And then we thought that we don't just want school to be a place where you do English, language arts, and math and science. We want it to be a place where all these other things happen. And we've already got an after school program and social services and family programs that we could wrap around the school. And suddenly it started looking pretty appetizing. And that's where that came from.

**Eric:** When did the school start?

**Rich Berlin:** It opened in 2008.

**Eric:** It opened in 2008. And what are the grade levels at the school?

**Rich Berlin:** It's now K to four. K to eight charter, I'd be very surprised if it didn't turn into a K to 12 charter.

**Eric:** So you add a class ever year. And how many kids are in this school?

**Rich Berlin:** 250. 250 kids per grade. 25 per section.

**Eric:** OK. So you set out to start this school for the reasons you just described. And then what's been your experience for the past few years running this school? Before you answer, it's an interesting process from the point of view of after school programs. Because we work with a lot of programs who feel very frustrated because they're so committed to supporting the young people in their program. And they want to really support their success in school, but they don't want to spend all their time doing remedial supports.

And even if they do spend a lot of their time doing remedial supports, they feel like if the kids are in like you said a failing school or are not engaged in their school experience, then they're really just working around the edges. And they're trying to take a strong youth development approach, which the school might not be taking. And, they're trying

to take a strong youth development approach which the school might not be taking. And, they're trying to support the academic progress of the kids, which feels like they need to do more of the same that the school is doing that they don't really agree with the way it's being done. So, they feel like they are in this very frustrated position and feeling increasingly like the weight of the world is on their shoulders because the pressure is on them to do it all.

And, I've heard some of the leaders of those organizations discuss the idea of, "Well, why don't we just start our own school?" And, you all went ahead and did it and have been successful in it for the past few years.

So, I am curious about what your experience has been and what guidance or advice you might suggest to other afterschool programs who are in that difficult position.

**Rich Berlin:** So, first to note on like after school remediation or even afterschool academic programs that exist to fix what doesn't happen in school.

**Eric:** Yeah.

**Rich Berlin:** Afterschool programs don't have the time, the resources, or the expertise to do that. And, I think it's a massive waste of time and money to try. That is not to say that kids don't need it, right? Like, kids do need to know how to learn to read and write, and all those things. But, I really don't believe that you can be very effective at it, if that's like what you are like trying to do in afterschool. I think there are lots of ways to enhance learning out of the school day and in the school day. But from a straight like - You know, our mission is to fix what didn't happen in school. Well, if it's not getting done in those seven hours with four times as much money, I can assure you it's not getting done in the hour and a half to three hours that you have. And, I can also assure you that many kids get out of fifth grade and no one's coming to your program either. So, there's my two cents on that business.

And truthfully, I don't think there are too many people in the afterschool world who would disagree with that.

**Eric:** Well...

**Rich Berlin:** I think people get forced into doing that kind of work and for all sorts of stupid reasons, mostly having to do with bad policy. But anyway, that's what...

**Eric:** Well it's interesting though, because I recently had a chance to talk with Earl Martin Phalen...

**Rich Berlin:** Yeah.

**Eric:** ...who founded Bell and Summer Advantage, and now runs an organization called Reach Out and Read. And, we had an interesting conversation about the issue of afterschool academics. And, he has very strong views on the necessity to hire credentialed teachers in the afterschool program and in summer programs, and to do really focused academic enrichment work. I think it's funny. The word remediation is a

funny one because it's pretty much only used in a negative way - like people sort of cast dispersions on remediation. No one defends the remediation. People defend academic practice, and academic enrichment, and academic support which often times takes the form of...

[crosstalk]

**Rich Berlin:** Yeah.

**Eric:** ...what we...

**Rich Berlin:** It's a pretty...

**Eric:** ...call remediation.

**Rich Berlin:** ... fine line there. Yeah.

**Eric:** Yeah, I think it's semantics. But, it's semantics based on a set of values, right? So, the language that you use is sort of based on what you value and what you want to defend. But, it would be interesting to have that conversation with Earl or with others from Bell who do take...

