

# TRANSCRIPT

## Learning Unboxed



Episode #273

Lisa Gitelson:

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**Annalies Corbin:**

Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I'm your host and chief goddess of the PAST Foundation, Annalies Corbin. We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education. And it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard.

Welcome to today's episode. As always, I am excited to talk with another great innovator in the transformative education space. And today, we are going to be talking about summer camp as a positive disruptor in education. And joining us today is Lisa Gitelson, CEO of the Fresh Air Fund. So, Lisa, welcome to Learning Unboxed.

**Lisa Gitelson:**

Thank you for having me. Happy to be here.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Absolutely. Super excited. And so, let's set some context for our listeners as we get started. Fresh Air Fund is quite frankly remarkable because it's been around for nearly 148 years. Just wow. And so, that is a nonprofit that invites about 3000 low-income New York City-based children, ages eight to 18, to spend the summer swimming, rowing, hiking, stargazing in Fresh Air Fund camps each year.

And the Fresh Air Fund understands the importance of physical and outdoor activities and believes in the significance of sleep-away camp and the need for all children, whatever their zip code, to have access to quality summer programming. And I hope that everybody out in the world that just listened to that is cheering in the background because this is something we so desperately need.

So, Lisa, as we get started then, help us understand at a very high level before we dig into sort of the why. You know, organizations very rarely manage to hang on for a decade, much less almost 15 decades. So, help us, what do you think is the secret to the success of the Fresh Air Fund? And then, we'll dig in.

**Lisa Gitelson:**

This is a great question. I think there's two things. I think one, what we offer is so important and people recognize that, want their youth to be part of it. We're lucky to have a lot of people who believe in the work, so they support it. We have a team of staff that every day gets up because we know how important this is and comes in. So, I think the importance of the work is one of the reasons.

And we've continually innovated. We don't do today what we did in 1877. We continually self-examine, make sure we're offering what is needed. We just completed a strategic plan just a few months ago where we're looking forward to the next five years, but to continually ask what is needed in this space and to include the voices of those we serve, those who support us, those who work here, so that we really hear from everybody about what's needed in this work.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Absolutely. And I appreciate that so much because it's an epic lift what you and all of your staff and all your supporters and everybody who's sort of in and around the ecosystem that you've created. It's truly, truly an epic lift. And I hope that people understand that the work of designing, developing, implementing, carrying off really, really high quality summer programming, it's a lot.

And yet we know how incredibly impactful it is for kids. And we also know how, in many cases, it's not equitable. We know that kids of means whose families aren't struggling, oftentimes, will participate in the summer in all kinds of programming. And we know it makes such a difference in a child's identity, their experiences, all those opportunities. But it's not always the case that everybody has access. And if we do have access, oftentimes, it can be little more than babysitting. It's just not engaging the whole child sometimes. So talk to us a little bit about this, because that seems like that's an element that is pretty near and dear, not only to you, but also to the mission of the organization.

**Lisa Gitelson:**

Sure. The mission of the organization is that the youth of New York city that don't have equitable access to the outdoors should have exactly that. And part of our goal is that every youth in New York city knows that there's outdoors available to them, that it is part of the world that they live in and the benefits of having those outdoor experiences. And I do wanna say like, yeah, summer's our concentrated time in our

camping. We have year round programs because we also want you to know there's outdoors all the time, every season, and even in New York City, there's outdoors.

So, for those of us who've experienced camping, either for ourselves or our children, we know the impact that it can have on us as we move forward in the world. Every new experience brings something new to somebody. Every new relationship that we have brings something to someone.

And at the Fresh Air Fund, we believe those new experiences and new relationships taking place in the outdoors is extraordinarily impactful. And we don't just believe this. We have data to back this up. We continually look at the research, we look at the satisfaction of those who participate and where we have impact. And at the end of the summer to say, like, what's different because you participated in this summer programming and to make sure it aligns with our goals, which are that you should leave feeling more independent. They should leave feeling that it's easier to create new relationships. They should leave feeling, "I'm willing to take on something new that I never thought I could take on before." And also that, "I'm part of a community and can be a leader in my community. So I'm going to go out into the world with all of these strengths and have an impact on my community as well."

