

Transcript:

Conversations on Economic Inclusion
The Effects of Toxic Stress on Youth and the Economy
Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland

Participants:

Charles Cox
Ginn Academy for Say Yes to Education Cleveland

Host:

Dionissi Aliprantis
Director Program on Economic Inclusion
Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Hi, I'm Dionissi Aliprantis, I'm the director of the Program on Economic Inclusion at the Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland. Welcome to part two of Approaches to Youth Development to Overcome Toxic Stress. Today we have with us Charles Cox, who is a family support specialist with Say Yes to Education Cleveland at the Ginn Academy.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Now Charles, could you tell us a little bit about your background and what brought you to the work that you do?

Charles Cox:

Yes. So I've worked in education, I've taught before. I've also worked for Children and Family Services and social work, and I've worked for the Department of Youth Services, which was the penal system for juveniles. So all of that work led me to Say Yes, if you will, because you have to have certain experiences working with children and I've done it all. I've worked with children in the legal system, in the classroom, and I understood some of the things that affect them, both at home as well as in school.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Okay, great. So hopefully, we'll get to hear about some of those things and your experience with that. I don't know, before we talk about the Ginn Academy and Say Yes, do you want to tell us a little bit about any of those experiences or should we just go straight to what you're doing now?

Charles Cox:

So when I did teach, I taught in the Cleveland Public School System. I taught general science. I taught at John Hay. I taught at ... The funny thing is I taught at the Ginn Academy building, but at that time it was Margaret Spellacy. And when I taught with the DYS or Department of Youth Services, I taught out at Cuyahoga Hills Boy School, and which is the juvenile facility for youth who are incarcerated. And there, they actually have a high school within the system, it's called Luther E. Ball High School. So I taught the general science there, and I was also over the GED Science Prep part for those students interested in getting their GED.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So can I ask you what ... You're doing a lot of work with kids? What attracts you to doing the kind of work that you with kids?

Charles Cox:

So, as I've said, working in the classroom, teachers are super important. They lay the foundation for a lot of what our youth will need moving forward. However, sometimes at least for me, the classroom was a little restrictive sometimes. And obviously when I worked for the Department of Youth Services, you're working with youth who are under a lot of pressure and stress because they have so many legal issues over their heads. And then, as I said, when I worked for Children and Family Services, of course I was working with kids who were under duress, and I was working with families trying to help them find resources and et cetera.

Charles Cox:

So then, that kind of is what led me to Say Yes, because I feel now with Say Yes, I'm really doing ... Well I always did meaningful work, but I'm doing some meaningful work that I kind of enjoy because sometimes when you're working at an institution like the Department of Youth Services, or you're working for Children and Family Services, you're working with youth in very, very stressful situations. You're always seeing things, the bad if you will. And I really wanted to be a part of helping some kids do some good things. So that's a really powerful thing that we're able to do through Say Yes, of course.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So can you talk about that a little bit? So, in the work that you do, how do you define success? And how do you try to get there?

Charles Cox:

Yeah. Well, first of all, let me talk a little bit about Say Yes' mission. Say Yes was founded in 1987. It was businessman and philanthropist George Weiss who founded Say Yes. It was more so founded on the East Coast originally, the Northeast Coast. Now obviously, they've spread out and now they're in Cleveland and its mission is to work with disadvantaged youth to give them better educational opportunities through the various services that we offer, as well as through paying actual scholarship dollars to help youth expand their educational goals or hopefully have a career.

Charles Cox:

Now, we push towards ... Well, we want to see kids go for higher education degrees and et cetera, but in Say Yes, we will support a child who wants to just get a skilled trade or go into other sectors. So, we just really want to see kids who are coming from disadvantaged backgrounds, be able to have the opportunities to go out and have success in the workforce.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So, when I think about Say Yes, how exactly should I think about that? Because I know that the kind of college scholarship is one big part of it, but it's not as simple as just putting that money out there for students. It's not just a matter of, we have this big scholarship and that's on its own going to change everything. And so, when you think about all of the other services, can you tell me about those?

Charles Cox:

Yeah. So you led me to a very key thing that we do at Say Yes. You're absolutely right. You can't just throw money at a situation and hopefully that solves everything. You have to have the youth be able to graduate and take advantage of scholarships and things of that nature. And that's where a person like myself comes into the picture. Through Say Yes, in each school building in Cleveland, we have what's called a Family Support Specialist. That's that word you were kind of ... And that's my role. I am a family support specialist for the Ginn Academy family and within that role ... Now obviously, each support specialist, because it depends on what grade level, you're in, does a little different things, but for the most part, we all kind of do the same things. And so, we understand when we're dealing with at-risk or disadvantaged families.

Charles Cox:

One of the main reasons why a lot of those youth do not take advantage of scholarships and higher education is because they lack resources or there are other barriers there in place. And so that's why they put an individual like myself to kind of coordinate those resources and walk and support those families, so that we can all ultimately help this student A, first of all, graduate. And then B, take advantage of hopefully the scholarship dollars, so that they can open up other economic opportunities.