**Rich Berlin:** Yeah.

**Eric:** ...a pretty strong stance on that. They sort of stake out that territory that as afterschool programs we can make a difference in the academic success of young people - academics success as defined by how the regular school day defines academic success. And, they have all their evaluation data and all that which they use to back up those claims. And, I tend to agree with your perspective that you just described. And, I do think that in some ways, it's the broader perspective. But, it's not the one you hear publicly defended as much.

**Rich Berlin:** Yeah. Well, first of all, here's what I say about Bell and Earl is they're, you know, incredible leaders in this field and this work. And I don't think at heart they're academicians. I think at heart they're youth developers. I think there's some significant differences between the way they program and we do. But, there's some good reasons for what they do, and why they do it, and how they do it. And, I think they're probably better at that version of it than anybody else.

**Eric:** Right.

**Rich Berlin:** All that said, I think Bell should open schools. If they want to build educated leaders for life, they should build it all day long.

**Eric:** Right.

**Rich Berlin:** That's my very highfalutin and unfair advice which certainly Tiffany and Earl don't need from me... [crosstalk]

**Eric:** Well, why is it unfair?

**Rich Berlin:** ...successful. Because like, I'm sitting a million miles away at my own desk, you know...

**Eric:** OK.

**Rich Berlin:** ...and have chose our own path. And like, they're enormously successful, and credible, and smart, and passionate people.

**Eric:** Sure.

**Rich Berlin:** And, they can do whatever they want. For us, what I should say...

**Eric:** Yeah.

**Rich Berlin:** ...is, for us...

**Eric:** Yeah.

**Rich Berlin:** ...you know, we felt, in order to credibly, effectively build educated leaders for life, we needed more time. And, the only place to get that time was during the school day. And, in particular, the only place to get that time and still do all the other quote/unquote "soft stuff" that we deeply, deeply, deeply believe in, like we really needed the whole day - like eight am until 8pm, or later, and weekends, and summers, and, etc, etc.

**Eric:** Hey, podcast listeners, I am actually doing an unusual thing in interrupting the conversation here, because I was so intrigued by what Rich said about that Bell should start a school. And, what I was so eager to find out what Earl Martin Phalen, the Founder and CEO of Bell and Founder and current CEO of Summer Advantage and Reach Out and Read, would have to say about that, that I went ahead and gave Earl a call after this conversation with Rich and played for him the clip you just heard of Rich saying essentially, with all due respect, if they want to really fulfill their mission, they need to start a school. And, Earl had pretty surprising response. Remember when you listen to this that Earl founded Bell and he also founded Summer Advantage. He currently runs Summer Advantage as well as Reach Out and Read, not Bell. So, his response really comes more from a Summer Advantage perspective. But philosophically, it's still just as relevant.

So, what we're going to do is listen a bit to a brief conversation, a phone conversation, I had with Earl, and then jump back into the conversation with Rich.

So, what did you think about what Rich said?

**Earl Martin Phalen:** Well, I think his advice - it's great advice. And, I guess, the good news is we're actually in the process, right now, at Summer Advantage of launching a network of charter schools in Minneapolis and Indiana.

**Eric:** Oh, really? I didn't know that. So, this is a good opportunity to [laughter] announce that. That's interesting timing.

**Earl:** Yeah. So, I love his advice. And, he should know that we're taking it.

**Eric:** And just to be clear, he was talking about Bell because that was the example that came up.

**Earl:** Right, right, right.

**Eric:** And, you're talking about charter schools that Summer Advantage is going to launch.

**Earl:** Yep, Summer Advantage is going to launch a network a charter schools. And, we're going to start right in our back yard in Indiana.

**Eric:** Well - And, what led you to that decision? Was it similar thinking to what Rich just described or were there other factors at play as well?

**Earl:** Yeah, I think it's twofold. I think we feel that we bring excellence to education and if we can take what we do in five or six weeks of the summer and make that the year-round experience for children, and for families, and for educators, we believe that our children will do extraordinarily well.

**Eric:** Do you see this as a potential evolution of the field of after-school and out-of-school time or even a trend in after-school and out-of-school time to move towards - for youth organizations that started out as, you know, organizations that work with young people outside of the regular school day or the regular classroom environment starting their own schools and sort of becoming the institution that they used to serve as a supplement to?

