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CHRIS DAVIS: Hello and welcome to the Career and Academic Resource Center Podcast. I am your host, Chris Davis, the associate director of the Career and Academic Research Center or CARC. And today it is my great pleasure to have as a guest someone who I've been wanting to speak to for a long time, Jason Silverstein is here with me now. Jason is a lecturer on Global Health and Social Medicine in the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine at Harvard Medical School. He has taught at the Extension School for many years. And I'm going to turn it over to him to talk a little bit about himself. But I am thrilled to have him here today. Hello Jason.

JASON SILVERSTEIN: Hi, good morning. Thank you so much, Chris, and thank you for having me. Really looking forward to it. I've had a chance to offer classes through the Extension School and Summer school since the spring of 2017. And been able to teach classes on everything from AIDS, and earthquakes, and the opioid epidemic to a class that we've done for many years that has meant so much to me on death and dying, called dying well that came out of my dissertation research that was done on pediatric palliative of care over at Boston Children's and Dana-Farber Cancer Institute, up until this last year when we've really turned to doing a pretty innovative course on the coronavirus pandemic that's been an incubator course for students own interventions.

CHRIS DAVIS: So I would love to ask you more about that. But before I do, there is a part of your bio that I was very curious to hear more about from you. So you are a writer in residence I believe in the Department of Global Health and Social Medicine. Can you tell us a little bit more about what that means? That sounds very interesting.

JASON SILVERSTEIN: Yes, so the writer residence position was created for me by the Department chair, Paul Farmer. And the position really was created for a couple of reasons. One is that I have a parallel life as a science journalist. So I've done close to, or actually probably more than 100 opinion pieces, and reported essays in places like the New York Times, the new Republic, GQ, the Atlantic, vise. And many others and have done a lot of other type of media work and commentary on subjects related to health, justice, racism, the sort of things that I teach about. And so part of it is in recognition and support of that work.

Another piece of it is that a lot of my teaching at the medical school has been around science writing. So I've done teaching at the medical school in the Global Health Delivery program. But I've also created science writing courses for all PhD students and master's students throughout Harvard Medical School, and in fact those classes are open up to students across Harvard now. We are also working on some other projects that unfortunately I'm not yet able to talk about. But we are actively trying to build more resources and classes for students who are interested in doing work that's at the intersection of Medicine and the Arts.

So people who want to be the next Atul Gawande, and go off and become a surgeon, but also write a memoir. Write work of creative nonfiction, someone who wants to be the next WC Williams or something like that, and write poetry as well as being involved in health care. We're trying to build more of that, and I'm working closely with someone named Neal Baer. And Neal is a pediatrician, but is perhaps best known as one of the original writers for ER. And he also was the showrunner for *Law & Order, SVU* for I think a decade, and has several other projects in the works now. A documentary that just came out called *Welcome To Chechnya*, which is on HBO. And it was long listed for the Academy Award about anti LGBT discrimination by the governments there.

So there's a lot of exciting things that we're trying to do in media, and medicine, and art over at the medical school. So certainly people who might be on the track of, oh, I want to become a doctor, but also have this artistic side. We want to nourish that, and we want to help train the next generation of storytellers. And Michael Crichton's who might be out there right here at Harvard Med.

CHRIS DAVIS: Excellent, thank you. So you made reference to a course that you're teaching that is called, I believe, the coronavirus pandemic, the fight to save the world. You taught that for Extension students in the fall, and I believe you're teaching that for students of the summer school this summer. I mean, I can't imagine a more timely course than that. Can you talk a little bit about it. I mean, it certainly came together at the right time. I'm sure it combines research and things that you already were in the midst of. Can you talk a little bit about the course, and why you offered it, and what you hope students get out of it?

JASON SILVERSTEIN: Yeah, absolutely. I think everyone, no matter who you are or where you work, all of our lives have been upended by COVID. And certainly teaching in the Global Health and Social Medicine department at Harvard Medical School, this has completely transformed all of our work. There's many people who have been involved in the health care delivery side, especially people who work with the medical charity partners in health is right here in Massachusetts, doing things like contact tracing and testing. For myself, all that science journalism and reporting that I was doing or planning on doing in winter of 2020, of course that completely changed. There is only one story that you could be doing, and that you had a public duty to do if you were lucky and privileged enough to have the education to do so at a place like this.

And then as we started to think, OK, well what courses are we going to offer? For several years I had been doing a class on the opioid epidemic, which is course I hope to do again in the future, and it's of course that, it's no less relevant. This last year there were more opioid overdose deaths than in any other year. So this is not an epidemic that's gone away just because we are now have been experiencing the worst pandemics in 100 years, but it definitely did change what we should be teaching.

And when thinking about how to design a class on an ongoing pandemic. We had to put a lot of thought into this. Their knowledge is changing, right? Of course, most famously what we thought or what we were being told about masks in February 2020 was not the same as what we were being told in April of 2020. And that happens, that's how science progresses. And when people are serious about protecting people and saving lives, they follow the evidence where it goes.

