



Four world-changers start and manage their nonprofit careers after graduate school with Savannah Cathers, Michela Masotti, Caroline Schiavo & Tenicia Winston
Season 1, Episode 11

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Transcript

Speaker 1:

Welcome to Asking for Good a podcast for people who want to make a difference. Hear stories from seasoned nonprofit professionals and volunteers on how to begin or further a career in making the world a better place.

Speaker 2:

I'm Katie Puer, a career fundraiser committed to making the nonprofit sector better. Our guests today are four young professionals. What connects them is that they are all recent graduates of the Masters of Science, of Nonprofit Management at Columbia University. Let's explore their unique stories of what led them to grad school and what they're doing afterward. We're thrilled for you to hear their perspectives and advice. Join us as we see how these four world changers are managing their careers in the nonprofit sector. Let's welcome our guests and first here, where are they now?

Speaker 3:

Hey, I'm Tania Winston and in just a couple weeks I'll be starting as a project manager at an educational nonprofit based here in Atlanta, Georgia. In undergrad I studied marketing and then I did Teach for America in Atlanta public schools and found myself in grad school a few years after I had started working.

Speaker 4:

Hi, I'm Michael Masad. I work at a large international humanitarian organization in New York City. I originally studied musical theater in undergrad and then pursued my masters in nonprofit management with interests in theater, the environment the international development world. And now I'm here.

Speaker 5:

Hey y'all. My name is Savannah Cathers. I'm a consultant at C C s fundraising, a global strategic fundraising firm that partners with nonprofits for transformational change. Essentially. I also have a theater background like McKala. However, I am more interested in helping the entire sector. I'm

interested in helping nonprofits regardless of their mission, not specific to theater, but all sorts of missions across the gambit of the sector. And I'm just so happy to be here.

Speaker 6:

Hi, I'm Caroline Scavo and I work in principal major Gifts at a large global environmental organization based in New York. And that's actually how I came to know Katie. So thanks Katie for inviting us. I also have experience working at healthcare nonprofits and nonprofits that work on racial justice and domestic violence. And I'll pass it back to Katie.

Speaker 2:

Well, welcome everyone. I'm thrilled you're here. And as I mentioned before, you've each graduated with this master's of Science and Nonprofit management. So tell me what drew you to the nonprofit sector and what made you even decide to apply to grad school?

Speaker 3:

So I had a very interesting experience my first year of teaching. I went through a process called Leveling, which is due to the number of students at a school and the funding and projections and found out that at my first school there were too many teachers. And so it is last one in, first one out, I was a new teacher, so that was me. Got moved to another school got a call about four weeks later, found out that I would be moved again because the numbers were actually inaccurate there as well. And then I ended up teaching fourth grade for the remaining school year. That really highlighted to me just the systemic issues that are prevalent in education and it got me thinking how I really never wanted another teacher and another set of students to experience something like that. And throughout my two years of teaching really other systemic issues within the educational field were really highlighted and I think that good teachers are extremely necessary, but I felt like my skillset would be better suited to help from a broader perspective.

Speaker 3:

And so that really led me to start thinking about how can I build other skills? And I was like, I need to build my business acumen. And that led me to look in the for-profit sector. And I actually joined a rotational management program. And in that job I was able to build a ton of data analytics skills and I was able to manage adults and learn how do you influence adults and lead them into reaching you know, a shared goal. And all the while that I was there, I still knew at the end of the day I wanted to be an a mission-driven organization. And so that led me to looking into what my next steps were. And I felt like based on my experiences in the career field and my own passions, what I wanted to do was get a formal education that could tie those together. And that's what led me to Columbia's program and how I spent the past two years.

Speaker 4:

So I was pursuing musical theater right out of college and I quickly realized that acting was not for me, but I loved that theatrical world. So I was trying to figure out my next steps in thinking about what I could do with my theatrical skills. And I was looking at theatrical organizations in New York City along with some other organizations with different types of missions. And I had the idea to to try one class in the nonprofit management program through a post ate non-degree program. It was with Professor Greg Witkowski on the role in un unique nature of the nonprofit sector. And it really just ignited my

passions, got me so excited to enter this sector that I decided to apply for the full degree and I just thought it would be the best way to open doors for all of my various interests.

