

**“Lesson Earned” Podcast
Strada Education Network
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Season 3, Episode 6: Gerald Chertavian

TRANSCRIPT

Host Ben Wildavsky, Strada Education Network

[00:00:01] Hi, I'm Ben Wildavsky.

Host Aimée Eubanks Davis, Braven

And I'm Aimée Eubanks Davis.

Ben Wildavsky

And this is “Lessons Earned.”

Aimée Eubanks Davis

Today, the founder and CEO of Year Up, Gerald Chertavian.

Audio Clip

Gerald Chertavian

[00:00:09] This is about recognizing where we are in the country with a lack of opportunity, with education being hard to access for so many, and to say, look, this won't build a country where you would say, “We want to pass that on to our children.”

Ben Wildavsky [00:00:30] From Strada Education Network, welcome to “Lessons Earned: Putting Education to Work.”

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:00:44] It is no secret that there are hundreds of thousands of young people in this country who are struggling to be meaningfully connected to school or to work. These young people have enormous unrealized potential. They are our country's “opportunity youth.”

Ben Wildavsky [00:01:01] That's right, Aimée. And Gerald Chertavian was ahead of the curve in seeing the potential in this group. Gerald is the founder and CEO of Year Up, which is a national nonprofit that takes young people with no income or very little income and gets them into jobs that lead to a ladder of strong, better-paid careers,

usually with a Fortune 500 company. And as the name suggests, they do this in just a year — six months of training and a six-month internship — which helps people who need a job right now to support themselves and their families.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:01:33] Ben, Gerald is a phenomenal entrepreneur and a real source of inspiration to me, especially when I think about the guidance that he gave me when I started Braven. He always made time to chat. And that was particularly meaningful because in so many ways, Year Up is the gold standard of opportunity youth programs. They've raised wages for this group of young adults more than any other program in the history of the United States.

Ben Wildavsky [00:02:02] Aimée and I wanted to talk to Gerald about how exactly he managed to do that.

[00:02:07] But for Gerald, this is a really personal endeavor, too. So that's where we started our conversation.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:02:17] So how do you personally think about the work that Year Up does, like, at its core, what does Year Up mean to you?

Gerald Chertavian [00:02:24] It starts with a fundamental belief system. We believe that every young adult has potential and deserves opportunity and economic justice.

[00:02:37] So at its very core, we think about Year Up, it is about providing young adults with opportunity. It's recognizing that our young adults need a hand up, not a handout. And it's recognizing that for so many individuals in this country, they need a clear, visible path to get to a livable-wage job and a career that they can sustain themselves and their families as they go forward.

Ben Wildavsky [00:03:03] Yeah, I mean, this whole idea of a clear pathway is so crucial. We just hear that over and over. I wonder if you could talk to us about your own pathway. You know, what drew you to this in the first place?

Gerald Chertavian [00:03:16] I was inspired originally to start Year Up as a result of being in the Big Brothers program, which I have now done for about 37 years. And one of my most formative, privileged experiences was working with a young boy who lived in the Lower East Side of Manhattan back in the late '80s, who lived in the most heavily photographed crime scene in New York City.

[00:03:39] And I was blessed to be his Big Brother. And I spent every Saturday in my life with David — in fact, I just talked to him this weekend for about an hour — but I spent every Saturday of my life in the housing development in which he lived. This is at the height of the crack and AIDS epidemic in our country. And it was so clear to me after a few years of Saturdays that David had all the potential in the world, all the ambition, all the skills.

[00:04:08] Yet fundamentally, what was holding him back with things like his ZIP code, the bank balance of his mom, the color of his skin, and indeed the school system he was attending. And that struck me as so wrong, that we were limiting so many people's potential for all the wrong reasons. And it felt like a tremendous waste of human capital in a country where we have no one to waste. And it was at that point, back in the late '80s, that I made a kind of vow to myself that if I was so fortunate and privileged to be in the position, that I'd be able to dedicate my life to trying to close what we call the opportunity divide, which was so clearly manifest in getting to know David and understanding his particular situation.

Ben Wildavsky [00:04:57] So this is the late '80s, and how old were you at that time when you started the Big Brother program?

Gerald Chertavian [00:05:03] Well, I really started in college, so I would have been a teenager so late teens. When I was in New York City, I was at that point working for Chemical Bank in a credit training program, so I would have been in my just graduated college, 22 probably.

Ben Wildavsky [00:05:20] So you were really, you were kind of on Wall Street. That's kind of an interesting contrast with the kind of work you ended up doing. Can you just talk a little bit about the Wall Street perspective you sort of started with and how that led you to where you are?