So how do we do that? How do we account for all of those things? And the answer was actually that we came up with, and I think worked very well last fall, was to try to do a very different type of course. A course that would allow students not just to read a lot of articles and books, though people are going to read a lot of articles, that's for sure. But also for students to develop an intervention for some aspect of the pandemic.

Now, this was taking off of-- there was a bunch of courses that were done at Harvard College by a professor named Allan Brandt. And Alan Brandt had done these incubator courses, especially around stigma, where the entire point of the class is not just for students to read a lot, and think through what the problems are, and have some at the end of the class. Comment on the State of the literature, which is fine. I mean, that's how most grad students and undergrads are trained. But Alan wanted to do something different. He wanted to find a way that students actually come up with something that would work in the real world.

And that's what we've done here with this class. It's an incubator course for interventions, we'll do it again this summer. What that means is that the class has as its focus in three steps, helping students be able to design an intervention that could actually work in the world. And without getting too far into the weeds of this unless you want me to, those steps are basically we guide students through, one, identifying a problem. Trying to really understand a problem of COVID in a particular setting and describing it in serious detail.

Then in the next step trying to trace the social factors. This is definitely a disease that is the best example of a biosocial disease, right? There's a sociology to it. The disease is not the same-- it's the same disease biologically, pathophysiology in two places. But we see why is it that the United States has 4% of the world's population and 20% of the world's COVID deaths, and leads the world in cases, right? There's a sociology to this. So the second step is tracing those social forces. And then the final step is creating an intervention that will include an executive summary.

So all throughout students are getting feedback from the teaching staff on how to improve the previous couple of steps. And also getting very detailed instructions on what the intervention should look like in terms of not only what the intervention is, but also like what does it cost? Why should someone want to do this? How is it sustainable? And then one of the big questions is, can it affect more than one thing, right? One of the things we see so often in global health and public health when things work is that there are these, I guess what we call like vertical to horizontal interventions.

In other words, if you look at like the 2014 Ebola outbreak in West Africa, you might have a vertical or disease specific intervention for Ebola where you say to yourself, OK, well in this area we do not have labs to do testing for the disease. So simplest thing, you build you build a lab, right? Simplest quote, unquote. But that's a horizontal approach to, right? An entire system strengthening because now you have that lab that's available not just for Ebola, but now you have it for any number of other things.

And of course, we know during Ebola the people were dying at far greater rates of a lot of other stuff including things they still die from like malnutrition, and lack of blood products. Lack of being able to do C-sections, things that we take for granted in most areas of the United States. So we really take students through how do you actually argue for the intervention?

And it's all about being specific, specific, specific. It's not about can you in your home come up with a better vaccine than Pfizer did, or something. Which if you can, good for you. You should do that and not do this class. But assuming you can't do that, you're a mere mortal like the rest of us, how can you actually make a really big impact with a small intervention, right?

And so we had these wonderful projects coming out of the class last fall. We're looking forward to doing it again in the summer. And I think as the pandemic changes, it'll be really interesting to see what students come up with, and what they take out into the world with them.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you so much. You definitely whet my appetite for learning more about that course. Before I move on, I did want to mention-- this is kind of coming back full circle, the very first podcast that I recorded over two years ago was with someone who had just graduated with their master's from Extension School. And I asked him what his favorite course had been throughout the time that he had been here, and he said the Opioid Epidemic. And I just realized that you taught that course. So Yeah he spoke very highly of it. And yeah, it clearly made a big difference to him and other students. So I just wanted to mention that.

So kind of along that note, I was curious to hear from you in addition to the students that you're working with in the courses that you teach, this is something that I've also referenced in other podcasts. The Faculty Aid Program is something that I oversee at the Extension School. It's a wonderful and very unique opportunity, and a continuing education program like ours for high performing students to do research outside of the classroom with instructors. And over the years I think there have been a few students who have worked with you on different projects, and I think a couple in the more recent past.

So I was curious to hear from you, without sharing too many identifying details of students. If you could talk about what your experience has been like with students who have worked with you in this capacity. Currently if there's any COVID related research that student is working with you on, and talking a little bit more about what that process has been like.

JASON SILVERSTEIN: Yeah, absolutely. And so, if I could say one thing, it's kind of related with the Opioid Class and this Faculty Aid Projects. I think that one of the things we tried to do, and I say we as in always have a really fantastic group of teaching assistants for these classes, and we work extremely hard on them, it's great to get feedback like that because we work very hard to make the classes as-- to allow them to be as fulfilling as possible to students, and what they really want to get out of it. With the opioid epidemic of course, it was extremely important to us because-- how do I put this.