Speaker 6:

And for me, you know, with graduate school it was kind of like three paths of my life. I volunteered young at my church's spaghetti separate and other church events growing up. You know, I saw my parents work in philanthropy and education and then in college I started in student government. I had various nonprofit internships, worked in my sustainability office and then I got to meet with Dr. Hanaman Atisha who solved the Flint water crisis and minor in healthcare studies and all these things kind of came to a fruition and that's what made me wanna apply to Columbia's master's program.

Speaker 5:

Similar to my colleagues, I also have an undergrad degree in theater, but you will never catch me on stage. I am a stage manager by trade, which is essentially middle management of theater. I did that for both live theater and opera work for a while. And the same problems kept occurring. Any seasoned project manager will have those same issues and concerns and obstacles that keep coming up and they just can't solve it no matter how many Gantt charts they make. I decided to flip the table and go to art administration and get my master's at the same time. And even while I was there in arts administration, I realized good business makes good art and I wanted to be there on the fore grounds, making good business for the betterment of the art that I wanted to see in the world. And that's really why I decided to go to grad school and deepen my engagement both with the work that I'm doing as an artist but also as my work as a nonprofit professional, really just to improve the world around me and make better art for myself and for my colleagues.

Speaker 2:

Fantastic. So what from the schooling stays with you? Did you have any formative classes, experience McKella, you mentioned a professor. Any other professors that come to mind?

Speaker 4:

I took another class with professor with Kowski and Caroline called Disaster Philanthropy, which is all about philanthropy and nonprofits and foundations and how they respond to natural disasters and manmade disasters. And I really credit that class for the reason that I'm in my current position at an organization that also responds to disasters and responds to hunger and poverty and inequity. The reason that that class stuck with me so much is we really dived into how nonprofits could be so well intentioned to help all of these people like you and me who get struck really hard by natural disasters or manmade disasters and fail them and how government and businesses also fail these, these people and they've lost their houses, their livelihoods. And what stood out to me about this class was how we really discussed how to respond to disasters in an equitable way, in a way that includes the people who are affected in a way that localizes solutions. And I think that is what brought me to my current job because my current job in organization has the same principles and accountability and ethics that we learned in a lecture format, but it actually enacts them with the people who are facing these disasters. So that's the class that I always go back to throughout my day-to-day job

Speaker 6:

Disaster philanthropy class that I had with you changed like how I think about things like, you know when you're at work and you're right, you write a disaster philanthropy class, a paper on the, you know,

Gulf Coast BP oil spill and it really applies to actual work you're directly doing. Like that's how you know, you know, school is comparing to what you're doing when you just connect with a professor who, who encourages you to publish articles in philanthropy papers and you know, also asked you to be an associate instructor for another course he's leading in January called Global Challenges and the Common Go, which is it connects all the things you do when you find that class in those people. That was the formative class that really made me say like you know, I'm in the right sector with environmental work as well as the right grad school program.

Speaker 5:

I know the course you guys are talking about and it's offered relatively later in the program for me. On the flip side is the really first class we took with Art Taylor ethics and the nonprofit sector, that class was foundational to how I approach everything and I think that's really foundational to how disaster philanthropy is taught. It's foundational to how the rest of the degree is taught and how we as professionals interact with this work. And it's such a honor to have the head of the Wise Giving Alliance sitting there telling us, hey this, this is the messed up thing, this is the great thing, here's what you should be looking for. This is a red flag, this is a white flag. And seeing how that blends both with us as humans and our work with the beneficiaries, like that's changed how I thought about the sector as a whole and it's changed how I thought about corporations, governments, other human beings. That course for me personally, similar to the feelings you guys have with disaster philanthropy has shifted my worldview for

Speaker 2:

Sure. Savannah, tell me about the independent sector principles that were introduced to you in that ethics class.