**Earl:** I am not sure if it's a movement. I think that the economic times, realities of most non-profits in the out-of-school times space right now, has been, really, holding on for dear life and trying to just continue to provide the services that they provide to children and families. And so, it's hard to be incredibly strategic when you're fighting for survival. That said, I think there's a small group of non-profits that continue to not only survive but actually thrive in this economic environment. And so, when you have the blessing to be strategic and you're concerned that our policy makers seem to be in an unethical, uncaring fight for power as opposed to service to the nation and to those who are most down and out, I think that forces one to at least look strategically and say, what else can we do?

And, some people are choosing to run for office. And, some people are choosing to start low-profit companies. And, others are saying - You know, what we came up with at Summer Advantage is we can leverage our experience working with children and families to make this a year-round experience for our children and families. But, not everybody is in that. And, quite frankly, the vast majority of non-profits, I don't think, are in that place.

**Eric:** Is there anyone in particular we should know about from our field who's chosen to run for office?



**Earl:** Well, Alan Khazei, founder of City Year, founder of Be The Change, is running for senator here in Massachusetts.

**Eric:** Oh, really? That's interesting. I didn't know about that.

**Earl:** Yeah.

**Eric:** Yeah. Well. All right. Well, he might be an interesting future guest for Please Speak Freely then. That'll be a first.

**Earl:** Yeah. No, he'll be a great - And, he's one of the most talented leaders that I have come across in my 20 years in the sector. So, he would be a great guest.

**Eric:** Great. Well I really appreciate you taking the time to respond to what Rich had to say. I didn't know what to expect. But, I definitely didn't expect you to tell me that you actually are starting schools.

**Earl:** [laughs] Well, it's a good reminder actually because I have been beginning to - We've had a half-dozen conversations with some of the nation's top school leaders. And, this is a great reminder because it will get me down to see Rich and get his advice next time I am in New York.

**Eric:** Good. All right. Well, Earl, thanks a lot. Well, there you have it. Summer Advantage is starting their own chain of charter schools. Who knew? Anyway, we'll jump right back into the conversation with Rich.

**Rich:** So now that I've opined on everybody else's wrong way of doing things. What I would say is it's incredibly hard and humbling work. I would say that we're just now entering our fourth year. It's just starting to feel like we know what we're doing. And it's ultimately for us not only just another way to put our kids in a position to recognize their potential and realize their dreams. It's also a way to make our community stronger. It's also a way to engage with families in a more deep and meaningful way. It's also a way to expand the concept of learning. Like when people talk about Harlem RBI as an after school program. I just think Harlem RBI is a learning environment. And I think Dream is a learning environment.

And I think our real kid summer program is a learning environment. Kids learn in all sorts of different places in all kinds of different ways. And most of them are kind of important and crucial to growing up this whole healthy person. And we're not interested in growing. Had no interest in supporting the growth of the next generation of consumers. We would like to help grow the next generation of citizens and leaders.

And that's not just being good at taking a test. It's just a lot more than that. Now, all that said, they better be able to blow that test away. That's a really important skill. Those tests actually do measure whether you can read and write and do math. People might not like them, but they really do measure fairly accurately, particularly as they get harder and they get better skilled. Whether you know your Rs. But what does that have to do with being a full human being?

That's a piece of being a full human being. And there are plenty of brilliant people in the world from all sorts of backgrounds, whether it's corrupt politicians or corrupt businessmen or other sorts of horrible criminals who are smart. Really, really smart. The Enron guys were the smartest guys in the room. Right? But they had no moral code. Right? They had no ethos. They didn't care about other people. That's really important.

**Eric:** And within the school, how do you deal with the testing piece? You say it's important for them to do all that and also blow the test away. How do you prepare them to do that? Do you focus on it?

**Rich:** We don't ignore it. So in order to help third graders be ready for a national norm test, you do have to practice that test. Not all day, not all weekend, not all that. But you have to take time out to do that. So kids know how to take that test. But it's sort of not the focus of our school. I think the way we prepare kids to do that is we have balanced literacy curriculum. We have some phonics early and then it turns into balanced literacy. And we have nine different ways of teaching reading, which I'll try and figure out different ways to teach reading. And if we do that right and we give kids the skill of this is what it's like to sit at a table and fill out a form. Not perhaps the best way to do it, but a way that we're required to do it, that they'll do OK. What we won't do is spend four hours a day shooting flash cards at them getting ready to do that.