**Annalies Corbin:**

Absolutely, and we know that kids can totally embrace that if we give them the opportunity to sort of find themselves in all of those spaces. You know, it's interesting because one of the things that I have no doubt you've experienced, and we certainly bump up against this on a pretty regular basis and that is that lots of families can be, especially in big urban areas where families and kids, to your point, don't always have the opportunity to sort of get out – however you want to define that – there's There's often this, this fear or this holding of our kids super close to us.

And so, sometimes, it can be difficult, as the caregivers, to let the kids go out. I can't tell you how many students that participate in some of our programs, and when you sit down and have conversations with them, you find they've never been out of the city. They've never been to the park. They've never been away from home overnight. There's lots of these things.

And oftentimes, when you dig, it can be, "Hey, I've had an opportunity, maybe my local church, I could have gone but my parent or my caregiver was like, 'Oh no, you can't be away from me.'" So, how do you wrestle with these? Because these are very real constraints, and they often stem from very real experiences and needs? So, from a cultural standpoint, how do we wrestle with that?

**Lisa Gitelson:**

Sure. I want to say we deeply recognize the cultural standpoint that families come to

us with. It's extraordinarily important to us that we meet families and honor that and own it and are transparent about it. For different cultures, different communities, the idea of letting your child leave for a period of time is somewhere between not comfortable and seems like not responsible.

And I want to say, also, COVID, for all of us, really led us to believe that you shouldn't let your kids outside. We kept our kids literally indoors for the most part for a very long period of time and allowing your youth to be with adults that you don't know that are now going to be responsible for them in a physicality that's different from the one you're used to.

Just as a quick joke, like, sometimes when I travel, like outside of the city, I talk to kids who tell me how scared they are of New York City. Like, isn't it terrifying to be in New York City? And I'm like, "I'm really scared of the outdoors sometimes, because that's not what I was used to." Everybody is used to different comfort zones. So, we're very open about this, very frank.

We have a large team, the community outreach team that meets with families and are well-trained to discuss this. We also really rely upon our alumni to be part of the discussion. We have a parent advisory group that is available to talk to the parents and is present to answer questions about what other parents might feel having already made this decision for their families. We have a youth advisory board that meets with kids and, like I mentioned, the alumni advisory board.

So, to just really talk to people who've had the experience goes a long way. And to also acknowledge what the concerns are, so that we can address them up front and talk to them about what it's going to be like. Even to some level, we've really, in the last several years, upped our game on videos, so that families can really see where their kid is going to be. It's unusual to think I'm going to send my kid away from home to somewhere I can't imagine what it looks like. So, even just the ability to do that, I think has been really important.

And you might appreciate this but this summer, we have six sleepaway camps. One of them at the end of each session is going to do podcasts of their summer experience that they can then share with their family and friends, so that people can also learn more about what it was like. And we're excited for that as well. So, I think it's transparency, education, and being sensitive to where people come from and what feels like it might be a block, so that the Fresh Air Fund can help talk about that and make you feel comfortable. And partnership with those who've been part of it.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Absolutely, absolutely. And I love the fact that you've got the kids telling their story. They're going to be the next ambassadors using alumni, but I really, really love that

the kids are going to do podcasts about their experience. That's fab. And it's a great way for them to really engage in technology and to share their stories. So that's fabulous as well.

**Lisa Gitelson:**

Absolutely.

**Annalies Corbin:**

So, let's talk a little bit about the programming itself. So, I'm really, really curious, especially since you're programming last year round, which is fabulous as well. Thank you for that clarification. Talk to me about how you and your team make the decisions around what is included. So, what is the experience about? So, from a design and development standpoint. Because oftentimes, we see the same thing running over and over and over again, right? It doesn't get iterated. It doesn't get modified based on feedback.

And not everybody or every organization is really good or has the bandwidth – let's be completely transparent, or has the bandwidth all the time to make the changes that are necessary, to make those programs absolutely relevant and meaningful for the kids in that moment. Because the kids you have, for example, this summer, even if they're a repeat kid from last summer, they've changed, they've grown, they're a year older. The things they think about, the things they see, the things they need, they also changed. So, how do you successfully keep abreast of that from the design and development standpoint of your programming?

**Lisa Gitelson:**

I really appreciate this question because it's something that we talk about all the time. So, the first thing I would say is, like, that there's many layers to figuring out the programming. The first layer is safety, of course. Like we're going to run the safest program possible. The second layer, and I say this often because it's important, is joy. Like the summer should have joy in it, right? Everything we do should have joy and a feeling of joyfulness, so that those who participate are walking away with that.

