Briana Mullen:
I really walked away from my time at Stanford realizing that schools are a really important place for children. I see it as the center of that village, and it can't be the only thing. Kids have to have other places where they feel safe, where they feel healthy, where they’re being encouraged to grow and be courageous. And for too long we've kind of asked schools to be the only place where kids can grow and grow up happy and healthy. And so yeah, that home, that sense of home to me is about schools are a place where that can be built really readily and we need to work really hard to build those places for kids when they’re not at school too, because I would've really benefited from having more places outside of school to be, as would anybody.

I'm Briana Mullen. I'm a 2020 member of the Knight-Hennessy Scholars program, I'm a 2021 alumni of the Graduate School of Education and a 2023 graduate of the School of Public Policy. I imagine a world where every child has a village to help them grow up happy and healthy.

Taylor Goss:
Welcome to the Imagine a World Podcast from Knight-Hennessy Scholars. We are here to give you a glimpse into the Knight-Hennessy Scholar community of graduate students spanning all seven Stanford schools, including business, education, engineering, humanities, law, medicine, and sustainability. In each episode, we talk with scholars about the world they imagine and what they are doing to bring it to life.

Willie Thompson:
Today you'll be hearing from Briana Mullen, a KHS alum and recipient of Master’s degrees from both the Graduate School of Education and the Graduate School of Public Policy. During our conversation, you'll hear about Briana’s experience as a California lifer, being a marching band kid, building an organization that democratizes and diversifies school boards and so much more.

We're so grateful to have Briana Mullen on today's episode. Actually, let's just get into the introductions as we get started here. I'm Willie Thompson, Co-Host, Business School, Ed School now. Yay.

Taylor Goss:
Woo.

Briana Mullen:
I'm joined by my co-host, as always, Taylor Goss.

Taylor Goss:
That's right, coming from the Department of Music with a music science and tech program, and also just completed all my coursework for my Master of Arts in Public Policy program as of the end of this quarter.

Willie Thompson:
Fantastic, congratulations.

Taylor Goss:
Thank you so much.
Willie Thompson:
How's it feel?

Taylor Goss:
It feels great. It feels really good. I feel energized by knowledge of public policy.

Willie Thompson:
Oh, wow.

Briana Mullen:
So a lot of folks don't know that Taylor's the person who I took the most classes with at Stanford.

Taylor Goss:
That's so true.

Briana Mullen:
So I took more classes with Taylor than any other person at Stanford. I have roped him into some wild classes.

Taylor Goss:
Right, yes.

Willie Thompson:
We'll get into it in a second because obviously the person on the other end of this mic is the one, the only Briana Mullen we have the fantastic privilege of knowing. Yeah, how are you doing today, by the way? Let's just get some of the pleasantries through and then we'll probably get to some of that.

Briana Mullen:
Yeah, wonderful. It's so nice to be back on campus. Stanford in the spring is gorgeous, seeing all the wildflowers pop up on campus. I still remember my first spring, which was in 2021, and just being like, "Whoa." And it was actually really gorgeous because it was during the pandemic and they weren't doing a lot of landscaping, and so the grasses got really tall and there'd be foxes and jackrabbits on campus. So it had kind of a more wild feeling than Stanford traditionally does. So I really love being back on campus in the spring. I've lived in California my whole life and I try and never take for granted the weather and the beautiful Northern California that we have to explore here, but I do, I do take it for granted all the time, and so coming on campus and seeing it again is really nice.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah. You took me a fountain hopping for the first time the other day.

Briana Mullen:
I did take you fountain hopping, yeah.
Really?

Taylor Goss:
It's going to be revealed.

Willie Thompson:
What's fountain hopping, by the way? For some who nay not know.

Taylor Goss:
Oh yeah, so fountain hopping, there are all these scattered around, I almost said LSU campus, scattered around Stanford campus and it's tradition for students, graduate students included, to go around and get on a swimsuit on a sunny day and go play around in a fountain and then hop to another one and hop to another one maybe with a drink or two along the way.

Briana Mullen:
Yeah, a little speaker, I had a little cart from the graduate dorms that we were all living in, we'd go down and pull the cart with a cooler and a speaker and hang out. And I love it. I mean, I was in Chicago this summer for the first time and they have some amazing public fountains for kids and families to play in when it's hot outside. And I don't know, I think that those kinds of public spaces make me feel really joyful. And there was a Knight-Hennessy scholar once who told me, they were a med student who just traditionally have a really grueling schedule, and I was asking them, it was Muhammad, and I was asking him how he was going to spend his free Friday, one Friday off and he was like, "I'm going to go watch little kids play in the fountain and enjoy the sunlight and just experience the joy of being on campus." And I was like, "That's gorgeous. I'm going to do that now tomorrow too. That's my Friday plans."

Taylor Goss:
Yeah, shout out to Muhammad. He makes use his spare time, the little that he has. He's a bright light.

Briana Mullen:
The little time that he does have. I think that's just something I've learned a lot from Knight-Hennessy Scholars is like how to pause and how to be and how not to do all the time.

Willie Thompson:
Mic drop.

Taylor Goss:
And pause.

Willie Thompson:
And pause.

Briana Mullen:
And pause.
Willie Thompson:
It's so interesting because I think if you looked at all the information about Knight-Hennessy Scholars, you would think that's all we are doing is doing. And I do think there's a lot of value in taking that pause and reflecting and resting. And so I really appreciate that. I mean, we've already heard the, "Imagine a world," statement, which we'll get to in a moment. And we even started getting into a bit of your origin story before. But before we talk about the world you imagine, Briana, let's talk about the world you were born into and have experienced thus far. So where are you from? You mentioned you're a California lifer, but where are you from? It's a big state. And what was your journey here at Stanford?

Briana Mullen:
Well, so really funny. I was born here at Stanford Hospital. I was not from here, my family and my parents met, they were waiters at the Red Lobster in Pacifica.

Willie Thompson:
Those biscuits, man, those biscuits.

Briana Mullen:
Oh man. And I was the first baby born in Pacifica the year that I was born. My birth announcement is really cute, it's like I'm the catch of the day and it's like a Red Lobster menu, and I love seafood. I think that this has deeply influenced my love of seafood.

Taylor Goss:
They knew who you were right away.

Briana Mullen:
Right away, right away. And I was the first baby born, strong Capricorn energy coming out in newspapers, stuff like that. Yeah, so my parents met here and I spent the rest of my life growing up in the Bay Area, in the East Bay in Concord and Martinez and Walnut Creek. But I really claim all of Northern California as my home. And I just got to be a person in a place that I think most people dream about and I didn't even realize was so special until I got older.

I'm the oldest of five siblings, so I had a lot of family members all in and around my house all the time. But it was hard too, we were growing up very working class and working poor, and the Bay Area was experiencing a lot of inequality and displacement of people at the same time. So I got to see a lot of different parts of the Bay Area, and I think places that a lot of times get invisibilized when we think about the shiny parts of San Francisco and even Silicon Valley, but there's so many places where working people are living. And at one point, my stepdad was commuting from Concord to San Francisco, and it was like two and a half hours with traffic and everything.