Gerald Chertavian [00:05:32] Yeah, you know, I loved working on Wall Street. It's pretty exhilarating as a young person. I loved the intellectual challenge. I liked understanding economics and business. But I knew really clearly that that wasn't going to fulfill me. And so I actually wrote my essays to get into graduate school about starting Year Up.

[00:05:53] In fact, that essay was sent back to me by the head of admissions at Harvard Business School years later. It was typed, typed up on an old typewriter, and he said, "Hey, you kind of did what you said you were going to do." But, you know, I knew that at that point I had no experience. I had no network, I had no contacts, I had no money.

And I needed to get experience and access. And so I recognized, I guess, that I needed to have before I could give.

[00:06:24] And I think it's something I've talked to a lot of folks about is in order to serve others, to give to others, it's OK to have a period in time where you're acquiring whatever it is that you need in order to be a strong giver and to twist that dial. I always think there's a dial in life between taking and giving and being conscious of the course of your life of, well, where's my dial?

Ben Wildavsky [00:06:47] Yeah, of course. Well, listen, I want to get to the details of the program itself, but I want to just step back for a second and hear a little more about David. When you were seeing him every Saturday, I think it was more than a decade, what was that like for you at the time?

Gerald Chertavian [00:07:03] It was the best education I could ever have gotten in my life. So people, you know, people ask, who's your best teacher? My best teacher is a 10-year-old boy from the Dominican Republic named David. You know, because I didn't understand the opportunity divide.

[00:07:20] I didn't understand how systemic racism was so radically impacting so many people's lived experience in this country. I didn't understand the reality of what is life like for many, many tens of millions, if not hundreds of millions, of our fellow citizens who actually have the ambition and the talent and don't yet see the path. Right? When you look up at the ladder and you can't even see the rung on the ladder, that's not a good place to be. And we have so many of our citizens who can't see that next rung on the ladder.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:07:53] Yeah, it's so inspiring, always, to hear about you and your passions and how Year Up came to be.

[00:08:02] Gerald, can you talk to us a little bit more about the brass tacks of how it works, how Year Up actually brings the very important work from a programmatic standpoint to life? What does it look like?

Gerald Chertavian [00:08:15] Sure. So that kind of traditional model of Year Up, which is evolving, as you would expect, over 20 years, for that traditional model, was recruiting and admitting a young adult who comes to our program for six months of training, learning, and development. Typically that's full-time. They receive a stipend. They're often dual-enrolled in a community college so they are earning college credit. They're

learning both hard and soft skills. And interestingly, it's really the professional, or the soft skills, that is one of the biggest gaps for young people today.

[00:08:51] So they're learning that over six months, and then for six months of being placed into an internship or a work-based experience, typically at a Fortune 500 organization, where they have an opportunity to really now show what it is they can do. For the employer, it's an opportunity to kind of try someone out before you hire them. And as a result of that, our young adults are able to be seen in ways that often without that four-year degree, it would be impossible for them to be seen in these types of career paths. And as a result, today, we're one of the very few organizations, I think maybe either the largest or one of the largest — it's kind of a question of whether one or two — in terms of placing low-income young adults of color into the Fortune 500. There's almost no one else who places more young adults of color into career jobs, right into livable wage jobs, in the Fortune 500 in this country than Year Up, and I'm proud of that.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:09:54] Yeah. So is gainful employment the primary objective, or are there another set of objectives that you're going after?

Gerald Chertavian [00:10:10] We talk about and position ourselves as a work-first program, and I'll explain why. It doesn't mean that we don't focus on educational attainment, but in our view, given who we serve, in the average income of our students is less than \$10,000 a year, if you can't feed your belly, you cannot feed your brain in this country. And so we recognize for those that we serve, and we serve a particular group of young people, getting stable income is the prerequisite to continuing on with your postsecondary education. And so our students leave with a livable-wage job and a what we call a kind of educational success plan that says how will they continue to further their education.

[00:10:56] Ours is not to say there's one path to your postsecondary education. It's you must continue learning, period. Now let's help figure out what does that mean for you? How does it manifest for you? What's right, given your own situation? But you can now do that from a position of economic stability as opposed to instability, which, you know, frankly, the numbers of folks dropping out of community college today, when asked why, it's largely finance that is the No. 1 driver behind that. And so if you don't tackle these concomitantly, I don't think we're going to make progress as a country the way we need to.

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:11:32] Yeah. Gerald, do you believe, though, that higher ed or a postsecondary experience has to be that pathway over time for the vast majority of

people? This is something that we've talked a lot on the show with various people about. As you could imagine, the opinions are wide and vast.