Charles Cox:

It looks different depending on what school setting you're in. For instance, if you are a family support specialist in an elementary setting, you might not do some of the things that I do, because I think it's doubtful that you'll do career planning with second and third graders. But whether you are in an elementary or a middle school or a high school, we still have families that are in need. We're still going to have the children who have barriers and don't have access to certain things. And that's where we come in, because we help to bridge those gaps and align those parents with the supports and the resources that they need. And again, that's where my role comes and I'm not just working with the student. I'm working with the entire family.

Charles Cox:

I'll give you an example Dr. Dionissi. I had a student, and he was living with his father and I was having a hard time getting in touch with dad. And finally, he called me back and we were able to kind of have a conversation. And through that conversation, I found out that dad was out of work and I was able to actually help dad get involved in a training program, right. And also, the student was complaining, he and dad were having a lot of issues and et cetera. And I think dad was really just stressed out, but I was able to help dad get involved in a training program. And of course, in my notes, I'm always saying, "I'm doing check-in with students that I'm following and students that I'm assisting." And so I did a check-in with the student again, and he's telling me how, "Oh no, my dad, now we're not arguing so much." I'm like, "Oh, imagine that."

Charles Cox:

So, dad's outlook, he feels a lot more positive being able to provide. And obviously that helped he and his son's relationship. So that's just some of the work that I do every day, working with my families.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah. So something that I'm hearing about the work that you do is it sounds like it really is a case by case situation, where you're really assessing what kids and their families need, right.

Charles Cox:

Absolutely.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I'm wondering if you can give some more examples of that. And I'm wondering if, how much you would say that a lot of the obstacles or barriers are very similar and how much there's just a lot of variability across children.

Charles Cox:

Well for our population, what unfortunately is very similar with all of our students is the lack of resources. And often times with our student population, certain things Dr. Dionissi, that you or I may take for granted, a lot of our students, it's a struggle. And I'm talking even food, access to healthcare. I'll give you another example. We had a kid, excuse me, who in my building was just very mean, and really couldn't understand what was going on with this kid, but to make a long story short, his teeth were hurting. What he understood about his family dynamic was, "What am I going to go to my mother about my teeth? Nobody has money around here, so I just have to deal with it," right. So just to be able to get him aligned with the doctor, a dentist, sorry. I have no idea what they did, but whatever they did, the kid's not as mean as he was. So I think that was pretty good.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Pushed in the right direction, I bet.

Charles Cox:

So yeah, but these are the types of things, Dr. Dionissi and it could be as simple as that. I think we don't really understand how our kids in certain communities really do not have the basics, right. And I remember when I sat down and I spoke with the kid, already in his mind, he just kind of knew, "Well, this is just what I have to deal with, and that's just the way it is." And I felt so bad about that, right because my daughter knows, if anything's aching, I'm going to get you what you need, and that wasn't that child's reality, right. And so that's where my role, I feel, is very important, right, to be able to reach out and explain to a family. And you have to understand sometimes, just because a family may be in need, sometimes people don't really always want to talk about, that they don't have, you know?

Charles Cox:

And so, that's where I feel that empathy. You really have to have a lot of empathy. You really have to be able to bear yourself to a family and just let them know, "Hey, I'm here to help and I understand." I think, because of my experience and because of my background and because of the work that I've done in the past, I understand things like being patient, because I think if someone jumped into this role and have never done any of the type of work that I've done, it could be pretty frustrating. They may be disillusioned. They may, "I've got services for you. Why are you hanging up the phone in my face for it?" Because they may not understand.

Charles Cox:

But to be honest, oftentimes when I call some of my families, I don't get a warm reception. They often times don't even want to talk to me, because they've probably had experiences with other types of agencies and services and some of those experiences may not have been so positive, right. And that's

what I truly really love about my work and my agency. We really, really focus on the people, the individuals and how we can help. And we sit in our meetings and we think of different ways to really break down barriers for our families and how to reach them, because it's really all about just helping these kids, and that's my passion.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah. I'm wondering if you could elaborate a little bit on, if you have ideas on what some of those other experiences might have been, because I'm thinking of what you just said, where you said, "It might be frustrating for some people." And I'm thinking also at a societal level, right.

Charles Cox:

Absolutely. Yeah, yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

It might be frustrating to say, "Wait, wait, I've got resources here."

Charles Cox:

Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

But it's maybe not as simple, again, like we're talking about the college scholarship where we're talking about a lot of these circumstances where there's this human element. So, it's not just a matter of, money always helps, right.

Charles Cox:

Money always helps, yeah but-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

And you're talking about basic resources, but now we're talking about access to those resources. And so I'm wondering if you can either talk about some of the ways that you think, people might be a little bit disillusioned or even some of the ways that you have found success in reaching out to people.

Charles Cox:

Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Is it just a matter of just pure patience?

Charles Cox:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Well, the good thing Dr. Dionissi, you and I have talked before. We talked before, so we've kind of ... You used the word disillusioned and I don't think that can be stated well enough. I mean, that's a really big factor. I think one of the conversations that you and I had was, unfortunately, when you're dealing with individuals from a certain community and from a certain background, there's almost this sense of hopelessness. And sometimes the mentality is, "Well, why try?"

It's never going to happen for us. So why try." Even with the kid with the tooth problem right, he was just cranky with me. I'm just trying to figure out what I can do to kind of assess. In his mind already, "That's not my reality. I got a bad tooth. I got to deal with it. Who is this guy with the long ... What do you want?"