So yeah, I love the Bay Area. I have so much joy in being raised here, and I also have this vision of it being a very incomplete place. I want it to be something that I think it isn't quite, but has a vision of becoming. And I grew up in, I like to say, the most average public schools in America. I went to really average public schools, and these public schools were amazing. They were places that really made me feel safe and feel loved and feel welcome and seen, another thing that I took for granted that I never understood was that lots of kids don't have public schools like that, that even are safe places to be because home wasn't always safe for me. And so I vividly can remember still getting to school really early in the morning because I was part of marching band and I was the president of the marching band.
Taylor Goss:
The president, we're speaking to president of the marching band.

Willie Thompson:
Which is different from the conductor or the director?

Briana Mullen:
It's different than, I think you're thinking the drum major.

Willie Thompson:
Yes.

Briana Mullen:
The drum major is the person standing in front, yes. Okay, so my best friend was the drum major. I was the president, I was the behind the scenes person, which is a theme in my life and work is I like to be kind of the person behind pulling the strings, but maybe not the person-

Taylor Goss:
But in a benevolent way?

Briana Mullen:
In a benevolent way, yeah, yeah. Like kingmaker, but benevolent, for the best. Doing a lot of the servant work that I think even at a young age, I was always really interested in service and community service and how I could engage with my community. I had somebody tell me the other day that since 15 years old, I was always creating community and creating hangouts and parties and things. And I think I was just trying to create something I didn't have, which was a big group of people who were all supporting each other and thinking about what we wanted to do.

And marching band was so amazing for me. I don't play any musical instruments anymore, Taylor knows this, but being a marching band kid was my biggest identity. It taught me so much about being a part of a team, about working really hard on a product, on a performance that can be two to five minutes sometimes, very, very short, but you work to perfect that thing over and over and over again. And it's also, I loved kind of the invisibilization of the marching band. You're not meant to stand out, you're meant to be part of this cohort, you're meant to create this beautiful piece of music, but if you're standing out, you're not doing it right. Yeah, being a band kid was really important to me.

I also, looking back on it, my band program was medium sized, we were 80 to 100 kids in it, but it was kids from all across the school, kids in classes, I was in a lot of AP classes and they were all tracked, and that was always a very consistent group of kids. But the marching band was kids from all over the school, kids who probably would not have been coming to school if it weren't for the marching band program because they weren't excited about anything else that was happening at school. And so I really felt like that was a safe place for me. And opening up the band door room at 7:00 in the morning after walking to school and getting hit in the face with all the sound of instruments warming up at 7:00 in the morning and feeling like I was at home, like I had just left a house, but I was finally at home is a feeling that I think about probably once a week because I think without that place, that band room for me, that's where I felt safe for many, many years. And that's how I got involved in school boards.
Taylor Goss:
I love the way that you talk about music. We've talked a lot about music in the time that we've known each other, but in particular the way that you talk about it and the way it influenced your life, it really hones in on the role that music and the arts play in education and in community building. And I just am so glad that you had that, but not only that you had it and that it was available to you, but that you had the willingness and the openness to walk into that band room and say, "Oh, this is going to be my family. This is going to be my home."

Briana Mullen:
Now Knight-Hennessy, for me, is that, right? So it's funny, I've searched for these different communities as I've gone through my life. But having it when I was a teenager and having it in band, band parents became aunties, uncles, people who took me in. I ended up moving in with a mom who was a third grade teacher of a friend of mine in band my senior year in high school. And some of the parents, like I mentioned, who I met through the band room, they went to my Stanford graduation in June. So it really became a place for me to get support, have people in my life.

And, it was the place where I was politically educated as well, because my band teacher really treated us like we were young people who deserved information about what was happening to our education. And at the time, I was in high school during the recession and there was massive cuts to public schools in California, and he told us and talked to us and taught us about, first of all, that music was always political, right? We studied jazz music and so we studied particularly how jazz music was used by Black musicians as a space of refuge and as a place for their own political identity to be expressed. But we also talked about why we deserved high quality public education. And during the recession, my band teacher was like, "Look, the district is going to cut a lot of positions and you deserve to know because this is going to affect your education." So that's how I ended up getting involved as my first school board meeting.

Taylor Goss:
Right, yeah. So you said, "Not on my watch"?

Briana Mullen:
"Not on my watch."

Willie Thompson:
"Not on my benevolent watch."

Briana Mullen:
Yeah. I was really upset because I had four younger siblings, my youngest siblings were 14 years younger than I was, and I was very involved with raising them. And they were only four at the time when I graduated high school, and before that, the district was cutting the district music program, which is so often the first thing on the cutting block, I cannot tell you how often when districts are dealing with budget cuts that elementary school music is usually the first program to go because it's a part-time program, it's usually taught by one teacher spread across the district, and it's just post No Child Left Behind in the early 2000s not considered part of the core piece of the curriculum. And I was terrified, I was terrified that the program that had provided me safety and refuge was not going to be around for my younger siblings, and I didn't know what their schooling experience would look like without it.
So me and my best friend, Vivian Law, at the time, we went to Michael's and we got $5 black t-shirts and puffy paint, and we made these protest t-shirts that were like, "War against music education," or something really dramatic. And we showed up and I waited all night in the back of the school board meeting to get my two minutes at public comment and I was doing my pre-calc homework in the back and got up to the podium and talked to them about how important I thought the music program was and how I really didn't think it was the right thing to cut it. And I had a school board member chastise me and tell me that I didn't know what I was talking about and that I was kind of a silly little girl, and that I needed to go up to Sacramento because it really wasn't her fault, it was really Governor Schwarzenegger's fault.

Willie Thompson:
Die.

Taylor Goss:
Willie.

Briana Mullen:
That's great. If that doesn't make it in, I'm going to be really sad.

Willie Thompson:
I think it will. Did you actually play war as you were making these war shirts?

Briana Mullen:
I wish I had. I think we were just like, we didn't understand... I mean, we did understand, I mean, this is the thing about being 15 or 16 is that you often do have a lot of clarity over what's right and what's wrong. You may not need to know all the details, but so often adults feel like, "Well, you don't understand the details." And it's like, "I don't know that I need to understand the details. I understand that you are radically changing my public education and I'm upset with that."

Willie Thompson:
And you should have a voice in how that plays out, right?

Briana Mullen:
Right. I think I was just developing my voice. I was terrified. I really still remember the nerves in the pit of my stomach. And frankly, I still have nerves all the time when I go up to give public comment and I've done it now probably hundreds of times. But when you're 16 and you feel like... You don't expect to be kind of talked down to, and then I was and I was like, "Oh, maybe I don't know what I'm talking about."

Taylor Goss:
Well, how did that make you feel and what did you walk out of that room deciding to do?