[00:11:50] So we'd love to hear your thoughts on this.

[00:11:52] Like there's real conversations around education in a more traditional sense, whether that's the associate degree, the bachelor's degree, or in a more nontraditional sense, certificates or stackable certificates, sort of where do you net out on that?

Gerald Chertavian [00:12:10] Not surprising that there's a divergence of opinion because we're at a significant change point and inflection point, I think, in our country, where for many folks, understanding how to become employable in a livable-wage job market may be more linked to certificate, certification, specific skill development, apprenticeship opportunities. And so I would argue that that will grow. It for sure doesn't obviate the need and the expectation for folks to continue to consume what are more traditional degree-based programs. And I would say to students, I would never tell students not to pursue that path. Yeah, and I'm honored to write references for our students to the very best graduate schools in this country. But the fact is, is that the age I believe the shift we'll see is younger folks, given the economic insecurity so many Americans face, will be more motivated to do things that end up in employment and from a place of stability than continue to learn in a lifelong manner that will ultimately result in degree attainment. But I think the age of degree attainment for bachelor's degrees, Bachelor of Arts, has been going up, and I would argue it's going to continue to go up as individuals need to satisfy both their economic needs as well as their educational needs.

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Ben Wildavsky [00:13:44] So, Gerald, let's talk about results. When people ask if this has been effective, if Year Up has been effective, are there specific numbers that you point to?

Gerald Chertavian [00:13:52] Sure, we're blessed. We've had several randomized controlled trials now completed on Year Up. And this is not Gerald talking. This is the federal government who over seven years conducted these studies. They will tell you Year Up has always raised wages for low-income young adults more than any other program in the history of the United States, period. And that's been validated. That's not my words. That's the government. That's Abt Associates. And we're incredibly proud that those results hold up, even when you disaggregate all of that data by race, gender,

age, because we serve, you know, a range of ages, and there's not another program that can tell you that same thing right now in terms of the size of the gain.

Ben Wildavsky [00:14:45] Yeah, but just in terms of sort of layman's terms, would this be primarily increased earnings or is it job placement or is it longevity in jobs?

Gerald Chertavian [00:14:53] Yes, over the four years that our students have been out of the program, they're going to earn approximately \$25,000 more than someone who is accepted into the program also but didn't come.

Ben Wildavsky [00:15:05] I am really intrigued about the employer side of this. You know, you've got partnerships with I believe it's more than 250 major employers across the country. I wonder if it's been a challenge for you over the years — it's now 20 years — convincing some of those employers that they should be starting to hire based on skills instead of degrees. You know, that's kind of a real paradigm shift.

Gerald Chertavian [00:15:30] It is. You know, Ben, when I had the good fortune to start you up, I would have walked over broken glass on my hands and knees for a quarter mile to get one internship at one employer.

[00:15:42] I mean, this was like beg, borrow, steal, lean on, cajole, persevere. And anyone, Aimée, you know this well from your background: You want to overcome inertia in life, you better be willing to work 10 times harder than you think you're going to need to.

[00:15:56] So, yeah, the early days were really hard to convince people to give us a shot. And I contrast that today. We'll place, you know, 600 people into Bank of America this year, 600 in JP Morgan, you know, 100-plus new folks like Salesforce, Microsoft, others. And they now see us as a relevant, valuable source of talent.

Ben Wildavsky [00:16:18] Yeah, but isn't it the case, though, I mean, it sounds like you're making some really significant inroads, but traditionally and I still see this in actually just today, there's some new survey data out of Strada about this, a lot of people say they want hiring to take place increasingly based on skills rather than formal credentials. A lot of employers say the same thing. But when you look at what they actually do, they hire based on credentials. So, I mean, do you still see that as a problem to be, a challenge to be addressed?

Gerald Chertavian [00:16:50] So it's changing as we speak. And I'll give you a sense of this. I was in a meeting recently with probably 15 CIOs of large companies, and I said,

“Raise your hand if you've started to get rid of degree requirements for certain aspects of your technology,” and half the hands in the room went up. The hands that went up looked at the ones that were down and said, “God, why haven't you guys done this?” I think that the key here is helping companies that say, tell me what to do to operationalize this so you can change a policy. But that doesn't change the practice, right? So what Year Up is built, we launched an organization called Grads of Life that works specifically with large companies through an advisory practice in order to help them to change and adopt what we call talent management practices that actually do lead to greater equity and inclusion. Because many folks would say, “I want to do this, but tell me the playbook. How do I do it?”

Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:17:59] So you've been at this for at least two decades now, Gerald. How are you thinking about scale now? Can you talk to us a little bit about how you're thinking about the growth of the organization into the future?

Gerald Chertavian [00:18:14] Sure. So we've grown Year Up, I would say significantly. If you look at it from purely just a growth perspective, it's probably a 20 percent CAGR, over 20 years of compound annual growth. But the reality is, serving 4,000-plus students a year is really incredible, but it's insufficient with the scale and scope of the challenge we're trying to address. So we need to test models that can scale to tens of thousands, not single-digit thousands. And, Aimée, the way to think about this is Year Up generally takes someone from zero to 60 miles an hour in some of our young adults have never turned on a PC. They've just now acquired that English language fluency. So there's an opportunity, though, to say, hey, there's a whole bunch of people out there who are working with the population we care most about in giving them some skill. So is it possible to meet people at 30 or 40 miles an hour to then do what we do really well, which is professional skills, which is coaching, student support, and then that transition into a job or an employer where we really understand those employers' needs? You can imagine that model takes less time, takes less philanthropy, could scale more quickly because you're working with a range of training providers as opposed to saying you have to do everything in an owned and operated fashion from day one.

And then the final thing is we absolutely believe that part of our remit is to help lead an employer-led movement to become what we call “opportunity employers,” which is really helping big companies. You can think of this like teaching a company how to fish so they can do this on their own. And we're seeing the impact of that in a really tremendous way where companies are saying, teach me how to do it, help me do this because frankly, we've got billions of dollars. We can move as a big company to do more of this on our own. So there's that concept of, can you help companies to change practices in ways

that create greater equity and inclusion and allow them to be doing this more and more on their own?

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Aimée Eubanks Davis [00:20:42] You've been such a pioneer in terms of bringing forth a real spotlight on the opportunity youth population of this country, the opportunity divide of the country. I personally really believe it has been your exceptional work that's produced results that has allowed people to understand the promise of that group of young people. And I know you know that there are a lot of other organizations that have come into the space of opportunity youth and really wanting to see more economic mobility of that group. So what advice do you have for them, for others who are getting started or who are a little bit further along their journey but not quite where Year Up is? What would your advice be to that group of organizations?

Gerald Chertavian [00:21:25] First of all, I would hope they always perceive us to be good colleagues. And I spend a great deal of time on the phone with social entrepreneurs in this space because I know what it was like to start with nothing. And I remember the feeling when someone cuts you a little bit of time. I also remember feeling when people said, "I don't have any time for you." And I said, look, if I'm ever in that position, let me try to be the person who says, even if it's a strange hour, which it often is for me, to try to be generous-spirited with our colleagues in this industry who are doing good work.

The advice I'd have for folks building in this field is, programs ultimately don't change the country; systemic change is what changes our country. So it's, you have to prove something. You have to prove it can be efficacious and causal. You've got to prove it can scale. But at the end of the end of the day, you also want to have a strategy that says, what's your theory around ultimately impacting the systems that perpetuate this divide, right? Yeah, it's wrong that my Little Brother, David, had such a great divide to have to walk across in this country. And so we can build, and we've built, bloody good bridges over the divide in Year Up, and colleagues have done as well. But you have to ask yourself, why is this such a divide, and what is our contribution to closing that divide such that young people don't have as far to walk to get to the door of opportunity and to get the mobility that they deserve in this country?

Ben Wildavsky [00:23:01] Gerald, you know, we probably need to to wrap up now, but you know, we we've talked about all the metrics that you use to evaluate the effectiveness of Year Up, but just to conclude, I'm wondering on a very personal level, what would success look like to you here?

Gerald Chertavian [00:23:21] Success is you don't ultimately need Year Up. At the end of the end of the day, you would want each person to be able to reach their potential based on their God-given abilities, desires, and motivations, and to not have the factors that limit people today be such incredibly hard barriers to get over. You know, success is we all win. This is about what type of society will we pass on to our children? This is about recognizing where we are in the country with inequality, with a lack of opportunity, with education being hard to access for so many, and to say, look, this won't build a citizenry in a country where you would say, "We want to pass that onto our children." So success is that you have much greater equity in terms of accessing opportunity and the ability for folks to reach their potential based on their capacity, ambition, motivation. That, to me, would be a successful place I think would benefit all of our citizens in a powerful way and, frankly, help this country grow and reach its potential as a country.

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Ben Wildavsky

[00:24:42] That was our conversation with Gerald Chertavian. See you next time, Aimée.

Aimée Eubanks Davis

Bye, Ben.

Voiceover

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