Charles Cox:

Well and even going back to the different agencies that these families are working with, and I've worked with some of these agencies and I get it, because when you're an agency and you're trying to help, you're meeting people at their worst. And I think sometimes, when you mentioned the human element, I think sometimes people don't really realize how people feel in that moment and I'm just going to be quite frank with you. I think some of our families have had some negative experiences with some of the social service agencies, because I know even when I was at children and family services, we were starting to change our philosophy, right. Yes, we're meeting families in crisis. Yes, there's some bad things that have happened to a kid. You still have to treat these people like human and you still have to have some empathy and you have to meet them where they are, but that wasn't always the case.

Charles Cox:

So, when you're dealing with the community that I'm dealing with, you're talking about individuals who may have not been treated so well by an agency. They may have had a bad experience. So, in their mind, "Why would I talk to you, Mr. Cox? You're just another guy from an agency." You know? And so, those are some barriers that you have to overcome. And so, you ask, "Well, how did you deal with that?" Well, patience absolutely, but you also have to be persistent. It's almost like a salesman. I think a good salesman knows, "I'm going to have to make 150 calls before I make two sales." And if he stops making the calls, he's not going to get the sales, right.

Charles Cox:

Well, it's the same deal and this is what I mean by, you'll find out what a person's really about, because I'm the guy trying to help you. I'm trying to give you these services, but I have to keep calling you. And I think humans, sometimes the human nature or that part where, "I'm not going to keep calling this family. If they don't want the help, it's ..." Well, you cannot have that mentality, right. I have to keep in the back of my mind, I'm dealing with the population that's pretty much been beat down. I'm dealing with the population, for instance, and it broke my heart. One student that I see every day and I had no idea, the prior two months, they had no lights in the house. I didn't know that, right. And this kid comes in, smiles at me every day. The empathy part, it's very, very important. You just have to remind yourself, "It's not about me. It's not about, how dare they not take my ... I'm Mr. Cox man. I'm great." [crosstalk 00:19:10].

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Don't they realize what they're ...

Charles Cox:

Yeah. What are you doing here? And humor. Humor Goes a long way, but yeah, I say that the main thing that you have to remind yourself is that, if I were in their shoes, right, if I were in their ... And I don't think most professionals think about it that way, because I mean, you get your master's in this, and then I got a certificate in this. And yeah, you can get all that type of training, but you have to just remind

yourself, if I was in that individual's shoes, how would I feel? Would I be so nice right now? Or what I ...
When you keep that mentality, people pick up on that.

Charles Cox:

And so, even with that father, when I reached out to him, of course his mental, "What do you want to talk to me for? Did my son do something?" "No, he didn't. He didn't do anything. It's just, I had a conversation with him. I just want to reach out to you." When you just let people know that I'm just as human as you are, "Hey, I get it, but I just want you to know if there's something I can do to help you out." Then even with that, you just kind of set that there and let them marinate on that a little bit and then you got to go back and visit it again, right. So yeah doctor, there's no magic.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

There's no magic, huh?

Charles Cox:

No magic.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

It's just that hard work, the persistence, [crosstalk 00:20:44] the patience.

Charles Cox:

Also, if you are looking for a thank you or a lot of thanks, I always say any social service job is a thankless job. You're not going to get a lot of thank yous. It's funny, because even sometimes when a family thanks me now, it's like I'm like, "Oh well, thank you." "Okay, let's move on now. What else do you ..." "Yeah." I'm like, "Oh okay, well now what are we going to do?" But it's tough work, it's tough work. Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah. So I guess I'm curious in a couple things here. So I guess there's two directions I want to go in and okay, maybe I'll just ask you both questions at the same time and you can decide how you want to answer them.

Charles Cox:

Okay. No problem.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So, I'm curious if you can talk about ... We want to talk about toxic stress.

Charles Cox:

Okay.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I think, we're having this conversation where we're going to be talking with Dr. Andrew Garner, Dr. Faye Gary, so people in the literature. And there's this emerging kind of science and evidence about how our

bodies, about just kind of biology, how we react to stress and how we react to repeated stress and sustained stress. And so I'm curious if you could speak about some of the forms that takes with the students you work with, and then thinking about also this broader question of our support agencies, our social service agencies, how they respond to that. And I heard you saying things like, it's about focusing on the individual and I also heard you saying that there's some kind of cultural shifts happening in some of the agencies. So I'm wondering if you could maybe talk about both those things or just one. Your call.

Charles Cox:

Sure. No. So I'm glad that we are now speaking about and doing the research on and really, really looking at toxic stress because I think as far as the African American Community is concerned, that's been a key factor in our early mortality rates, if you will, because now we do totally understand if the body is under a lot of stress, often and for years, that has a toll on your health. So when I look at even our school population or other schools in our, obviously, inner city settings and the high incidence of depression, anxiety, I think you and I were talking and I was letting you know that we had lost in our school five kids to gun violence, right? And then I shared with you, how I was going on a home visit because this particular child had not been in school.