**Eric:** You don't torture them at your school?

**Rich:** No, we don't torture them. I don't think there are that many schools out there that will. I don't think there are that many great schools out there that do torture them.

**Eric:** They wait till middle or high school to.

**Rich:** Actually, I don't think there are any great schools that do torture them.

**Eric:** OK, so you said great schools.

**Rich:** Yeah.

**Eric:** I thought you said grade schools.

**Rich:** No. I think there are plenty of schools that do good on tests and do bad on tests that torture their kids. And I think there are lots of ways to do this well and lots of ways to do this poorly. I think our vote is for the holistic approach to working with children and families as possible. To the degree possible, we really believe in having kids for long periods of time, working with them in lots of different contexts. Providing them with lots of different opportunities, skills, and supports. And building on that year after year. There are other more technical ways to do that like providing academic support after school and doing it in partnership with the school. That can really move the dial for kids.

**Eric:** It's interesting to me that in all of your description of the after school programs and the school, you didn't really talk about baseball. And Harlem RBI's sort of heritage is reviving baseball in the inner city. RBI is a national initiative, right? It's not exactly a

national program. Right? But there are other RBIs around the country. Hundreds of RBIs, really?

**Rich:** Yes.

**Eric:** I didn't even realize that. We're doing a little work through a program called Good Game with Athletes for Hope with a Cincinnati RBI program out of the Cincinnati Reds. I've known for some time that Harlem RBI is maybe a little different than the other RBIs that exist out there. But it seems to me sort of telling that in all of this description of this, you haven't mentioned baseball. Can you talk about that?

**Rich:** Yeah. What do I think about that? I think probably because we just take for granted how central it is to what we do. Teams and in our case baseball and softball teams are the organizing principle of our programs here. And in that regard, fun is kind of the organizing principle of our programs here. That playing is fun and playing is work for kids. That where they learn. I don't know what more I would say about it like that except there are ways in which school is just a huge departure from that.

And I think there are ways when we see our work happening at the school or elsewhere off the field. Let's just say that. There are other ways in which when we see our work being done off the field the best it can be doing, all the values and lessons of 20 years of baseball practices and games are infused deeply into that culture. So that means a team environment where individuals have to often succeed and fail on their own.

A game where if you fail seven out of 10 times, you're successful and you need to be enormously resilient. And a place where kids build skills very slowly over long periods of time. And it takes a long time to get good at, but once you develop the muscle memory of being good at it, it actually is something that you can sort of accelerate in a certain way. A place where kids get to lead. A place where kids get to follow. A place where the set of peers, the team is a really, really powerful peer influence.

And a place where the adults, the coaches are also really central to the experience of how and why that team works. When we see our programs, our school, our classes, whatever it is working well, I think we see all the values that are infused from that playing themselves out in there. And baseball is integral to who we are and what we do. But there also is the dirty secret of we could probably do it other ways too. This is just the way we do it.

**Eric:** Well, it's funny. I was just thinking, you could do it other ways. Could you do it with other sports? Could other sports serve as the center piece of a program and of a school in the same way as baseball could? Or is baseball special as a vehicle in that way?

**Rich:** No. Baseball is special for us because it's evolved that way. But why would there be anything special about baseball? Just like there's something special about chess for chess in the schools. And there's something special about soccer for America Scores and there's something special about squash for City Squash or Squash Busters. And it's special because they've made it special. And then there's sort of this meta. And then there's the reality of doing it. And that's to me like the concept of it. To me, there's

nothing special conceptually about it. There is something special about doing it and having done it and building upon it.

And sort of the conceptual thing becoming real and then truly having a life of its own. My friends at MLB would like me to say there's something special about it. [laughs] But of course there's nothing special. There's only special about things that people make special.

**Eric:** Well, and there's something special about it maybe to you or to others who are here. And that that passion and that belief in something.

**Rich:** But I think it's very specific. Very people specific, very context specific. In our case, very neighborhood specific. And as we grow our program, it will be interesting to see. How important are all those specificities? Because I think you can also ask that question about East Harlem. There are other ways.