Briana Mullen:
Well, I took her word. I was like, "Oh, okay. I guess I don't know what I'm talking about. I'm going to work really hard." And so I had a college counselor who in my high school was like, "Hey, you qualify to apply to the UCs for free. Why are you not applying to UC Berkeley?" And I was like, "I don't think I'm
going to get in." And she was like, "Well, it's free, and it's just like you have to click a box and why don't you just click that box and try?" And I was like, "Oh, okay." And I did, and I got in.

And when I got to Berkeley, at that point I was angry in a lot of ways because I had seen how predatory lending and the recession, my parents really affected by that. And I was like, "What's going on here? Why is this happening?" I wanted to understand my own story, but I also wanted to understand some of the macro levels of what was going on. So I ended up studying history, education, and city and regional planning, which kind of was like a detour a little bit, but ended up changing a lot of how I think about problems now because I think about the space and I think about the spatial reality of the way that we live in them.

And so I spent four years studying as much as I possibly could about how we got here, we being 20th century America, and why were public schools underfunded? And why do public schools even exist? Who created them and for what reason, for what purpose? And who has access to them and who doesn't have access to them? And I met amazing peers and really good lifelong friends of mine who were undocumented students in LAUSD and experienced a very different public school system than I had, right?

Willie Thompson:
LAUSD?

Briana Mullen:
Los Angeles Unified School District, which is the second-largest school district in the country. And yeah, I think that I realized, I was like, "Whoa, okay. My very average high school and public school experience as a white person in the suburbs looked very different than a lot of my peers." And I felt more deeply than ever that we all deserved that thing that I had gotten, which was caring adults providing me not just a safe place to be, but they were the people in my ear whispering that I was amazing and that I could do something with my life and that I could go to college, and I'm the first in my family to go to college and so without those people in my life, I don't think I would've set my sights on where I ended up.

Willie Thompson:
And Stanford calls it you're FLI, I didn't know that they called it-

Briana Mullen:
Yeah, Stanford, this is a new acronym that I adopted after it came to Stanford. It's like FLI first generation low income. What's interesting at Berkeley is that so many people are first generation low income. So it wasn't as clear of an identity for me at the time. At the time I identified as an independent student, because I had moved out when I was 17. And so when I was at Berkeley, I was on my own. I didn't have a place to go on Christmas breaks, they would kick you out of the dorms and I'd be like, "Where am I going?" And during summer breaks, I would take classes and work.

And so for me, Berkeley became a home for me very intensely, very deeply. One of my tattoos is the Berkeley motto, it was actually my first tattoo, which means 'Fiat lux', which means let there be light. But it was just this place that fed my soul, my intellectual soul in a way that I was like, "Oh, I found my people. I found my people who want to be courageous and change the world." But also I spent so much time diving into why is this a problem? Why are we even dealing with this problem now? And I got one internship, or I took one internship when I was at Berkeley working for the state superintendent of public instruction, then they hired me after graduation. I got really lucky with my one internship.
Willie Thompson:
Right, right. All it takes is one. And you mentioned a lot around homes, and it really sounds like you found homes in multiple stages of your life, which is encouraging, reassuring, and very inspiring, to say the least. And even when you talk about your 'Imagine a world' statement, I mean, I think what I hear at the crux of this notion of having a village and being happy and all these emotions seem to evoke this idea that the kids can find a home, right? And two quick things, how did you get to this 'Imagine a world' statement and how it's conceived? And is it different now than it would've been earlier in your life, you think?

Briana Mullen:
Oh, totally, yeah. I was just thinking about in the shower today, I was like, when we first did the 'Imagine a world' exercise at the 2021 Knight-Hennessy retreat in Asilomar, which was magical to say the least. I would've and I think I did write something around the fact that I imagine a world where school boards can be part of creating an amazing multiracial, vibrant democracy. And I still absolutely, that is like 90% of my waking hours is thinking about how school board members can be part of a more vibrant, multiracial democracy.

And Willie, you'll probably spend a lot of time thinking about this existential question next year in the POLS degree, but I really walked away from my time at Stanford realizing that schools are in a really important place for children, I see it as the center of that village. And it can't be the only thing. Kids have to have other places where they feel safe, where they feel healthy, where they're being encouraged to grow and be courageous. And for too long, we've kind of asked schools to be the only place where kids can grow and grow up happy and healthy. So yeah, that sense of home to me is about schools are a place where that can be built really readily, and we need to work really hard to build those places for kids when they're not at school too because I would've really benefited from having more places outside of school to be, as would anybody.

I spend a lot of time thinking about other people's kids now. I think that's what it comes down to. And I no longer identify as a youth organizer the way that I used to, right? When I was 16, and for a long portion of my career, I was a youth organizer, I was organizing, I was involved in student government really heavily when I was at Berkeley and then when I even went and joined, I worked at the California Department of Education right after graduation. And even then, I was the young person in the room, right? I was the person who could share the perspective of a vulnerable youth who is served by schools, that was usually my perspective as a policy advocate.

And now I find myself shifting identities. I'm in my thirties now, which is a fun transition life moment. And now I spend a lot of time as queer auntie and a much older sister, and just a person in a lot of young people's lives, friends who have kids, I really love being a part of their lives and being part of the larger village that they have around their kids. So now I'm starting to think more about what the next generation of kids deserve and firmly how I can, in some ways, take a step even back further than I have been and let the next generation of young people really articulate what they need so that it serves them.

Taylor Goss:
Not surprised, most things you say are beautifully said. I'm wondering, once you left Berkeley, entered the career path of public policy working with Department of Education, I believe, right? How many people did you meet along the way that you felt shared that vision in the way that you describe it?

Briana Mullen:
Well, everyone I worked with at the Department of Education did. I worked with the most amazing team. The state superintendent that I worked for, he was a former cross-country coach and environmental science teacher in the early 1970s, he was teaching about climate change in 1972 to his Title I high school, which is basically a low-income high school.

Willie Thompson:
Objectively ahead of the curve.

Taylor Goss:
Right, yeah.

Briana Mullen:
Truly. And he organized his high school students, his high school students got him organized, went both ways, right? And they formed the first national insect refuge in the United States. And then they also organized with the city council to stop the closure of a recycling plant in the city. And through those two campaigns that they were working on, he decided at 26 to run for city council. And he was a high school science teacher who ran for city council, and he lost his first race by 40 votes, won his next race and continued to win for many years on.

But working for him taught me so much about my leadership strategy and my leadership vision because he believed in teamwork above all else, anything. Our favorite phrase was, this is like a, I don't love the ascription of this, but it's like African proverb, which is like, "If you want to go fast, you go alone. If you want to go far, you go together." But he meant it in a really, really deep way where he was like, "We're not going to go anywhere until we have everybody on the same page and the team is together." And for that, he showed me what that meant on a statewide level of, how do we get the teachers and the principals on the same page and move them forward? How do we get families and advocates on the same page and move forward?

Because schools are really complex institutions and people kind of want to ask everything from them, right? They want schools to be able to do everything. They want them to be able to get your kid a great job and teach them how to be a person and teach them social emotional learning and financial literacy and how to read and how to do math, and how to understand AI and not can be manipulated by...