Charles Cox:

So I was just going to try to reach out to the family to kind of see what I could do to assist the family, and I ended up driving right in the middle of a shootout and this was broad daylight and these were real bullets. It wasn't a movie set, this was a real shootout. But what it made me do when I finally got to a safe area and I reflected on what the heck just happened, you have to remember these students, they deal with this type of stuff every day. This kid, the kid I was looking for, thank goodness it wasn't that - His house was further down the street, so I will go back and try, but that's that kid's street, right? And these were assault weapons that these kids were shooting.

Charles Cox:

And I say kids, because the sad thing was that, I would say those kids were no older than 20, 21. 21 in my opinion, they would've been the oldest, but it wouldn't have shocked me if those guys were 17 or 18. These were very young guys with high powered weapons, shooting up a house, right. And so, whether you were the guy next door, that's still on your street. That kid understands, "This is my environment." And you have to say, "Well, what do I do about this?" I don't think people understand when you're living under that type of stress.

Charles Cox:

So I'm near Shaker Heights and my friends who live in certain parts of Cleveland, it's like a running joke. The response time for police at Shaker Heights, that's like three minutes, they're there. But a friend had told me about an incident about, they thought that their house had been broken and the police showed up the next day, right. So you have to look at all these factors. If I'm a kid and I'm living under a situation like that, I'm living under these conditions. There's this violence all around me and Lord knows what's going on within the house, right, because when you know that you have to deal with stuff like that, we as humans tend to take things out on the people closest to us.

Charles Cox:

So there is a lot of widespread anxiety and depression. I was talking to a kid and I asked him, had he ever talked to someone about possibly being depressed? And he snapped at me, "What do you talk about, et

cetera, et cetera? I said I'm angry. I don't want to kill myself." I says, "Yes but did you know, that anger could be a big sign if you're ..." And he had no idea. So, what am I saying? Our kids deal with more, sometimes within a seven day week, as far as stress and trauma, then you and I may deal with in six months, right.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Or six years, right?

Charles Cox:

Or six years, right. I mean, I know where my next paycheck is coming from. I know that just as I've left one agency and I've been able to go, I know that I have a certain skill set that's pretty marketable. I mean, there's certain things I'm not so concerned about. Whereas in my kids' households, not so much. I'm going to give you another deal, when you talk about the toxic stress and how our families deal.

Charles Cox:

I remember reaching out to a family and I'm speaking to the mother and I'm talking to her about her son's absences, right. And her point to me was, "Well, he has to work." And I go. Now of course, my first initial reaction, "What do you mean he has to? He has to go to school," right? And see, this is where it's almost like two different worlds. You and I, it's like, "Come on, it's the law. The kid's supposed to be in school. Education is ..." Well, there are people out there living day to day where things are so dire, I don't care about him going to school right now. He's bringing in some money into the house, right. So-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I mean, and I think that's only gotten worse with COVID, right. I mean, I think-

Charles Cox:

Absolutely. Absolutely. I don't want to mention a certain company who I think the district had to reach out to, because there were so many of our students working. And not only working, they were working overtime and I'm sitting here going, "Wait, I thought when they were a certain age, you're supposed to send them home." Well, guess what? This is our America. They were not sending those kids home. They were letting those kids work whatever hours they wanted to work. Because once again, there's our reality and then there's the reality of those who simply don't have we have. So yeah. I'm sorry, there was something else you asked me.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Well, I guess no, this is all really good and I think trying to hear these stories and understand this perspective is really what I'm really grateful you're here to tell us about.

Charles Cox:

Right mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Because you are trying to put yourself in others' shoes and trying to support those people. And I guess the other question I had is, I was going to ask it to you a different way, but just this question of even at a very high level, when you think about supporting kids, dealing with this kind of toxic stress. So, I think

Dr. Garner is going to speak a lot about this idea of stable, supportive, nurturing relationships. What are the levers we can pull individually, as groups, as organizations, as an entire society, how do you support ... I'm thinking of the kid on that street.

Charles Cox:

Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

What can we do? What can we as a society? What can you and I? What can we do for that kid?

Charles Cox:

Well, that's why I got love for your doc, because first of all, I appreciate what you're trying to do. And I think that those of us who have attained at least a certain level of education, a certain level of success for ourselves, we have to understand that you mentioned nurturing. Your definition of nurture, and maybe one of my student's definition of nurture, that's two totally different things, right. And I think we all need to have a baseline.

Charles Cox:

Let's all agree that we're not the experts on things, we don't know anything about. We don't live in their shoes. So one thing I try to not do, is to act like I'm the expert on their life. I have to understand their life experience. So, meeting people where they are, because we could go and try to push some things on them, "Oh no, look, I want to give you this nurture. I want to give you this and that." And the kids will be, "Man, that's corny. I don't need. What? What are you talking about?"

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So first of all, same thing, nothing but love for what you're trying to do and it's very much mutual appreciation here. I very much appreciate the work that you're doing day in, day out.

Charles Cox:

Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So let me think of another side of that, and this is something that in my own head, I've had a tough time with, and I can think about this even for my own kids right, where there's moments where kind of just let them be, right?

Charles Cox:

Absolutely.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Just let them be kids, let them enjoy themselves. But then there's some point where again, we're thinking that the long view here.

Charles Cox:

Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

We're thinking about the labor market. We're thinking about educational outcomes.

Charles Cox:

Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

And there's this other moment where it's, "But you need to start studying. You need to start working."