Speaker 5:

Really the strong part of that ethics course with Art Taylor is going through the independent sector principles for good governance and a core part of that class is going through all the principles in that and it's so enlightening to like see hey, this is what you should be doing, this is what you shouldn't be doing. And honestly I refer to it so much it's right here next to me on my desk. Those principles are just a great example of how the sector comes together to govern itself and it doesn't need external influences to do the work for us. We know it's right, we know what we should be doing and regulation can come in and help us move along the way, but the formation of the sector isn't built on that. It's built on communities coming together for the social good

Speaker 3:

Ethics and governance. I can't put enough stress on how important those two classes are, but for me another class that really stuck with me was social purpose business with John Tyler iii. In my experience, I was leaving the for-profit sector thinking that the nonprofit sector was going to really be my answer into doing good and that's how everyone needs to do good. But that class really opened my eyes to the idea that we can have for-profits, we can have nonprofits and government agencies all working towards similar goals and that in fact you need all of those people and all of those efforts because solving social issues is going to be a multi-pronged approach. There's no silver bullet for any of these missions and so there's only a finite number of resources really in the nonprofit sector. And so having social purpose businesses that are willing to contribute, you know, their time and resources and efforts towards these is absolutely essential.

Speaker 4:

I think our program in general did a really good job of being very critical of this sector through classes like ethics and disaster philanthropy, trying to like shape like the next generation of nonprofit leaders with these principles and with these ethics and with this accountability so that the sector can go forward and be the kind of sector that we learn about idealistically

Speaker 5:

A hundred percent I think we have these ideals of what social good is, but then sitting down and recognizing that it looks like you and me every, every aspect of our lives, every step that we take, every email that we send is bettering the this concept of social good

Speaker 2:

Great points. And to kind of wrap up for those thinking of more schooling or formalized education in the nonprofit sector, I endorse it. I couldn't recommend it more. The commentary about how the program you all chose is critical of this sector so that it can improve is a really great observation and something to think about as you're considering additional schooling. Good intentions in the nonprofit sector don't get you very far. Effectiveness in the nonprofit sector is what really matters. So many people have good intentions, but effectiveness and integrity and strong ethics are what really advances the social good. So let's talk about the job search and talk about how each of you have gone about it. For many people their search actually begins within to identify their own passions or a personal mission. Was this true for each of you?

Speaker 6:

Yeah, it was true for me. You know, I was always interested in environmental efforts. It just took a while because of like other, you know, other paths that lead me in because of the pandemic. But environmental's very personal to me. I wrote P papers on food deserts, I've interned for various environmental offices. Fun fact, I signed my job offer today one year ago. So I'm kind of like happy to have talk about this podcast today and talk about that my passion from a year ago is still here. It is what it is. And I think passion isn't just the cause, it's also the people you connect with. And on the interviews I had, you know, I connected with those people and those are the people who are gonna make me stay. Those people are incredible. My manager has always been an advocate for me, has always empowered me to do things and to go above and beyond and take initiative and have a lot of other advocates too, like including Katie that have encouraged me to, you know, try new things and personal passion isn't just about personal mission, isn't just about like the cause you want but the right fit for you.

Speaker 6:

And I think if you find that then you'll be set up for success and stay where you are at what organization you are for a longer period of time.

Speaker 3:

Yeah, so absolutely I had had five years of lived experiences and I knew that children education, youth development, that was really my passion. And so that's where I really dialed in my job search and you know, just thought about what are the skills that I can bring to the table that fit within certain job descriptions and job types because I think there's a job for anyone within any mission.

Speaker 4:

When I was applying to jobs, as I mentioned in my introduction, I had a bunch of different issue areas and passions that I would be happy pursuing in a job. So I initially started applying to a lot of a big range of organizations and as I narrowed in and got further along the job application process, something that was really helpful for me was just talking to everyone I knew who worked in this sector and worked in various sub-sectors within the sector or different and worked within different fields within the sector like communications versus fundraising versus project development. And that was really helpful in leading me to my current job and helping me decide what were like requirements in my search, what I really wanted. And it helped me realize that I enjoy fundraising and I enjoyed development. So that was definitely very helpful and like I agree with Caroline also that it's really important to enjoy the people that you're working with.