The next layer is the real areas of curriculum. And often, when people think about curriculum, they think, like, "What am I going to learn in math?" But there's summer curriculum as well, right? So, we have a whole bunch of goals for every youth and different for different ages. This year, what we're engaging in that's going to be different and as part of the iteration of what we learn is that each of our six camps, we're working right now to finalize this, will have a theme. All of the themes have something connected to the outdoors, because again, we believe that outdoor learning, experiential outdoor learning is so important.

So, each of the camps will have a theme, and that theme will build. So, if you start as an eight-year-old, you know what you're going to do as a nine-year-old and a 10-year-old and so forth, so that, like, I know when I went to summer camp, I would look at the older kids and think, I want to get to do that someday. And that was part of what kept me coming. And we believe that, kind of, building year upon year with a theme, with curriculum that's tied to that theme, is going to lend an extra layer of what is so important and special about the Fresh Air Fund. You're right, though. We have the bandwidth and we have the capacity to really think about this. And I'm extraordinarily grateful to have a team of staff that can think in this way.

And in addition to the safety and the joy and the social-emotional learning that layers on top of everything, we really, again, engage the voices of the parents and the youth and the alumni about what did you love about camp and what is it that you took away from camp? One of the things that, I think, resonates is that when we talk to kids, often what they talk about that they love are things that, like, I would call STEM. But if I called it STEM, they'd be like, "Oh no, not necessarily." And when you talk with parents, they're like, "We want STEM."

So, it's also about how do you create all of the learning? And you don't need to call it STEM or not call it STEM, but create the meaningful learning experiences. So we, every summer, at the end of the summer, do a review of everything that happened. This summer is a much bigger review because we're adding in the themes and we're adding in the curriculum based on those themes. But every summer, it's an iterative experience of what worked and what we can do better just because I think it's important too.

Like, at camp, again, like when I talk about curriculum, I think people often think of like a classroom setting. The curriculum is based in the activities of camp, not in sitting at a desk and learning, which there's good reasons to do that. That's just not what we do. And we have every single traditional kind of summer camp activity that people think of and some not as traditional ones, but we aim to make sure that you have this full, rich summer experience in which they learn throughout, whether or not it's so apparent that they're learning and that we are being very intentional every step of the way about the activities and the curriculum we include.

And one last thing I would say is that we also have a strong social work team and it's important that the work be available with the review of social work and the social work at camp that makes sure everything we're doing is in alignment with the safety and emotional learning that a youth should have.

**Annalies Corbin:**

How does a kid get to the Fresh Air Fund and the programming? So, that's one question. And the followup question with that is, so a child or family gets to

participate, and then there seems to be this hope, and please correct me if I'm reading into this, but there's hope that that child comes back next summer or that child participates in other ongoing programming throughout the year. And you're talking about roughly 3000 kids every summer, so how many of these kids are repeats? And then, how do you grow this experience in an ecosystem that is encouraging people to return and yet probably at the same time wants to get as many kids as possible to have these experiences? How do you balance all that?

**Lisa Gitelson:**

It's a lot to balance. So, first, how do kids come to us? We have a team that does outreach in the communities. That's our community outreach and support services team. They do a tremendous amount of activities in communities. We have over 90 community partners in New York City that, in a lovely way, partner with us to make sure that we can also be introduced to their families. You know, if you go to the local Y, and you really trust that Y, and we're able to come in through that Y, often that goes a long way instead of us just showing up and saying, "We're the Fresh Air Fund, trust us," although we are the Fresh Air Fund, and just trust us.

**Annalies Corbin:**

That's right.

**Lisa Gitelson:**

And we work hard with community partners. Also, a tremendous amount of families come to us through word of mouth. I am always grateful to know how many families come to us through several generations? It is not unusual for me to talk to somebody who says like this is my grandchild coming to the programs. And I did this and my children did this. And I'm so happy my grandchildren do this. So, we do it through a lot of intentional outreach, partnership with communities, and also word of mouth. So, that's how families come to us.