Charles Cox:

Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

And I guess, how do you think of that balance of wanting to push kids, let's say, academically or afterwards, thinking about their careers, how do you balance that with, I don't know, maybe they need time or ...

Charles Cox:

Yeah. Yeah. Okay. I want to say a whole lot, so let me just ... Okay. Believe it or not, I do use a lot of tough love with my kids because that is needed. I'm going to use this bit of an example and maybe a little crass, but Mr. Cox understands his population, right and talking to, you have to know your students. There are some students I can just simply say, "Hey, come on. John, why? Why are you ... Come on." And that's enough. There's a few other of my kids I know, I will say, "Get your ass over here and come here now and let me talk to you." And if I didn't throw that in there, right and this is what I was trying to say about the nurture part, to that kid, that was care. "Hey, get your ass over here. Come here."

Charles Cox:

When I threw that in there for that kid, he understood exactly what I meant. He knew I wasn't playing at that moment and he came right to me. But if I would've said it a little nicer, he may not have not. No, I'm being honest. He may not have responded the same way. So when you say, what does nurture look like? And I'm serious, you really have to ...It depends on the individual and you have to meet people where they are. You really do, right, because one thing, just like I'm talking about a baseline.

Charles Cox:

One thing all of my students know, I'm that staff, if I hear them using too much cursing and I'm, "Hey wait, we can say that a lot different," and they'll respond, because what they do know is, Mr. Cox doesn't tolerate that. So they know that. And what they also know is Mr. Cox doesn't tolerate the, "I'm not in class right now." Or, "I'm serious." "No, you need to go back there and go to class or come here let's talk. What happened between you and the teacher? Okay, how could we have said that differently?" Because my point is, you're going to learn a lesson and then you're going to take your behind right back in that classroom. So they understand my baseline.

Charles Cox:

I now have that relationship with all of my kids in my building. I can fuss at them and they listen to me. Like I'll be like, "Hey." And everyone will get quiet. And I'll call the kids, "Come here." And all the kids, "Oh, you messed up now." I'm not going to go off on him in front of the kids because I know where that goes, but I'm going to pull that kid off to the side. I'm going to love on him, maybe with a tough voice, right. And then afterwards, I'm a fist pump, give him a little to the ... Let him know, "Hey man, you know I love you, but this the expectation."

Charles Cox:

So anytime you're writing a program or anything of that, you really do need to have people who can assist you, who know how to meet people where they are. And if you don't get that, I don't care how much money you put into a program. I don't care how many shiny glossy brochures and how cute it looks. If you're not meeting people right where they are, and if you do not know how to communicate with the people that you're working with, you're going to be frustrated, wondering, what are we doing wrong? Does that make any sense?

Dionissi Aliprantis:

It does. It does.

Charles Cox:

Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

And so I guess when you think about the supports, I think that a program like Say Yes or when we think about the Ginn Academy, we think about different agencies. Do you see that there is a move in this direction right now? And do you think we could do more in this direction? And what would that look like if so?

Charles Cox:

If I'm being honest it's yes and no. I'm going to say obviously for instance, with an agency like Say Yes, first things first, I want to talk a little bit about that. I jumped all over the opportunity to go and work for Say Yes. When I realized what they were about and what they were able to do, I said, "Oh my God, those are all my skills and I have a possibility in changing this kid's life. So yeah."

Charles Cox:

You have more programs ... Here we go with that. There's moneys. I'm not going to say more money, but there are moneys available. There are different programming avenues and things of that nature, but there's still a disconnect. There is still a disconnect, even with, I mean think about even the politics every day within our everyday lives, within our society, right, that disconnect. These people see it this way and these people see it, but there's this disconnect, right. So I do think that since a certain presidency and I'm going to go back to the Obama's first, I think there's been a really strong push to try to do some things I really do. Do I think we are there? Absolutely not. Are there things that we could be doing a lot better? Absolutely.

Charles Cox:

I'm just going to say, even with my agency and I brought it up to my agency, even in the way that we reach out to our families, we can do that a lot different, okay. If I was teaching, I mean I'm not teaching anymore. If I was working in Solon, right or I don't know, Woodmere or some other ... What term would I? A stable community, if you will, maybe sending out some of the things that we send out to our families would work in those situations. Some of the ways we've reached out and it hasn't worked as well as we wanted to and I kind of let them know, this is why. You're communicating to them in a way that that's how they communicate. I'm just saying. So-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Is that because of housing instability? Is that what you're getting at? Or that's-

Charles Cox:

That's a big part of it. When you're mailing out things to a family that's moved three times within the last 18 months, then-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

How does a school or how ... I think of the work that you're doing for Say Yes, you're trying to address some of these issues, right?

Charles Cox:

Absolutely, yes.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

How do you deal with something like housing instability? And how does the school? So how does the Ginn Academy in a general ... Before there was Say Yes, how would Ginn Academy have dealt with that? And now with Say Yes, how do you all try to offer support for students in those circumstances?

Charles Cox:

Right.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

And housing instability, to be clear I'm meaning something like what you just said, a family or a household moving multiple times in a year and probably not on their own terms, right?