There's just the list of what schools are supposed to do never ends. And I think a lot of times we set the bar really high and then we get upset when schools don't meet that bar. But so often it's really about trying to get a team of people to think about how to get schools there because it's a collective project.

And education in America has always been localized. It's very unique in the world, we have a really unique education system that puts a lot of power at the lower level. But working with the people at the Department of Ed when I was there was the group of people that really taught me how to work in a team and how to not put my vision of what I want before what the collective vision is. So I was a policy advisor for the state superintendent at the time. And then in 2016, President Trump was elected, Betsy DeVos was appointed educational secretary and our work changed a lot, as you can imagine.

Willie Thompson:
You don't say.

Briana Mullen:
And a lot of that came from the fact that California had a very different vision of what we thought schools and public schools needed to do. I got to run statewide initiatives trying to protect undocumented students and families from ICE being on campus. At the time, we were trying to build multilingual education, build back multilingual education, because in California for 25 years we had only allowed teachers to teach in English, which in a state where families speak 65 languages at home is just absolutely a travesty.

But what I saw in that role post 2016 was that I could be at the state and I could be doing amazing public policy initiatives, but at the end of the day, school boards made the final decisions. And it was weird. It was weird to be at the state and have all this presumed power and then be like, "Oh wait, so we have to convince school boards?" And they're like, "Yeah." And I'm like, "Oh, okay. So I'm going to go work for them actually, because I really want to work on these things that I think matter a lot." And it turns out at the state, I think a lot of people think the higher you go up in public policy, the more power you have, but it really depends on the issue. And in education, most of the power for educational decision making is at the local level.

Willie Thompson:
And you've gone about finding opportunities to work with these school boards to enact this local change, the Education Justice Academy, the EJ, I'm always thinking of the Equal Justice Initiative, I don't know if that happens to you often.

Briana Mullen:
It was kind of on purpose.

Willie Thompson:
Okay, so I've been accepted already.

Briana Mullen:
You've been accepted, absolutely. Actually, before my Knight-Hennessy interview, I read... What's Bryan-

Willie Thompson:
Just Mercy, Just Mercy.

Briana Mullen:
Just Mercy with Bryan Stevenson.

Taylor Goss:
Bryan Stevenson.

Briana Mullen:
I read Bryan Stevenson.

Taylor Goss:
That was a Jeopardy moment.
Willie Thompson:
Yeah, yeah, yeah.

Briana Mullen:
I read Just Mercy and learned a lot about Bryan Stevenson's work. And I was inspired because what I really took from it is that you need to go where the work is most important, you need to not stay in the place that you feel the most comfortable to do that work. And you also need to be building power with people on the ground in order for things to change meaningfully. And one of the things I love about EJI's work that we've taken a lot for EJA's work is the focus on often left behind rural suburban exurb communities. My family has lived in rural Arkansas for the last 12 years, and my younger siblings now are in public schools there.

And so when I think about EJA's work, which is to equip school districts with school governance leaders who are going to push forward educational justice, we are going to places that nobody else is going to. We are going to that rural Central Valley school in the middle of an almond field where 90% of students, their parents are farm workers, and so many of them are undocumented. And we are going to the Inland Empire where there was really the first Black suburb of LA for a long time and a third of the students in San Bernardino Unified have been homeless for the last eight years, right? So those are big structural problems in those communities.

And I think that the best thing that we can possibly do as an organization is go in, find local leaders and give them tools and resources to be able to solve their problems themselves. Because oftentimes we have this notion that somebody's going to come in and save us or somebody, some funder or some philanthropy or whatever, somebody's going to come in and have all the solution sets. But really what we're talking about, creating stronger school governance, is, do people in the community know who the school board are? Do they know what powers the school board have? And are they in conversation and collaboration, and are they on the same team? Are we building a team for kids?

And so when I imagine getting to this village, a stepping stone for me to this village is strong democracy at the school board level. Because we have 90,000 school board members in America and they're one fifth of all of the elected officials in America, and they're largely just not thought about when we think about creating healthy communities. People write them off, I think largely because they don't realize what they do. And school districts are a separate government entity, they don't sit under the mayor's office that often, sometimes in bigger cities they do, but even then they're often treated as kind of a separate project, a separate policy initiative.

But really what we're talking about when we're talking about school boards are the people who represent democratically children, and there's actually no other elected officials that their 100% responsibility is children's outcomes. So that's where I see school boards being so crucial and so important. But it's going to take people on the school board who really understand the community, and it's going to take the community really understanding what the school board is supposed to do and holding them accountable.

Taylor Goss:
And this organization, the Education Justice Academy, was something that was incubated within Stanford, within Knight-Hennessy and is now supported by the Knight-Hennessy program through the Impact Grant. Could you talk about how that process of bringing EJA to life happened?

Willie Thompson:
Shout-out to the Global Impact Fund, shout out to the Global Impact Fund.

Briana Mullen:
Shout-out Global Impact Fund. Yeah, my first line of my Knight-Hennessy application was that I wanted after graduation to start an organization that would recruit, train, and support diverse school board members. So I came to Knight-Hennessy to execute this vision. I came with a lot of clarity about what I wanted to try and do and everything-

Taylor Goss:
It was clear. It was always clear.

Briana Mullen:
People started to know me as the school board girl, which was not a bad thing because anytime anything would happen on campus, I'd get 15 emails from people like, "Hey, did you see this school board thing?" And I'm like, "This is perfect. Everybody now knows I'm the school board girl." And I first took the leap with EJA in the first KHeystone project round when Director Tina Seelig was piloting the KHeystone projects. It was still during COVID, so we were figuring things out, but I had two scholars at the time join to just start to help us sketch out the learning outcomes of what we would eventually end up teaching. And it was amazing. I had Darion Wallace, who is a very good friend, another Berkeley Bear, and he is a PhD student in the Graduate School of Ed. And I also had Max Denning, Max was a school board governor for the hospital school system he sat on, worked in the UK. It was so interesting to have that international perspective of, "Okay, what's common here about just anybody who's overseeing a school internationally?"

And then EJA was a KHeystone project the next year, and we involved another six to eight Knight-Hennessy scholars from the med school, from the business school, from the law school, from the ed school, from the engineering school, people from all over Knight-Hennessy came because they all had felt like public schools had played a role in their lives and their journey of getting here, and they wanted to give back. And so it was incredible, we had them design our application, write our definition for educational justice, which we still use, figure out how we were going to run this program, how we were going to pick people.