Speaker 4:

So as much as I love my mission and the cause of my organization what talked that and what solidified my yes was the people who I interviewed with and being able to say I wanna work with these people, I wanna talk to them every single day is why I ended up accepting this job versus other jobs. And that was the most, probably the most important part of my job search was kind of interviewing the quote, I'm using quotes right now but interviewing them as well because now I work with like the best group of people. I'm excited to come to work, I feel more passionate because I'm with people of the same passions as me and I think because of that we're doing a better job together. So my advice is definitely talk to the people in your life who work in the sector but also really think about if you would want to work with the people who are interviewing you.

Speaker 5:

I think for my experience I am both dedicated to the idea of social good and the concept of what the nonprofit sector stands for. So staunchly that for me, my passion lies on the responsibilities of the job. And there is something like that for everyone in the sector. If you are a data analyst, there's room for you. Do you code room for you? Do you like PowerPoint or an exhale? Can you make a costume or use a drill like there's room for you in the non-profit sector. And so for me it is the passion of what I physically want to do every day. And right now that's PowerPoints totally down for that right now that's having deep thinking conversations with people, Excel spreadsheets and producing excellent work from my community. And I think there is a certain approach of being so swept away with the mission of an organization but also if you don't like fundraising you can still love the environment but you can do something else for your climate based organization. And I think it's really balancing the two when it comes to approaching the work.

Speaker 2:

So I think what you're saying Savannah, is when you're identifying your passion, you're thinking about causes that matter, but also what are your passions relative to the functional needs of the nonprofit?

Speaker 5:

A hundred percent And I think yeah you're right balancing the two and your passion for the mission and your passion for the work cuz it both are available readily available.

Speaker 2:

Let me get us back to this idea of finding our passion. Were there any resources or exercises you did to help you articulate or discover your passions?

Speaker 3:

To discover my passion, I think that's really based on my years in the classroom and then stepping out of the classroom and realizing what I, what pulls I still felt towards the education system. And so you know, that's more of that internal process but as far as tools, you know, I think that reaching out to your network and using different programs that will edit your resume is really important because you want, you know, in the 30 seconds that someone has to look at your resume, you need to convey a story to them and show them what type of skills you have and also just practicing your interview because interviewing is truly a skill and I believe that anyone can become good and confident in it and you'll be most confident. I noticed this with myself. When you're looking for a job and you are so certain of yourself and why you showed up to this interview and what you would bring to this team and what you're hoping to bring that you are having that two-way dialogue between you and the interviewers because really in, especially in I think the nonprofit sector, you are gonna pour so much of yourself into this job that you want to make sure that on both ends you know it's a fit and that you're getting the things out of this job that you were hoping to and you know, you are finding just finding your place.

Speaker 6:

For me, like a lot of the extracurriculars I did in undergrad were almost like fundraising positions but volunteer based. So like that's kind of what made me draw to the sector comparing the fundraising aspect with knowing the sub-sector I wanted. And then I've read a lot of good books like recently how to Avoid a Climate Disaster by Bill Gates is really great and that's like environmental and then like pursuing passion I've read like written by Angela Duckworth. So there's a lot of great books out there that have also encouraged me to like, you know, use my resources. And then something like that helps with personality is I've taken the Myers BRI test so many times, I don't know if everyone knows what that is. It's like a standard like personality test in the industry and that helped me identify that, you know, I'm like the outgoing person who would be a good fundraiser and a good communicator. Those are just some things I've picked up

Speaker 2:

And Savannah,

Speaker 5:

Thank you. I point blank Googled values of values and exhaustive list of values and I went through and I circled the ones that I liked and I narrowed the list down and I came up with my five values that I used to define myself. And from there I practiced the heck out of my elevator pitch. I perfected who I am and how I can articulate that to others while also staying true to my values and that helped me tremendously in the job search. You can take that list of values and look at if it's a good nonprofit, they'll have their values on their website and just look at the two back to back

Speaker 4:

To articulate my passion. Something that was helpful for me was informational interviews, which I kind of discussed in the last question, but just talking to people who work at nonprofits that you think you would want to work at and hearing about their job and their work doing that was really helpful for getting me excited by the idea of working at a certain place.