Charles Cox:

Oh, absolutely not. Yeah, yeah. Let me just state this. When it comes to housing, one of the biggest issues that you're going to have is housing. I have an 18 year old, he just turned 18 and he's going to be unfortunately kicked out of his dad's house, but he had hasn't graduated yet. And people were like, "Oh, he needs housing." Absolutely does. The problem is there aren't as many resources as people think, right, for an individual like this. I don't think what we understand as a society, when we ... Okay. Say Yes does have this pot of money and we talked about this. You don't just throw money at everything and think that fixes everything, but you do need people in certain positions to help you allocate funds effectively.

Charles Cox:

So let me say it that way. I do not think oftentimes in many agencies we're allocating and even we can induce some improvement in my agency as well. We don't do an effective enough job allocating funds in ways that really help people where they are and push them in the right direction. Now, my fear for that young man who's 18, which his father's being shortsighted on, he doesn't have the necessary skills yet. He hasn't even graduated high school. You kick him out, right. So what did you just do? And there's no resources out there for this kid. What we're not looking at is where, and he's a very nice kid, but when you push somebody's back against the wall, right, and then we see this story on the news, "18 year old guy sticks a pistol in somebody's face and told him to get out of the car," I don't think we recognize what we do when we just say, "Well, we don't have resources for it." Yes, but there are funds out there, but where are we putting these funds?

Charles Cox:

Do we understand we need more funds in transitional housing? There's hardly any funds available for transitional housing. Transitional housing for kids coming out of the foster system, transitional housing for kids who are in at-risk communities, who are trying to get on their feet. We do not have dollars for that. And guess what population tends to get into more legal problems, tend to go out and start using drugs and et cetera, because I know if I'm feeling a certain, you know you're depressed or what have you, you're far more susceptible. So we don't look at those things. People, we're not just helping to save a life. We're helping our own community, because if you turn those young folks loose and now they have to fend for their selves and they didn't have the best coping skills to begin with, well now you just created a problem.

Charles Cox:

Now you have a menace, a menace to society out there, because now this kid's going to listen to those who he probably shouldn't listen to going, "Aha see? And you were going to school for what? See? I told you that stuff was ... Here man, let me show you how to make some money." Well, why shouldn't he listen to that guy now? In my opinion, that's our fault. That's we as a society.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

That's on us, that's on us.

Charles Cox:

That's on us, because-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

We got to find a way to support that kid in that moment they need it.

Charles Cox:

And it's transitional people. It doesn't have to be ... I think, and you and I have talked about that in the political part and what people tend to hear, right, people tend to think when you're talking about social services helping people or especially funding parts of their ... "Oh, that's just a welfare thing. Oh, these people want to sit." And I get that, because let's face it. When welfare first came about, first of all, it was never well planned and it did kind of cripple people to a certain extent because it didn't give them the incentive to go out and do better. I get that part. And Lord knows I'm not proposing, "Let's just put everybody up and pay for them." No, no one's saying that. We're talking transitional housing, we're talking about transitional resources and training for individuals to help them get on their feet.

Charles Cox:

There are smart enough people like you and me doc, who can kind of work some stuff out, but the problem is there's not enough of that going on, right. So yeah, you get a lot of tragic cases out there because we turn a lot of these young folks loose to fend for themselves. They do not have the necessary skills. They don't have the coping mechanisms and all of a sudden it's menace to society time.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I'm thinking about your own work, so you.

Charles Cox:

Okay.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Because we're thinking about this on a societal level, right.

Charles Cox:

Okay.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I think what where we're thinking about, a kid like that, that's on the margin that can kind of go either way, right?

Charles Cox:

Right.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

And this is a tragic case where it didn't go the right way.

Charles Cox:

Did not.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

And you're talking about the societal level that we need to try to pull more of those kids in the right direction.

Charles Cox:

Correct.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I'm going to ask you.

Charles Cox:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Dionissi Aliprantis:

You spoke about this a little bit earlier, but you're talking to that kid or you are thinking, and now I can think about you personally, but also I'm thinking about a school. What would make your pitch to that person, your appeal to that person, what would make it more effective and make that person more likely to kind of come back to kind of the, I don't know if you want to say the formal labor market, or thinking more about their career.

Charles Cox:

Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

And their long term employment, those kinds of ... Thinking in those terms, rather than in these negative terms.

Charles Cox:

Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

What would make that pitch more effective? How do you try to make that pitch? What would you need? What would make it more effective for you now? What do you wish you could pull out of your backpack and say, "Hey actually, I got this for you or we can talk about this."

Charles Cox:

Well, clearly the transition housing piece. I obviously wish I had more resources there. But what I try to do, Dr. Dionissi is that, a lot of kids think that it's college or bust. And one of the main things, thank goodness, we have found four new programs for just skilled trades. And one of the things that I really ... You're going to need more skilled tradesmen than you're going to need people with four year degrees. That's just the bottom line, right. And sometimes our kids don't make that connection. A lot of them, believe it or not, don't even see that a skilled trade is a viable, right, career move. So there's that level of just not knowing within the community. They just don't know. They don't know what's out there for them, right. If you're coming from a house where uncle over there is on couch and mom kind of works and there's not a lot going on, you don't know right?