Before we even launched our first academy to train school board members, I think we had had 15 Knight-Hennessy Scholars in some way touch the program and touch what we were trying to create. And I don't think there's any place else in the country that I could have gotten that kind of expertise and that kind of diverse perspectives on what we were doing and what we were trying to do. And I see it every day, the work that the Knight-Hennessy Scholars have helped us create is creating a really strong foundation for what we're able to do now.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, absolutely. And I'll just also say that every time I've heard you pitch EJA, even at the KHeystone Celebration Festival, I believe, yeah, man, I feel energized like, "We got to do something about this." The average age of a school board member is 60 or something. It's like, "Why aren't they younger?" So I think it goes to show a lot the clarity of thought and the clarity of purpose with which EJA is going about its business. And you mentioned how scholars have provided a foundation, and so the foundation, home, I'm loving the language, building this foundation, how has the grant helped you build on that foundation to start scaffolding other aspects of the work for EJA?
Briana Mullen:
I mean, it's been huge. I mean, first of all, I graduated in June and I've gotten to work on this project full time since June, which for anybody who knows anything about social entrepreneurship or nonprofits, getting to a sustainable level for a nonprofit is a Herculean task. My partner runs a business, and I like to say it's like running a business with both hands tied behind your back, right? It's just so much more difficult when you're talking about revenue and capacity and programs and impact, you're often expected to have been doing the thing for years before you get money. So the fact that Knight-Hennessy was able to give us a seed grant is so amazing and so unique. To get that seed grant to work on this project full time, it meant that we ran our second cohort, in the fall of 2023 we trained amazing all women of color cohort actually in Oakland, in Berryessa, in Glendale. Our cohort ranged from 24 to 64, and just people doing incredible work right now. And we got to support them right now, we didn't have to wait a couple years to scale up. Also, being a first-gen college student, I'm also a first-gen founder and so-

Willie Thompson:
Everything first-gen.

Briana Mullen:
Everything first-gen, first-gen College student, first-gen grad student. And then when you throw in the Stanford Ivy Plus thing, that's a whole nother aspect of the work that's really difficult and new. There's just so many things that I'm learning all the time. So not only has the Impact Grant given us the ability to have resources to fund our work, but the team has been so supportive. Stacy Peña has provided us a ton of communications infrastructure that I just really want to appreciate her for because so much of what we're trying to do is tell a new story around school boards and tell people, even if they don't run for office, even if they don't show up to a school board meeting, people knowing that school boards matter and that they should be voting, about 12% of people vote for their local school board members, which is really low.

Willie Thompson:
One in eight, everybody, if anyone's tracking that for those of our mathematicians.

Briana Mullen:
And so we're just trying to get the word out there that we've trained 10 school district leaders so far, and there's 6,000 in California, there's 20,000 on the ballot in 2024. So we are only going to be able to work very deeply with a small number of people. But if we can get the word out that you should be paying attention to who your school board member is, you should be finding out what they care about, what their priorities are, and you should be, at the very least, Googling their name and trying to see if they have a website when you're on the ballot, because most people just skip them because they're on the bottom of the ballot. And I get that, and I totally understand, sometimes it's very hard to find information about them. And that's one of the things we're trying to change, is make sure that our graduates are going out there and really engaging with the public very meaningfully because schools can't do this all by ourselves, we have to have more people involved.

And we need different people who think differently and have different resources, we need business leaders and we need engineers. I worked with this person who was a landscape architect who just joined a school board, what a cool set of skills to bring to a school district, right? It is still very much a public project to figuring out how schools run. So we want to try and bring lots of diverse people into
the role, people who've never seen themselves in the role before. And Willie mentioned the average age is 66, 80% of school board members are white. And that just doesn't reflect what's going on with our kids and our families.

And post-COVID, post-COVID learning losses is very steep, but one thing that's happened after the pandemic is I hope that my silver lining viewpoint is that people realized how important schools are to our whole society functioning because as soon as schools weren't open, nothing else worked, right? I think the labor that schools do for our kids and in raising our kids and feeding our kids, I work with a lot of schools now that feed their kids breakfast, lunch, and dinner, provide mental health supports for kids. I had access to a counselor when I moved out at 17, that was so important for me, I don't even know where I would've been if I didn't have somebody checking in on me at that time. And so, yeah, the needs for kids have never been higher, and I think that we all have a role to play in getting involved.

And so one thing I'm doing right now that's completely separate from my work with EJA is I've signed up to be a substitute teacher in my local district, because I moved back to Sacramento and I'm at home taking care of my grandmother, and I'm like, "I could substitute teach one day a month," and that would be a really great way for me to still stay engaged with schools. There's a massive teacher shortage if you haven't heard about it, and burnout for teachers is at an all-time high. We also have a massive substitute shortage. So you don't have to have any qualifications except be over 18 and pass a background check to be a substitute teacher right now because we're in such a dire state for emergency subs. So I'm looking forward to going and getting absolutely roasted by some gen alpha middle schoolers, I think it's going to be so good for the soul. It keeps me young.

Willie Thompson:
Do you get to pick the grade or level that you substitute?

Briana Mullen:
No.

Willie Thompson:
Okay, all right. That's why I was like, if you chose middle school, you must get off to punishment.

Briana Mullen:

I was in the classroom for year when I was in undergrad, I was a literacy tutor in East Oakland at a community school actually, which hugely influenced how I think about schools, because I saw my second-graders, the school was three blocks from the Fruitvale BART station, which yeah, if folks are familiar, Oscar Grant was killed by a BART police officer on New Year's Eve, so it's a community that has a lot of... Honestly, it's a very violent place to be outside of the school grounds. But on school campuses, it's such a wonderful place to be. And they had dentists coming to check on the kids' teeth. A lot of people don't realize kids can be acting out because they actually have cavities that are causing pain.

So just providing that, my first boss really helped popularize the idea of the whole child framework and this is something that I believe very deeply in that kids can't learn until they've come to school and they're happy and healthy, and then we can teach them. But there's a lot of things that go into kids coming to school happy and healthy before we can teach them. And one thing during the pandemic that we did is that we cut child poverty in half through the childhood tax credit, and then we let it expire, and so now childhood poverty is back to where it was before the pandemic. But there are absolute things that we can do to make the job that schools have much easier.
And one of the things we teach in EJA is really, how can school board members partner with other local governments, other organizations to help address a lot of those outside of the classroom concerns? Because they don't stop at the classroom doors, they obviously come in the classroom doors. And so we have to be mindful and schools have to be good partners in figuring out how we can make the job of parenting a lot easier because I know you're thinking about it all the time, daddy Willie, but I don't know how anybody really parents right now, it seems like a very difficult task.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah. The sheer breadth and depth of your understanding of the fuel in which you work is always very impressive to me, especially the way that you so specifically and thoughtfully understand the connections between all stakeholders involved and all parties that have an influence and all aspects that should be considered for this holistic child viewpoint. And the thing that comes to mind is that I've always seen you as a person who does that with whatever you're working with and wherever you are. And when it really comes down to it, it is hard to be a first-gen undergrad and a first-gen grad student and a first-gen founder. And you bring such care and kindness and light into people's lives. And so I see you as working in such an impactful field, doing it in such a thoughtful way, and making so much space for relationships and friends and family in your life. That's a lot. We've talked a lot about how hard it is to have your irons in multiple fires and sort of stay happy and stay surviving and stay with that space physically and mentally to give to other people. How do you deal with times whenever you're overwhelmed or when the vision doesn't seem as clear?