Teaching in global health, we often are teaching students here in the United States about diseases, and conditions that they will never see. Unless they go and they go join us at Harvard Medical School. In which they in which case they will see it in the clinic, or if they go overseas to do work. But you're not going to find too many people who raise their hands in a classroom and say like, oh yeah, my uncle had Ebola, right?

Or they're not going to say, oh yes, of course-- Certainly there are places with TB, I don't want to get that wrong. Certainly in Lynn, Massachusetts has an extremely high TB rate actually, but they're not necessarily things that have impacted people. But if you teach a class on the opioid epidemic, you go into it knowing that almost everyone knows someone. And it's and that's why they're in the classroom.

And those classes have been not only successful because of the work we put into it, but really, the students who take those classes. And their generosity and empathy towards each other has been so impressive. Because we're talking about something academic. We always bring in guest speakers from the front lines, and certainly for the COVID class, we're bringing in guest speakers from many different types of front lines. Like this summer will have the person who's the director of operations for Doctors Without Borders, and we also have someone who's working in an ICU.

But it's a great feedback to get because we really just want to make sure that these types of classes are something that students walk away from them with more than just a grade, but with something that truly means something to them perhaps in more than one aspect of their lives. And to segue to the Faculty Aid Program, I think likewise, there are projects are set up that I'm looking to do, I'm looking to get help with. But also the exciting thing about it is to work with students who want to get real experience in the type of work that I'm doing in order to improve their own work, to learn from it, and to use it for their own aspirations. Whether that be in like academia or some kind of public intellectual space.

I have to say for myself, I've always been so excited to participate in the faculty aid program because everything that I really learns that I do in my own career as far as writing goes, I learned from faculty aid research assistant positions. That's how I learned how to write a conference abstract. That's how I learned how to write an actual academic paper. That's how I learned how to work with editors. That's how I learned how to work with book editors. It was all from these types of positions.

And let's also add in there that when I was a student, I needed the money too. So it was before this, before I had those positions I was working as a waiter at like late night diners, which I think is good for the soul to do. But it was definitely-- I definitely liked doing the faculty aid work a lot more. And so I'm just-- for example in this last semester, of course it's been focused on COVID reporting. I had been doing a column for men's health, but then also doing some additional reporting for other places like GQ. And really needed someone who was really excellent at research, but also very good at helping me bulletproof these articles.

Being able to ask the types of tough questions that I might miss. Being able to add that extra set of eyes. And then I hope for them, that they were also able to get some insight in too. OK, here's how you pitch an editor at GQ. Here's what that process looks like of sending out an idea, of getting it accepted, of working through the piece and then seeing it go out into the world. And then also I have to say giving them a sense too, of how often I get rejected as well. I think it's actually a really good lesson too, something that I definitely learned from working closely with professors when I was a student.

I think too often students can get the impression that once you hit a certain level, the rejections and the no's stop, and that certainly is not the case. If you're working on anything that's even remotely creative you're going to hear no way more than you hear yes. And I think it's really important for faculty, and I don't think we-- and I say we as in that includes me too, don't always do the best job of modeling to students, here's how you deal with failure. Here's how you deal with when the piece you work really hard on it, and it doesn't get accepted. Or it does get accepted, and then maybe even worse it gets accepted and it's just sort of like another wave on the beach, and no one really pays attention. That's another type of feeling.

So it's definitely been I think extremely rewarding for me. I've certainly gotten so much help from the faculty aides. And I also like to think, and I hope that it's true that they've come away from this with some types of skills that you can't really take a class to get. You really have to have someone show you, OK, I'm going to pull back the curtain, and here's what magazine publishing is. Here's what op-ed writing is. Here's what book writing is. And that's been so rewarding for me and exciting for me. And I hope that it's also been rewarding for the students as well.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you for sharing that. I'm always interested to hear about the individual experiences of instructors and students. It certainly varies from I think discipline to discipline, or field of field, but I think you hit the nail on the head in that, I think what I've heard from students over the years is, yes, it certainly teaches them whether it's research skills or some of the things that you alluded to, real world skills, real world experience that you generally can't transmit in a classroom. So I think students over the years have gotten a lot of different kinds of experience that has helped them professionally. And if they've gone on to other avenues of academia, I think it's helped them there too. So thank you for sharing that.

Well Jason, I know you're busy. And I want to say thank you so much for stopping by to talk about this a little bit. I've been very curious to hear more about what you do because it is I think unique and very interesting. And I'm certainly very intrigued by the courses that you teach. And if there are folks who are taking the coronavirus pandemic course that you're doing this summer, it sounds like they're in for a real unique experience. So thank you so much for talking about it.

JASON Oh, thank you so much. And thanks to everyone who's just made all of these classes possible. It's a really
SILVERSTEIN: incredible group at Extension, that there's a lot that happens behind the scenes that students don't see, and I don't know, it gets acknowledged enough, but it's a really passionate, dedicated group. And I'm just glad to be a small part of it.

CHRIS DAVIS: Thank you so much.

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