Charles Cox:

So the pitch that I try to use with my kids is, first things first, you have a right to look at, what are you interested in? And do you know, I get the blankest looks sometimes because, just to show you, like my daughter knew, because I was saying it to her, she was three years old, "What do you want to become?" So she knows she had to think about something. Do you know, I sit across from 16, 17 year olds and I go, "Well, what do you want to do?" And they'll give me this blank look, "I don't know." "So well, have you ever thought about it?" "No." And they're not lying. This is the honest to goodness- "Yeah, I have no idea."

Charles Cox:

So one thing I try to sell them on is, even if you weren't the best student in school, you still have the right. You still should look at what is important to you and what would you like to learn more about?

What would you like to do? Do you know so many of our kids have not even had an adult sit down with them and have that discussion, "Hey, what would you ..." Again, this is one of those things doc, where I'm saying, certain things you and I would do just naturally and we take for granted, "Oh, that's probably happening in that household as well." It's not. Certain things we take for granted, certain conversations are not happening in our kids homes. It's just not. So my pitch to a lot of them is, "Do something that you feel you can do in your heart. You have a talent, you have a skill, let's tap into that," right. And there's almost like, I see the light bulb go off.

Charles Cox:

And then what I say to them, Dr. Dionissi, I say, "All right, I'm going to give you a small homework assignment. It's not major." Because at the end of the day, the good thing about their generation, from their phones and laptops and even from their watches now, you can Google anything. And I make a kid, I say, "Pick five things that you think you're good at or if there's five things you think you might be interested in and I want you to report back to me. And don't report back to me with just the names of the careers. I want you to give me a little bit about each one."

Charles Cox:

"Well, how would I do that?" "You're going to Google it." "Okay. Mr." "Yes, you're going to Google it. I want you to know more about it." And the reason I'm doing that, I'm doing some career planning with them. I tell them, "And as you read about this career or job that you may be interested in, think about, can you see yourself doing it?" I say, "You may be thinking, I think I'm interested in this and then you do some research on it, you go, "Well no, I don't think I like that." And I told them, "That's fine." But I tell them to pick five things and then we report back and we go over it.

Charles Cox:

Of course, some are better than others, but I pump every time they ... First of all, if a kid does it, I pump them up. I'm, "Oh, good job." Okay so now, let's think about it from ..." Because you're trying to build the kid up.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Yeah.

Charles Cox:

And point him in a direction right? So that's where I start with a lot of our kids, because a large percentage of my youth have never thought about the future. When I'm walking out the door and there's people shooting outside and this dude, I know this dude sell drugs. I mean, you're not thinking about the future, unfortunately. That's just their level of existence.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Thanks. Okay, so this is good. I mean, in some sense, it feels like ... You know what I'm hearing a lot from what you're saying is just a little bit of time with the right person, at some of these critical junctures can really change people's career or educational trajectories.

Charles Cox:

That is correct. That is correct.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Just a little bit of time.

Charles Cox:

Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

So I'm glad you're there. I'm glad you're there. So, okay. So, I'll give you a few more questions. So one going back, and I was supposed to ask you this at the beginning, but then we got going.

Charles Cox:

We got going.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Obviously, we're hoping to have Ted Ginn Sr. or Mr. Holmes, Principal Holmes.

Charles Cox:

Right, right.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Have conversations with them directly, but could you speak just for a moment about the Ginn Academy and what it is that attracts you to the Ginn Academy?

Charles Cox:

Right. So I look at Mr. Ginn's vision of taking these inner city boys. And I think what Mr. Ginn understood was, it's pretty bad for Black males oftentimes. We know our incarceration rate. We know our school dropout rates. We know our graduation, all these are not always good. And so, Mr. Ginn had a vision to start a program that teaches them certain necessary skills to even begin to think about going out in the workforce, right? Again, certain things you and I already know, certain kids don't, right. Little things like, you have to pull your pants up and you cannot ... Just the basics. The basics, I think most people take for granted and we have to realize those kids don't have it.

Charles Cox:

So Ginn had a vision to that, and that's why they have the uniforms. And I'll be honest with you, they're very resistant oftentimes, especially when they come in as freshmen. They're very resistant, right, because there's that pull of what's right outside. When Mr. Ginn, myself and Mr. Holmes, we're doing our jobs, we understand that pull of, and for lack of better ... The streets, the pull of the streets for our children, it's real and it's more powerful than people think. And they sometimes really believe that's it, that's life right there, because they know nothing else but that. And so, Ginn's vision of teaching these boys, the proper way to tie your tie, to wear the uniform with pride, to understand what the Ginn Family means and I think he did that strategically because a lot of these kids don't have stable family, right. There's some of our seniors who will say, "Man, you guys really are my family," because they weren't getting that at home, right? So-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Well, it's pulling in the opposite direction, right. It's pulling kids into that family environment, that school.

Charles Cox:

Absolutely. Absolutely, Because what they're getting outside, unfortunately, is leading them to a path of really destruction. So, he had a vision to kind of set up the academy to give them exposure. So let me say this. When I applied for the position, there was Ginn and then there was another school, I'm not going to mention that school's name, that I was up for. And I was sitting there hoping I'm going, "Give me Ginn. Please give me Ginn." And reason being is because I knew more about Ginn, I understood what he was trying to do, and I knew my skillset would fit in that environment better, or not better. I would've done well in any one of the schools, because I'm going to do my best for those kids, but I was really hoping for the Ginn environment.