Briana Mullen:
Talking about pausing for a moment, like graduating and going back home and slowing way, way down was really hard for me. I take care of my grandmother and she has dementia, and so my conversations with her look very different than when I was at Denning where I'm having these super stimulating intellectual conversations. And one thing that it's really helped me realize is that I got to slow way down to meet people where they're at. And when I do that, then it's actually easier for me too, right? So I think so often when we think about going to a place like Stanford or really any graduate education, it is such a privilege, right? Knight-Hennessy is this incredible privilege. I went to grad school during the pandemic when things were really scary outside, but I could bury my head in books and just be a student. And now I'm slowly unveiling myself and going back out into the world. And some of that makes it a lot easier because talk to somebody who regularly I'm convincing people to run for office in a way that they've never thought about and 30 minutes later, they're like, "I guess I'm running for school board now, right?" And I'm like, "Okay, well come join us."

But in a lot of other ways, it is a big task. It feels like I'm just one person, I can't do it all by myself. And I just try and slow down and focus on, what is the one thing that I can do right now that's right in front of me that I have power over? And I've been meditating a lot, that's extraordinarily helpful for me. Growing up, had a lot of depression and anxiety, and so I've sought a lot of treatment for that over the years, and that's been really helpful. But meditation right now in my life gives me just a moment to be and not do because the work is never ending. And once I gave up on the idea of the work ever ending, it suddenly became a lot more easier to do the work on a day-to-day basis. I no longer have the founder rush of like, "Oh my gosh, I have to get all these things done today otherwise we're not going to be funded tomorrow," right? No, that's not what's going to happen.

I'm putting paving stones down, and I like to use the analogy of I am holding a lantern for somebody in the dark, and if I run way far in front of them, that doesn't help them at all, right? So I have to walk at the exact pace that people are willing to walk with. And if I can get a big group of people to do that
altogether, and then we have one lantern that we can see in the dark with, I think that that is so much more meaningful and valid than me sprinting ahead all by myself, trying to do this all by myself, because that's the kind of reform and change that I've studied for a long time that doesn't stick, it doesn't last, it doesn't make a meaningful lasting difference in kids and families and schools' lives.

And so I think a lot of times that means de-centering what I actually want in this moment. What I really want in this moment is for 100 people to come to me and say they want to run for school board and for me to help them make that change and help them transform their communities. But right now, sometimes what we need to do is just go in and talk to people about, "Are you happy with what your school board is doing? And if you're not, is there somebody here who wants to do more about it?" And starting the conversation there.

Willie Thompson:
Yeah, absolutely. What I hear in that is the importance of deliberate speed, right? I mean, because there are probably points where people can run with you and you go at 20 miles an hour, which for humans is very fast, but sometimes you do need to go at a snail's pace to get it figured out. And to that point, because I know we're running out of battery soon, but we're good, but as we think about sort of maybe hitting the final leg of our conversation here, to keep that running metaphor going, you've given a lot of perspective on what it's like to run EJA and be a Knight-Hennessy scholar, and I'll leave it at Taylor to talk a bit about improbable facts, but what perspective or advice do you have for folks who want to be a part of this community?

Briana Mullen:
I spent a long time thinking about this because I am probably the podcast's biggest fan.

Taylor Goss:
More on that later.

Briana Mullen:
And I've listened to a lot of pieces of advice and I was like, "What could I possibly say that somebody else hasn't said?" One thing that really stumped me on the application was the section on awards, because I had never received an award before, not a single one, maybe since fourth grade or something, but that wasn't going to go on the Knight-Hennessy application.

Willie Thompson:
What was the award, by the way?

Briana Mullen:
I was most likely to be voted president.

Willie Thompson:
That's great.

Taylor Goss:
Foreshadowing moment.
Willie Thompson:
Right.

Briana Mullen:
And I realized when I took a step back, because I got a really good piece of advice from Tyler Chen, another Berkeley alum, at an info session that he had decided to answer the questions with a voice memo. He had gone on a walk and he had answered all the questions with a voice memo. And I loved that because I was a much more comfortable speaker than I was a writer, and I often felt like a lot of writer's block when I went get to the computer. And so I was like, "Oh, if I could just talk through this stuff first, I'll come up with a lot of good material and then I can edit it afterwards."

But the awards section just stumped me because that wasn't the essay portion, it was like, "I don't have any awards. Oh my God, I'm not good enough, I can't do this. I don't have any awards, maybe I should just not apply." And then I took a step back and I was like, "Okay, well, what do I want them to know about me? What is the story of Briana and Briana's service?" Because I worked for six years before applying to graduate school, so I was part of the older, we used to have an OKHers, an older Knight-Hennessy group.

Willie Thompson:
I feel that.

Briana Mullen:
And it's a little different than for folks that came straight from undergrad, and have very good friends who did. And I was trying to convey a lot of experiences and a lot of my thought that had changed between undergrad and applying, it was my last year for consideration. So I was like, "This is it. If it's going to happen, it's got to happen."

And I decided that in the award section, I would put down all of the committees that I had served on and all of the public service work that I had done, which I decided were awards because they were things that I had applied for and gotten selected for and been put on, but they were servant leadership awards, right? I sat on the Chancellors' Advisory Committee for Mental Health, I was working a lot on mental health and suicide for undergrad students at Berkeley in the early 2010s. I sat on the Children's Commission in Sacramento County and I was on that. So it was a way for me to take what I wanted to tell whoever was reading my applications, because who I had no idea who was going to be on the other side of it, and I was like, "I want you to know this about me. And I know this doesn't maybe fit perfectly in your application, but I think you're going to still want to hear it."

And I guess my advice would just be, my first advice to Knight-Hennessy for folks applying is just literally write down on a piece of paper everything that you want them to know about you, your values, your story, your professional work, your non-professional work, and then fit your things into the application. Don't use the application and try and answer the questions the way that they've written them, tell your story and use all the space available in the application to do so. Because I was like, "Look, if they don't consider these awards, they don't consider the service that I've done on these committees and the work that I've done here as something worthy of award, then this isn't the right place for me."

Taylor Goss:
So you talked a lot about portions of the Knight-Hennessy application that you worked very hard on and put a lot of thought into. What were the improbable facts like for you?
Briana Mullen:
I enjoyed the improbable facts section. I know that it's probably the place that people have the most existential dread about doing.

Taylor Goss:
I know I did, yeah.

Willie Thompson:
Plus one.

Briana Mullen:
Because they're like, "What does this possibly mean?" And I was like, "Ooh, this is fun." I just liked the creative challenge for it. The one that I decided I was going to talk about, because it's relevant again, is I created a syllabus on The Legend of Korra show on Nickelodeon.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah, the sequel series-

Willie Thompson:
To Avatar: The Last Airbender.

Briana Mullen:
To Avatar: The Last Airbender.

Taylor Goss:
Not the Blue Guy Avatar.