**Eric:** Yeah. I mean, what's funny as a tangent. It's hard for me to imagine football talked about in the same way you talked about baseball. Just because of the conflict and the violence of football. But that's probably another conversation. There's probably people who are passionate about football and could see it as a vehicle.

**Rich:** Absolutely. And I've started Netflixing Friday Night Lights.

**Eric:** Oh yeah. Where are you? Just the first season?

**Rich:** No, I'm in the third season.

**Eric:** You've still got some good shows ahead of you.

**Rich:** Well, it's amazing to me how many football games come down to the last play. [laughs] But there are lots of things not to like about Texas high school football and all that, but there's so many things to love about this coach. And the way he's trying, what he is to these kids, and what he makes the team to turn into. For these kids and for this town. There's all this horrible, ridiculous stuff about it. And there's all this amazing stuff about it. So you can do anything with enormous integrity and power and purpose. And you might talk about it differently, but I bet you could have the exact same impact.

**Eric:** But it's interesting because if someone tried to replicate that. There's a lot of talk about replication. If someone tried to replicate that and implement the coach Taylor of Friday Night Lights program, you might see a very different version of that. And it reminds me of something that I've often thought about because you hear about a lot of pilot programs all over the place and the success that they have. This was piloted and it was very successful. They did an evaluation. They showed that this intervention was very successful at preventing these behaviors. Or whatever whatever. And I have come to think that it's not any of the individual processes or content or curriculum that are the ingredient that makes it special.

What makes it special is it being a pilot program. That what's effective is piloting something because the people who come and run that are passionate and they're focused

and they're evaluating, they're reflective. They're asking people to really buy in and try something. There's a focus of energy there that whatever it is that they're piloting is almost secondary to the energy and the focus that they're bringing to it.

**Rich:** Right. So the big problem with human services is that the humans who provide those services are not replicable. Right? Humans are people, they're individuals. And you can arm them, you can do a lot of things. But if you do not have an amazing, an extraordinary, almost heroic committed person who believes so deeply in our case in the youth they work with every day. And if you don't have someone similar managing them, and if you don't have someone similar managing and on up, you're going to have a very hard time scaling your work. Right? There's are no efficiencies, no real efficiencies to be had in our work. Our work is about, right, a kid with a kid, an adult with a kid. That's what our work is. It's people connecting and supporting and sharing with each other.

And yes, if Harlem RBI could figure out a way to do what it does for 10,000 people I'm sure we can find all sorts of ways to thin out some of our overhead cost. And as we grow we get more quote, unquote efficient. But we're not talking about the types of efficiencies that - you know, can do is turn a \$1,500 summer program into \$150 summer program and have the same impact. And in many ways if I want my \$1,500 summer program to serve 1,000 kids instead of 100, I might even have to invest more. I bet I do. I know I do.

**Eric:** Even putting the efficiencies and the money aside. There's a real question about whether just the idea of replicating is even possible. Or not possible, it's certainly possible.

**Rich:** Well, it's really happening.

**Eric:** That actually leads me to another question that I had for you. Before we started recording we were talking about some other organizations in the field, and I won't name the names now as we're recording. But we were talking about the notion that programs don't always live up to their hype. And that there are people who are very strong voices for their own programs or their own organizations who have excelled at describing their program. But when you go and visit the program, you find out that it's not how they described it to be. But most people don't go visit the program. And particularly most people who are audiences at fundraisers and business people.

And that kind of audience who might be willing to give some money and resources to help continue the organization, to support the organization aren't necessarily going to visit the program. And if they do, they're often led on a site visit that is going to be a constructed version, or a constructed vision of the program. Not just the ever day, what the program looks like. We were joking around a little bit. But do you think that that's an issue or a problem for us in the field?

**Rich:** It's a disease. [laughs] It's a total cancer. And ultimately it's not a problem for the field. It's the problem for the people the field serves. Philanthropy is totally dysfunctional and irrational. Even the most rational versions of it are pretty dysfunctional and irrational and wasteful. And policies maybe even more. Policy making might even be worse in many ways. And the people to blame for that are us. We accept that. Right? I see

fundes every day. There are very few, like how many of us are willing to speak truth to power in that way? Probably not at the risk of our funding. And by the way, speaking of that, speaking of like, oh, this guy is all hype and all this. Well, you know what?