Charles Cox:

And the one thing I'll say about Ginn that I really love that they do, we have like oh, 11 different partners, right. We partner up with so many different agencies and we have a lot of different partners. And the reason why we're doing that, we're trying to make sure we can expose those boys to as many opportunities as we possibly can, even when they're resisting, right. And you got to have a stomach for that as well, because sometimes you go, "What is wrong with this boy?" But you stay persistent and use your empathy, but we just try to expose them to so many different opportunities. Like we have the program, the E.C.E.C. Program where the kids could do some interning and some working through Lincoln Electric, the Water Company right, because as we stated not, everybody's going to go to college and that's fine. And me being a Tuskegee graduate, that was kind of Booker T. Washington's philosophy.

Charles Cox:

Booker T. in my opinion and some thought he was wrong, but I understood what he was saying. Booker T., even though he was an educated man, he understood not everyone's going to go off and get a college degree, but each and every one of you should learn a skill. Learn a skill, and that university was built by the students themselves. Booker T. was like, "I don't care if you are fresh off the plantation. You come, you work. We're going to feed you. You're going to grow your own food, all right? You're going to help build own room, but we're going to show you some things that you've never learned, and this is how you're going to become self-sufficient."

Charles Cox:

Well, that's kind of what we're doing there. We have a lot of work and training programs that we try to expose the kids to because unfortunately in certain communities, it's not always cool to go to college or whatever. So we're still even fighting that mentality, and a lot of our boys don't feel, even though a few of my boys I think, if they could just change that mentality, they would realize, "Yeah, you could go to college." But I got a kid and I love him to death. He's a good kid, but he's going to go get a trade and that's fine, but I don't like his logic. "I know I'm not college material." I say to him, I says, "No, it's called lazy, but ..." Because I know he is lazy. He just laughs and everything. Yeah, but we're all also fighting against that mentality of, they just think that higher education is not in them. It's not a part of who they are. So yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

They've probably received that message from a lot of sources though, right. And so that's what you're trying to fight.

Charles Cox:

They might receive it from home. I had a father who told his ... He has two sons in our building and he told his two sons, "If you graduate, you graduate. If you don't, you don't." What? And this is the father saying this, you know? So yeah. But our thing is, we're saying, "No, no, no, no. Our baseline, if nothing else, you're going to get your high school diploma. So everyone in that building is preaching that. "No, no, no, no. You at least need the high school diploma. Come on now." Because again, depending on what that kid's situation is, even a high school diploma may not be important. So it just depends.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

All right. Well Mr. Cox, I think I'm going to ask you a last question then.

Charles Cox:

Sure.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

What did I not ask you that I should have?

Charles Cox:

How can people collaborate better? What can we do to collaborate? What other resources do you need? Or how do you see that? And what way do you think even a guy like myself could kind of add in some things, which I think you already know, because thank God you did come and do the summer and the kids loved it, right. But I think we have to have more discussions on collaboration. We have to have more discussions on discussions. We have to have more dialogue on what we really need to do to reach more people. It's sad when I hear about the crime rate increasing and the things of that nature, yet our graduation rate is not where we want it. So it's a direct correlation in my book because I know what the studies have shown me. When you have a kid, doesn't have good academic skills, never really graduated. I know where this kid is more likely to end up, you know?

Charles Cox:

So we need to have these hard discussions. We really need to talk about it. That's why I'm glad you've mentioned Dr. Gary from Case, because the work that they're doing and you know I work with the pro bowl scholars, but the work that they're doing, pivotal. Right? These kids are actually allowed to go down to Case's campus. They get to meet Case staff. They're working with Case staff. They're working with case students. That's great. This is an exposure. To be honest, these kids would've never, ever, ever, ever had exposure to a prestigious university like Case Western, would've never had that. And that's why I love that. I wish we could expand it a little more. I wish we have the hard conversations on allocating resources. I think we need more discussions like that. Yeah. I'm sorry, I don't ... But yeah, that's what I wish you would've ... "What else can we do Mr.?" Well, we need to develop this more and take it somewhere that we need to give people-

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Well, I think there's ... I mean, in my own view, I think there's a lot of capacity for supporting our public schools in more ways. And I think, in my opinion, the work that you do is almost like a first step. I mean, I feel like it's the basis of doing more and I hope that we can do that.

Charles Cox:

I'm on the front lines doc. I'm on the front.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I know, I know. Day in, day out.

Charles Cox:

Yeah, every day. Yeah.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

That's why I appreciate you. So-

Charles Cox:

Thank you.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

On that note, Charles, I think we should wrap it up, but-

Charles Cox:

Oh, okay.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

Thanks so much. I mean, we can keep going. I'm happy to keep going. [crosstalk01:02:56] I can talk all day.

Charles Cox:

Oh no. That's fine. No, but first of all, I thank you for the opportunity to even speak about this, because I like to talk about how to help those students. So I thank you for that. And hopefully, my prayer would be that hopefully this leads to something that can be positive and hopefully open up some doors, will change some things. I hope.

Dionissi Aliprantis:

I hope you enjoyed this episode of Conversations on Economic Inclusion. If you would like to learn more about this series for the Cleveland Fed's Program on Economic Inclusion, please visit our website at clefed.org/PEI.