To be eligible to do our programs, there's three things and it's pretty straightforward. You need to live in New York City, you need to go to school in New York City, and you need to fit into a certain financial bracket. And the easiest way to define that is if your family is eligible for food assistance, you're going to be available for our programs. Our programs are without cost to families. So, those are the three requirements to become a youth and be in the right age range.

The next question is about repeaters. We do really want kids to come year upon year. And if we're serving a certain number of youth this year, next year, I want to serve even more youth because I want to have the repeaters and the additional kids. So, in the time I've been here at the Fresh Air Fund, we have continuously grown the number of children since I got here that we're serving every summer and that will

continue to be our goal. We're running at about 35% of our youth being returners. Right now, I'd love to get that even higher.

And to that end, also another one of our major goals is that our youth stay with us to become our staff. We want youths who were campers to be our counselors, to be our leaders, to be the next CEO. This summer, one of the things we're doing that I'm super excited about is one of the camps is changing, and it's going to be only to serve our counselors in training and leaders in training, which are kids who normally we've had a CIT LIT program for a few years, but we decided to make it different and to put all of those kids together in one camp where they will have curriculum of leadership, where we hope they'll develop to be our next leaders but just to be the leaders wherever it is that they go in life. And super excited for that opportunity for our youth coming in and how it will impact us going forward. So, yes, we want kids to keep coming back and we want them to come back to start working for us and lead the work.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Absolutely. And I really, really love that you've spent some time, energy, and effort thinking about how to cultivate those future leaders. We do a very similar program, and it is the most remarkable thing. I tell people this all the time. They ask me, what's the best day at PAST Foundation, the work you do? And I said, I don't even have to think about it, because those best days almost always include a kid who has been on a journey with us for a period of time. I remember this child, X, Y, or Z, who showed up in the fourth grade, and now they're leading programs for us. They are designing their own programs, or so on. And that is so incredibly, it's amazing. It truly is.

**Lisa Gitelson:**

Absolutely. It's amazing. You want to just sit back and be quiet. I'm so grateful when I walk into a situation that I can sit back and be quiet because everybody's got it. I think all the things you talked about are important. And for some of our counselors and other leaders who've been through our programs, when a kid comes to camp and is homesick or experiences something for the first time, they can be very honest and say, "I felt that too, and here's some ideas," or just like to be empathetic in a way that's different because you have had that experience. So, both to create ideas, to create the future of our programs, and to be supportive of the youth in ways that's just different if you've had that experience.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Exactly, exactly. And I think one of the other things that I love about these types of programs in the work that organizations do to make them possible is the opportunity to watch kids gain confidence. For example, we have kiddos who will come all summer long. So, we have a couple of a few-away camps, but the majority of ours are locally driven. And so, it's not uncommon for us to have kids who will be with us all



summer long because we're a safe place, and we design our programming, so that it doesn't repeat week after week. So, the kids can learn all these different.

And for us, it's about exposing them to different STEM careers, in particular, because it's one of our big focus pieces. And I love that first day, the kid who's like super nervous or the kid who's a little on the shy side, not sure about how the whole thing's gonna work, and they're really struggling. And by about week two, they're meeting all the other new kids at the front door to tell them how it's gonna work, right? I'm gonna take you over to where you're gonna be. And you just watch those kids blossom because they've had an experience that honors them and allows them to grow in their own way in their own time.

**Lisa Gitelson:**

100%, absolutely. I mean that's what you do it for because that's the hope is that, again, you create the work that the next generation is going to do, so you can step back and they just own it and do the work themselves. And that's a great professional joy.

**Annalies Corbin:**

It is, absolutely. And I love that. Professional joy is indeed. I want to make sure that we also touch on the fact that your programming is, in fact, year-round. And so what's different about it? What does it look like when it's not in the summertime?

**Lisa Gitelson:**

So, some of what happens that's not in the summertime is focused on the fact that it's not the summertime. So, some of it is going to be focused on education. There's mentoring, There's tutoring. We have a college prep program that is extremely popular. We have programs about, what does it mean to be a young adult in this world and how will I become an adult? Those, I find exciting.

We have a new program that we're rolling out this fall, which I'm extremely excited about, which will be about the outdoors of New York City and how youth have access to it. And it's going to be a mentorship program. So, a youth will be assigned an adult or a family who will, then, be taking them to do outdoors in New York City year round. And one of our goals there is that the youth of New York City have agency and ownership over their own outdoor spaces.