Speaker 2:

Tania, you had a chance to answer this question, but your idea about informational interviews verse real interviews is one I don't want us to miss.

Speaker 3:

Yeah, so I think it's really important to have informational interviews and that's really when, if you haven't heard of that term, it's when you are seeking out people that are doing something that you think you are interested in, that you want to learn more about and you want to be driving that conversation and asking, you know, what was their roadmap there gaining as much information, what do they like about it, what would they change about it? What type of problems do they run across on a day-to-day basis And based on you know, your background, what are some of the most important skills that someone could gain in order to get to this point? And really you are taking in like data points there and you're not necessarily trying to sell yourself, you are trying to just show how interested you are and them and really learn from them versus you know, interviews or introductions that people make on your behalf where they are trying to introduce you to someone who could potentially be an employer for you.

Speaker 3:

And if you know that you're interested in that job, then in that case you do want to be you know, better aligned and talking more on your end about your skills and your experiences and sharing those type of things and not necessarily asking the same types of questions. And there are two very distinct types of conversations and I think they're both extremely important to find. I think informational interviews help inform how you are going to enter your actual job interviews or those you know, connections that folks make for you and you don't have to be quite as polished in those informational interviews. And you know, people are really happy I think to have informational interviews with you especially students or folks that are trying to switch gears in their career because it's actually a layer of pressure off from them because they aren't looking for a candidate to fill a position, you know, they get to talk about their work and people especially in the nonprofit sector are extremely passionate about what they do and are, you know, more than happy to share and really happy to help.

Speaker 3:

And in my experience I'd say, you know, more than nine times outta 10 after those people are saying, you know, please keep in contact with me. Let me know how your job search is going, if there's anything I can do. And they'll offer up the type of skills like they have like Hey, I can look over your resume. Hey I actually think based on this conversation that I know someone at you know, X and Y organization who might want to talk with you. And those things can lead and they build upon each other.

Speaker 2:

Great, thank you all. Let's talk about job search advice in general. Previously you've all mentioned or told me that Work for Good is a website that you can't miss if you're looking for work in the nonprofit sector.

Speaker 4:

I actually have not heard of work for Good, but I've always used like LinkedIn and also just going to the websites of the organizations I love and seeing their listings. But my advice for the job search and in general to live by is to always be nice to everyone. Like you never know who's going to give you a job, you never know the different paths your life is gonna take, but just be nice to everyone in everything you do. Be a compassionate, empathetic person and it should lead you to the right place. I think.

Speaker 6:

And I'll echo that like, you know, it depends on what sector you're looking at in nonprofits, like for me I knew I wanted fundraising, so association with fundraising professionals, that's a really common, you know, website. But if you're looking like, you know, nonprofit broadly, there's more broad nonprofits websites, there's also environmental specific. And again such a small world, like I found out after I got my job that people I knew people that knew of me through other people. So like I'll just say like you'll never know who's looking out for you and just keep that in mind that you need to be really nice to everyone because someone who you talked to once in your life may be the person who gets to your job which I found out <laugh>.

Speaker 4:

Yeah, and along that note also like reach out to people like people, most people are okay with you reaching out and asking what's your job like, are there any openings? Like reach out to someone that you had a five minute conversation with in class. As long as you're nice, they're likely to wanna help you out.