Obviously I believe deeply in what I do. I think we run model work in many instances. I think there are plenty of places we can improve, etc., etc. Like all of us should be a little bit careful about casting stones. How much time do I spend visiting other people's programs? Not a ton. But yeah, there should be a better way. We all should be more honest with each other, with our fundes, with our electives, with our policy makers.

But the structure of nonprofits is a pretty dismal thing generally. When nonprofit boards work, they make incredible sense. I think they're incredibly powerful. And Harlem RBI happens to have what I think is like a world class board. People who really govern, focus on policy strategy, resource development. Trust the staff to be good at what they do, but ask the staff to prove it to them in meaningful ways. I think they're awesome. Most boards aren't like that. Most boards are really detached. Or the other side, they're really connected and therefore are too much like the clients.

Right? And then don't have the resources and connections to help an organization move the dial. So you've got a really bad societal structural problem. I think private philanthropy is in many instances, in its worst instances, kind of a really ugly form of social control. I don't understand why foundations get to give away five percent of their assets a year in existing perpetuity.

**Eric:** What should they do?

**Rich:** They should give away everything. Like I'm only going to give you enough to survive on? Like, what? What sort of weird, bizarre. On the other hand, say you have a billion dollar foundation. It's really hard to give away a billion dollars. But then all I'm really going to get into is my thoughts on the distribution of wealth in this country and other things like that, which would really make me unpopular with some of our fundes. But first and foremost, providers and leaders like myself are to blame for how things are.

**Eric:** How could we do it differently? How could leaders - and I don't say we, putting myself in the same category. Not just leaders of organizations, but there are leaders of organizations who choose to play a more public role. And there are some that stay inside more. How could those who play that more public role be more honest or represent things more authentically?

**Rich:** Well, I think we could be more honest in representing. I mean, we could be more honest. Right? We could say that your \$25,000 grant sucks. Not only is it not enough money to do anything real with, but it's totally inefficient in many ways. Right? Oh, and if I do well with this 25, I'll get 30 next year. Or the other way, which is like, we raise money here at Harlem RBI both ways. And there are people who come to our gallery who write that \$25,000 check because someone wrote a note on the invite saying, I hope you can join and support me. I believe in this. And we were just serving for proxies.

And like OK, I owe him a favor. He's a proxy. Whatever it is. That spectrum of giving is crazy. And it forces people to do crazy things. But it is the way our business is. And it is

the way that wealth redistributes itself. It is the structure of wealth redistribution in this country. Whether it's a public grant for too little money or a private grant for too little money, or a private gift for too much money. All those things. But I don't spend a lot of time thinking about it. Maybe that in itself is part of the problem.

**Eric:** There's an incredible book that I read recently called *Small Change: Why Business Won't Save the World*. And it's this little thin paperback, but it talks about the toxic model of philanthropy and how it's gotten even more toxic as it's gotten more market driven.

**Rich:** Yeah. Well, let's be very clear. Business exists to be in business. And strategically it is intelligent to make philanthropy part of your business model. For your business. How many private companies even maintain philanthropic giving when profits go down? Right? Like, no, because that's not core. That's not core. Or a few maybe it is core. But when you're making thin margins or negative margins, you're probably not going to be giving a whole lot of money away. And to create a system where relying on the health of a company to - you know, like relying on the health of Pfizer to fund health programs.

And it makes a lot of sense for Vizor. It's good business. And there's no question that there are a lot of people at Vizor who care deeply about these issues and world health and all those things. But the way a corporate entity acts is not necessarily how individuals would act. It's driven by its own rationale. And its own rationale is it exists to make money. And public companies exist to make money for public shareholders. They don't exist to see the vision of a compassionate founder. And that's scary and dangerous.

**Eric:** Well, I know that my being a little bit late today has made you late. And I wanted to apologize for that. And thank you very much for doing this. And for everything you do for kids. You're actually the first person I've had on *Please Speak Freely* who is currently running a direct service organization, so I was really excited to talk to you for that. Because it's kind of important. Thanks a lot for doing this.