Willie Thompson:
Not the retelling of Pocahontas.

Briana Mullen:
Not the retelling of Pocahontas, the other retelling.

Taylor Goss:
Hero's journey.

Briana Mullen:
Yeah, it's a hero's journey. Yeah, I created this whole class syllabus at Berkeley on The Legend of Korra because my roommates and I, we would all get around and watch the show together our senior year and absolutely just loved it. And one of us was an econ major, the other one was development studies, the other one did rhetoric and peace and conflict studies, and I studied history. So we would sit there and dissect the show from all of our disciplinary frameworks, and I was like, "This show is so rich. This show talks about colonialism, it talks about genocide, it talks about imperialism, it talks about PTSD, it talks about mental health, it talks about sexuality, and it's all for kids."
Willie Thompson:
A lot of things the original show did too, just taking it up another level, yeah.

Briana Mullen:
Yeah. And so rewatching the live action Avatar again, I think I'm going to go back to the syllabus and create the framework for the new show, because I think what I love about this show in particular, the way the children see the world is often through a lens in which they can truly see the injustices that are happening in the world, and they have a role to play in changing them. And that's why I love the work that I get to do because I get to work with young people all the time who are articulating a more just vision of the future, more articulately and with more clarity than even I can, right? So I get to work with them and help them enact that vision. But that show really was a place for me of hope and refuge. And watching it again has helped me realize that we need to stop putting our kids on the sidelines and trying to protect them from things that we think they can't handle. Because they often, not only can they handle it, but right now they are dealing with it and nobody's helping them understand it anyways.

Taylor Goss:
I love that because another thing that marks our friendship is the very keen understanding of media literacy. And I just remember you telling me like, "Oh my God, you haven't seen The Matrix? We have to watch The Matrix."

Briana Mullen:
When I invited you over to come watch The Matrix, yeah, because I was just-

Taylor Goss:
And then everything we've ever watched or listened to, it's like post-conversations on the social commentary of it and the political angles of everything.

Briana Mullen:
I just love getting the chance to consume media and use it to create critical consciousness and also enjoy it. I think that that's something that I really love about the show is that it strikes this balance between joy and finding moments of joy in a really hard situation. And also in the first series absolutely rejects when his mentors tell him that this is a job for him and him alone, they say, "The Avatar's job is to save the world, and their job is to do it by themselves." And Aang says, "No, I'm going to do it with my friends." And I teared up the other night watching one of the episodes because I was like, "I'm going to do it with my friends too."

And in so many ways, that's what Knight-Hennessy has been for me, is when I came here, I cared so deeply about changing the world, and I wanted to be around people who cared as deeply as I did. And then to get to be here and be like, "Wow, people all care and they're all working on different things, and we can all be in our own lanes and be doing amazing things in those lanes, but I can set this thing down that I thought that maybe I needed to work really hard at because I can see somebody who's doing amazing work in that lane, and I can focus on my lane." And coming to Stanford required a lot of shifts in perspective for me, the big one was moving from a scarcity framework to an abundance framework, but being in Knight-Hennessy also really helped me just feel like, "Wow, we have a lot of abundance. Stanford is just a place of abundance." They talk about it being like a candy shop, and I had never been in a place of abundance like this before.
And so to be around people who cared as deeply as I did was so refreshing, so encouraging, and we got to share and learn from each other, right? There's people like Danny Gajardo who is doing such amazing things in environmental policy and politics, and it's a very parallel lane to what I'm trying to do in education policy. So we can sit down and we can share exact notes on what we're doing and how we're doing it, but he's going to go do it in Chile, and I can feel like I can learn from that and I can see what he's doing. And to not feel like you have to save the world by yourself because nobody does. And so coming to Knight-Hennessy and coming to Stanford has really allowed me to open up my brain to that abundance and to realize that there are lots and lots of people who want to help, and I just need to figure out a way to work with them to do that.

Taylor Goss:
And I want to highlight that anyone who has been part of the Knight-Hennessy program while you were here as an active scholar, I think, would say that you have been one of the most transformative and core members of this community, both in influencing what the community looks like and prioritizes and how you made people feel as a friend while you were here. Because I and a lot of other people can attest that we have learned from each other, but you've also particularly been a guide and a mentor and a dear friend in times of great need and helping people build scholar-driven events, doing the fountain hopping and the social side of things, and serving on the finance committee and serving on the scholar board and then saying to people, "Hey, here's how you do this. Here's how things work behind the scenes, and here's why you should feel comfortable and confident taking on this responsibility." But also making time to have fun in your life. This energy that is so giving and so kind and just made me feel so welcomed once I came here, you were one of the people whose energy I latched onto immediately.

Briana Mullen:
Yeah. Well, I also cornered you in a line at a retreat.

Taylor Goss:
And that's where I'm going with this. You have a story to share because listeners may have caught on, you are the reason this podcast exists, Briana Mullen, you are the-

Briana Mullen:
I'm one of the reasons.

Willie Thompson:
Remember the Avatar story, the Sokka, Toph, Iroh, Amon.

Briana Mullen:
I'm Katara, I'm here to make people understand what their roles are, but yeah.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah, of course there are many co-founders. And you are the OG co-founder.

Briana Mullen:
I'm the OG co-founder. I'm person who didn't let it lift, right?
Willie Thompson:
Wait, so it's Katara from Korra. So then are you... What's the name of the first avatar? Wan, Avatar Wan.

Briana Mullen:
Wan, I'm Avatar Wan.

Willie Thompson:
So you're Avatar Wan.

Briana Mullen:
Okay. I'll take that identity. I'm down. Pass the legacy, reincarnation, I love it, I love it, I love it.

Taylor Goss:
So you did, at my first Knight-Hennessy retreat in Asilomar, which I believe you mentioned briefly earlier, yeah, a couple of things you mentioned briefly, Asilomar, Danny Gajardo, these come back into play, so you cornered me in a line but would you back it up little and tell the whole story of how this podcast came into reality?

Briana Mullen:
So Asilomar was my first retreat for Knight-Hennessy. COVID was the year before.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah. So it was both our first retreat? Okay.

Briana Mullen:
And so, yeah, I was so excited to come in person and meet everybody. I got to interview Michael Tubbs earlier that morning, it was just like an absolute pie of a day for me. And earlier on the way there, Danny Gajardo, who was actually my downstairs neighbor for two and a half years when I was at Stanford, him and his wife-

Taylor Goss:
Lovely, lovely man.

Briana Mullen:
Gorgeous.

Taylor Goss:
Danny and Kata.

Briana Mullen:
Danny and Kata.

Taylor Goss:
Mom and dad.