So, let's just use you and I as an example. If you were my mentor and on Saturday, you took me to Prospect Park, and we went boating, maybe on Sunday, I'd call my cousin and say, "Hey, did you know that we could take the train and be boating in Brooklyn? Let's go do this," so that we're introducing outdoors to youth that then own it and also create a relationship with their mentor that's ongoing. We deeply, again, believe in a

relationship building with everybody you come into contact with at camp—the staff and the other kids— and throughout the year, to continue that

**Annalies Corbin:**

Absolutely, absolutely. And not only do we want but we need our kids to do that, right? We need them to make the connections to their role in their community, whatever that happens to be. It can just be a convener. It can be, "Hey, let's go do this thing," but it can also blossom into so many other things once we provide true opportunity for kids to engage in the communities they live in. So, I really, really love and appreciate that.

You know, when you step back and you think about the work that you've been doing and the organization has been doing over many, many years, do you have some greatest takeaways that you've seen? If you think about your own story, your own journey, I always just want to make sure that we leave the folks that are listening with saying, "These experiences are transformative in many ways to the participants."

**Lisa Gitelson:**

Sure. So, I will say just about myself, and then my biggest takeaway. I went to camp for four summers. I worked at a camp for four summers. Without question, I would not be in this role without that. It taught me about so many of the things that I value in this world. I still have friends from that. And I did that literally when I was a teenager. I'm far from being a teenager. But it taught me the values that we hope to instill in the youth that we work with. It taught me a lot about independence. It taught me about taking on new things that felt scary. It taught me I could meet new people and make new friends. It taught me about leadership.

And really the takeaway for me, every summer I'm very, very lucky to get to spend time at camp. And when I talk to kids, and I hear them saying those kinds of things that, like, this is theirs now, they walk away with this, that they are going back into their communities with these additional strengths, that's the takeaway, right? Like I say this without being corny, but I always believe that when each of us is stronger and each of us has more of what we are, the whole world is better and that's something to participate in. That's, again, a great professional joy.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Absolutely. I appreciate that so much. Well, I want to close recognizing that a lot of our listeners are educators, and one of the things that I spend a lot of time, and certainly our organization spends a lot of time, is talking with educators about how to take the experiences of our beautiful and amazing work that's happening in the informal spaces, whether it's after-school programs, summer camps, all of these sorts of elements, and recognize that those experiences are transformative for kids. And more importantly, oftentimes, kids find such joy in them. They love to be there.

So, what would you recommend or suggest to our more traditional education folks about the things that they can incorporate in their day to day classroom practices that can bring the same joy of those out-of-school or out-of-time experiences, if you will, into the everyday learning?

**Lisa Gitelson:**

So, I'm gonna point to two things. And I'm gonna say number one, no matter where your educational setting is, no matter what it is you're teaching about, teach something new, bring something new, show it in a new way. Kids aren't scared of this. Kids want the opportunities to do new things, to push themselves, to see what their limits or limitations are not there that they want to be able to engage in new activities.

So, however you're teaching, to just continue to think about innovative ways to teach what it is that you're teaching. And that doesn't even require money. It just requires thought and work with others who've thought about it and partnership. So, to continuously offer something new, whatever it is that you are educating on.

And then, the second thing is to always encourage youth to ask the good questions. I think asking questions requires a real sense of safety. If you don't feel safe, you're not going to ask questions. So, create that community and that space where youth are going to ask good questions. I am always super wildly happy when youth are asking questions about our programs, asking questions about the activities, asking questions because it means they're engaged in there.

So, both to create newness and to create safety where kids can ask questions to learn, I think those are the ways like we all really grow. I think that's how I grow. And I think it's how youth grow and the kids that we serve grow.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Absolutely. And there's nothing more powerful than co-designing with kids. And the reality is if you ask them and you allow them to participate in asking questions, everything you design will be so much better. So, I so appreciate that. Lisa, thank you so much for taking time out of your day to join us and have the conversation, share with us the experience of the Fresh Air Fund and all the incredible work that's happening in New York City with your youth. So, thank you for joining us today.

**Lisa Gitelson:**

Great pulling every way to you, the work you do, and for allowing me to be on this podcast and share a bit about what I do. So, thank you.

**Annalies Corbin:**

Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to

be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @AnnaliesCorbin, and join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.