Speaker 5:

Yeah, I think a strong network is definitely an underutilized resource, but it's also talked about all the time and it could sound redundant but we can't speak strongly enough of it. I think on the flip side of that, a strong sense of self, if you are in the wrong role at the wrong company and you know that six months in it's okay to smile, be nice and find something that works for you. I think I've had like three roles just while I was getting my degree and I lived in two different places. And I think that that is foundational. Knowing yourself and knowing where you sit and knowing what works for you and what doesn't work for you,

Speaker 3:

That's really important to understand yourself. And so taking the time when you know that you want to switch jobs or that it's time for you to leave is really important. And I've done it a couple of times and sitting down with yourself and asking what it is that you want to get out of your next role and next position and actually taking the time to write that down is extremely important because it helps you understand what values you have. I knew what sector I wanted to go into. I knew what salary I was going to accept and what I wasn't going to accept. And I also knew like what skills I had on the table and what I wanted to continue to work on, what I enjoyed in my previous jobs and what I wanted to be stretched in. And I also took the time to actually go to folks who I feel like either know me personally really well or professionally really well and actually made a Google doc a questionnaire for them and I asked them things like what would you say are my top three skills?

Speaker 3:

What do you think as far as my education or you know, technical skills that I could learn that would make me a stronger candidate. And even to the point of, you know, what kind of job do you see me in and as a good fit because I trust those people. And not that you have to follow what everyone else around you is saying, but it's good to get an outside perspective and also craft that into, you know, your resume and into your cover letter and into the story that you tell in an interview or all really good. And also it will help you if you've taken the time to be reflective that you can connect those dots for future employers. Because if you take a look at my resume, I started out in the classroom, I moved to corporate America you know, in a managerial role and then I was looking for an education nonprofit and people

that can be a hard line to connect for folks, but if you have a really good story to tell, then people are gonna be willing to listen and will be even more interested in you.

Speaker 2:

Excellent. Well let's take a moment and allow each of you to give yourself advice. In hindsight, what advice would you give yourself five years ago?

Speaker 4:

Well, my program in college, my musical theater program was very much had the mentality like acting is the end all be all. And I wish five years ago I knew that I wasn't in that there are so many different paths that you could take and be happy. You never know where life is going to lead you. So just keep learning and trying new things and you'll find your way.

Speaker 3:

Five years ago I was in still my first year of teaching and I think I would tell myself one year going to get through this experience of being in, you know, three different schools at three different grade levels and it's going to make you better at your future jobs because you're really used to change and adversity. And so, you know, take it in stride, but it's also very valid to feel the way you're feeling, feeling. And I think on just a second note is as important as it is to listen to other people and to, you know, hear what advice they have to say, being extremely clear about what it is that you want is at the end of the day the most important thing because people will oftentimes be very excited to help people find their next role. And if you aren't extremely clear on your end about what it is you want to be doing, people can end up leading you down paths that you aren't interested in. And that could be just a waste of time on either person's end. And so it's okay to tell folks, you know, thank you for offering that, however, I don't think it quite fits with what I'm going for. And to figure out a way to articulate to them what it is that you do want and what would be most helpful because people are willing to be helpful in a lot of different ways.

Speaker 5:

Yeah, I would tell five years ago me that I don't know a single thing and that's okay. You just need to buckle up, be humble, express gratitude, and be willing to learn for at least the next 15 years <laugh>.

Speaker 6:

And I would echo both of those things and just saying, you know, pursue your passion, number one, keep willing to learn, you don't know like where you'll be. And always, you know, stay humble. I was originally an electrical engineering major five years ago and now I've changed completely to transfer schools. I changed majors. I was a political science major and now like, you know, it's a whole different ballgame. So you can make your own path, carve your own path and use the people you know and help with your network to figure out the best steps for you and your future.

Speaker 2:

Thanks to each of you for being here, for sharing your experience, sharing your advice.

Speaker 6:

Thank you for having us Katie. Thank you <laugh>.

Speaker 5:

Thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

Speaker 3:

Thank you Katie for getting all of us together, being able to talk about this. It was really great to hear and I know I've learned a lot from my colleagues today.