Briana Mullen:
And Kata did my program afterwards at the GSC. So we were really close, we spent a lot of dinner time together, especially during the pandemic when it was just a couple of us. And I was sitting in the bus and I saw a gas station on the drive down, and I turned to Danny and I said, "Danny, what are going to happen to gas stations when we don't use gas anymore?" This is the future that we're imagining, it is like there will be a fossil free future, I believe in a fossil free future, and so then what's going to happen with all these gas stations? They're all over the world, they're everywhere. And we built all this infrastructure. What are we going to do with it? And he turned to me and he said, "Oh, I have all these ideas. We just did a class project on this. You can use the tank underneath the gas station as a composter. You can use the building to be a post office for packages. You can turn it into a cafe. We've done these design challenges to reimagine what gas stations are going to look like." And I was like, "That's incredible. That's amazing." I never would've learned that if I hadn't been able to turn to this amazing Knight-Hennessy scholar who knows this issue well, who studies this question in such detail. And so at the retreat, the executive director, Tina Seelig, who had just started just a couple months beforehand, led us through an exercise called 'Imagine a world'. And we were all asked to put on an index card what was the world we imagined so that we could kind of talk about it and use it as an icebreaker. And after this exercise, we were all going down to lunch and we were waiting in line, and I was percolating on this. I was like, "This is such a cool exercise." The question has so many similarities with Afrofuturism and what Afrofuturism has done in terms of helping people imagine a world without oppression, and how when we get past our current status quo and start to imagining building something new, we can actually solve a lot of our problems that we're dealing with right now. Because so often we get stuck in solving the problem over and over again. And I ran into you in line.

Taylor Goss:
Yeah, waiting for lunch.

Briana Mullen:
Waiting for lunch. And Danny was right there, and I turned to you and I turned to Danny, and I was like, "What if this was a podcast? What if we asked each other and talked and had the conversations that we are constantly having in the community, which is imagining a world that is a lot better than the world that we currently have right now?" And so lots of amazing people, including Jordan Conger and Danny Gajardo and Taylor, you and I first started in this very room meeting with KHS staff and talking to them about this podcast that we wanted to run, and we wanted it to be scholar-run. And I'm just so proud of what you and Willie have done with it, because as an alum now, it's an amazing way for me to stay in touch with scholars in the community to learn what's going on. And honestly, I spend a lot of time in my car and a lot of time driving all across the state to work with schools and sometimes I just need a little dose of inspiration and hope, and this podcast gives it to me every time. It's like being back at Denning.

Taylor Goss:
It makes me so happy to hear you say that. And the fact that we get to do this today, it feels very full circle. And yeah, I'm so glad that it's out there in the world for people to listen to and evidently some folks are connecting with and really enjoying it.
Briana Mullen:
Yeah.

Taylor Goss:
We did it.

Briana Mullen:
We did it, we did it. I mean, I'm so grateful that when I turned to you in line, you were a, 'Yes, and,' person, Taylor, and you brought a ton of skill sets that I did not have to this podcast, largely having done a podcast before. And I think part of it for me being a first-gen scholar was really about how can we open up the information and resources that we have here to the greater community? Because I didn't want to feel like I was coming to Stanford and just getting things for myself and making out like a bandit and then leaving, right?

I wanted to feel like I was leaving the university open a little bit more, even just a quarter of an inch cracked the door for the next person to come through and see what they can do with it. Because I so deeply believe in student and scholars' abilities to shape the program, shape the university. I believe in shared governance to my bones, and so I think this podcast is a really amazing way for scholars to get to share their visions and connect with people outside of Knight-Hennessy who might be able to help them enact those visions. Because just like Aang, we're going to need all of our friends to do it to make the world a better place, and we need lots of people outside of Stanford to do that too.

Taylor Goss:
Amen. What a beautiful way to close this out. Incredible segue.

Briana Mullen:
I have one full circle thing that I wanted to add. I mentioned that when I was 16, I went to the school board meeting and they decided to eliminate the elementary school music program and that this was kind of my origin story of how I ended up in school board politics. Well, the February that I got into Knight-Hennessy, one of my good friends who was the drum major at my high school had taken over the music school program, and he was the teacher now. He had gotten his master's in education and in music at UCLA and had gone back and was now teaching the programs, amazing full circle moment for him and for my band teacher. And he calls me and he says, "Briana, they're doing it again. They're going to eliminate the elementary school music program." And I was like, "This is my full circle moment."

And so 10 years later, I went back and I helped organize all the music school teachers and students and families in the district, and I helped them write their public comments and feel comfortable and courageous enough to go up to the board and fight to keep elementary school music in the district. And I went up and I went to the board and I gave my public comment again, and the same board member who had chastised me 12 years earlier was still there.

And so I had the chance to look at her and tell her that she had told me to go to Sacramento because I didn't know what was going on and that I had, and I had worked for the state superintendent and I had worked for the California Department of Education, and I had worked for the California School Board Association, and that it was within her power to save this elementary school music program, and that she couldn't tell anybody in the room that it wasn't because I had gone on this long arc journey to learn the answers, to come back to the same moment, to come back to the exact same place in the exact
same elementary school gymnasium and stand in front of public comment and tell her that this was within her power.

And yeah, I stayed until 2:00 AM, I bought pizza for all the high school band kids who were hanging out in the back just like I had been a decade ago. They had no idea who I was, they were like, "Why is this lady bringing us pizza?" But they didn’t ask questions, they just immediately ate the pizza. And at 2:00 AM, yeah, they voted to keep the elementary school music program.

Taylor Goss:
It's like the end of a sports movie.

Briana Mullen:
Yeah. It's like my Rocky moment coming out of that gym at 1:30 in the morning and realizing that we can do this, we can create a really strong public school system that serves kids in the ways that they need it, but it's just going to take a lot of work, and it's going to take us building a lot of community along the way.

Taylor Goss:
I'm so glad that California has you helping to build that community, and I know that you're going to have a lot more landmark moments like that along your career, a lot more Rocky moments to come.

Briana Mullen:
Yeah. You got to have the Rocky moments to fuel you when you don't have... Rocky also has a lot of low moments, that's the key of his hero's journey. And so I think that it's very easy to gloss over the really hard moments that I've experienced in this journey. And being in graduate school is hard, anybody who tells you it is not telling you the whole truth. But this community and the people here, especially those who helped me, carry me through those hard moments like you, like Willie, like Seth Kolker, so many great people. I can't even list them all, but they're all part of what we're doing now. So we've had 25 scholars and counting involved in Education Justice Academy, I have a finance committee meeting in an hour with them. So I am so excited to see what this podcast grows into, the community grows into, because yeah, I feel like as a servant leader, my job is to leave things better than the way that I found them.

Taylor Goss:
Thank you so much for coming and spending time with us today and for sharing your story, and I'm so excited for folks to be able to hear this and then follow up and go find out more about Education Justice Academy and all the other amazing ways that is changing the landscape of school board activity in California.

Briana Mullen:
Thank you so much, Taylor. Thank you for having me on the podcast.

Taylor Goss:
Of course. Thank you for joining us for this episode of Imagine a World where we hear from inspiring members of the KHS community who are making significant contributions in their respective fields,
challenging the status quo, and pushing the boundaries of what is possible as they imagine the world they want to see.

Willie Thompson:
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