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Episode 8 Transcript

Emily: This is EWA Radio. I'm public editor Emily Richmond here with your weekly guide to what's hot on the education beat.

Welcome back to EWA Radio, everyone. I'm joined today by my EWA colleague and partner in crime, Mikhail Zinshteyn. Mikhail, great to have you with us.

Mikhail: Hello. Thank you.

Emily: This week, Mikhail and I have an interview with Joy Resmovits of The Huffington Post talking about her project along with her colleague Christina Wilkie to take a deep dive into the education initiative of the Koch Family Foundation, which has close ties to conservative causes. The Youth Entrepreneurs Program is training Midwestern and Southern teachers to teach high school students about finance and free market theory. Their story is raising some interesting questions about what happens when ideology and curriculum intersect. Let's go straight to that interview.

Joy, thanks for joining us for EWA radio.

Joy: Thanks so much for having me.

Emily: Let's start at the beginning. How did this story land on your desk?

Joy: I cannot take credit for finding it. My brilliant colleague Christina Wilkie, who covers lobbying for The Huffington Post, was reading that new book about the Koch brothers called Sons of Wichita. She read a quick mention of a K12 public schools program that was funded by the Kochs, and she said, "Hmm, that's interesting." Then she said, "How interesting is it?" I said, "Pretty interesting." Then we started working on it together and trying to learn as much as we could.

Mikhail: That is interesting. Speaking of books, in the beginning of your article, you two write about The Science of Success, written by Charles Koch. It's a book that is apparently mandatory reading for all the teachers participating in this curriculum by Youth Entrepreneurs, that's reaching now 1,000 students. What's in this book, The Science of Success?

Joy: I will go on record as saying I have not read it, but I have read about it. Christina knows more about this than I do. It is about Charles Koch's patented, trademarked philosophy, which is called market-based management. It's a little hard to explain because it gets pretty jargony, but at its root, it's the idea of evaluating employees by how much they contribute to the bottom line. What I do know about this book and this idea I know from reading Sons of Wichita. The way Schulman describes it in that book is that for a while, at Koch Industries,

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Charles Koch tried to apply this philosophy so much so that he was having janitors prove that they brought value to the company.

Mikhail: Wow.

Emily: That's incredible. Certainly, a school is supposed to be a collaborative environment, but putting that kind of pressure on a janitor to prove his worth to a school is going to be a tricky one. I'm really interested in some of the teacher voices that you got in the story. How difficult was it to find them to go on the record to talk so openly about why they adopted the curriculum?

Joy: It actually wasn't hard at all. These are people who believe in what they do, and they're enthusiastic about it. I think Taylor Davis was a really good voice for the program. We found him because he was Teacher of the Year of the program, even though it was only his first year by the time he was teaching it. We contacted him. We said, "Would you like to talk about this program?" He said, "I'm happy to." He told us how he got involved, and he told us that he thought it would be an important thing for kids who aren't traditionally good students but are really bright, he saw it as a way for them to create other connections to school.

Mikhail: Interesting. Speaking of teachers, how many of the teachers overseeing this curriculum are members of teachers unions? Did you hear of any tension between being in a union and teaching to a curriculum that champions ideas that unions tend to decry?

Joy: No, that didn't come up at all, I think because we're talking about Kansas primarily and a little bit of Missouri, and then some in Georgia. I believe those are Right to Work states, so it wasn't going to be a huge issue. I think the biggest bureaucratic hurdle that we learned about in the specific people we were reporting on was, Mr. Davis told us that he was taught to run a program but he wasn't actually certified to teach financial education. The program helped smooth that over with the district.

Emily: Joy, there's been a tremendous response to this story. The last time I checked, you were approaching 30,000 Facebook likes, about 1,000 comments. Clearly, it's struck a nerve. Do you think you changed anybody's mind, or are you mostly hearing from people who already had a very firm viewpoint on both the Koch brothers and public schools, and the kind of programs that they're using with students to teach financial issues?

Joy: That's a good question. We're hearing a lot of different responses. On the one hand, we're hearing people who say, "Why are you writing a conspiracy theory

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article about somebody who just loves liberty and wants to teach about how little government we should have?" That's what they believe in, and so they're saying, "Why are you attacking this thing?" Then on the other hand, we have people saying, "This is disgusting. Thank you for exposing this." To me, the more interesting responses ... We've heard from a parent in a different school district who said, "We actually have a similar program coming to our district. Do you know if they're related? How do I know what my kid is being taught?" I think that, to me, is the most important kind of impact we can have, is on parents who are making decisions and taking the time to educate themselves about what their kids are learning during the school day.

Mikhail: I have a question that ties into parent voice and trying to understand where education standards ... in this case, curricula ... are coming from. In your reading of organizations like Youth Entrepreneurs and others that share political views with the Koch Foundation, how do they reconcile their criticism of the Common Core State Standards as an education initiative that's blind to the needs of local schools in control, or at least that's their criticism, while pushing a curriculum ... and it's a curriculum, not even a set of standards ... that's also not locally hatched?

Joy: That's a really good question and, to be honest, one that I would love to have answered. It's something that was on my mind throughout the reporting of this. As we discovered the curriculum documents, I kept thinking to myself, this is awfully prescriptive for an organization that thinks the common core goes too far. The Koch Foundation did not respond to our requests for comment, and they have yet to address this on the record post-publication directly. I am still curious.

Emily: Have you heard from anybody at the Koch Foundation since the story ran? I know you reached out to them before, but has there been any response ...

Joy: Nope. Nothing. Not a peep to us.

Emily: Not a peep. I wanted to point out that the Capital-Journal newspaper in Topeka had an editorial claiming that you overstated the idea that the Koch brothers were using Youth Entrepreneurs to promote their political agenda. How do you respond to that?

Joy: I'm always interested to see critiques of stories without specific things that we got wrong. They didn't raise any issue with any of the facts that we published, and what we published were just that, is any facts we could gather about this. If they have other evidence about things that are happening at YE that we missed, I would have been curious to read about it.

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Emily: I think that's a fair point. The editorial indeed does not criticize any of your reporting, but it's more they take away a different interpretation from the evidence that you lay out.

Joy: That's possible. I don't really know how closely they evaluated all that evidence based on what they wrote.

Mikhail: I have a question about the intent of this curriculum by Youth Entrepreneurs. You have a quote from one of the senior administrators behind this curriculum, where he writes in a memo, quote, he was not interested in lessons about creating business plans or spotting opportunities to make money. That sounds to me like this course is much more about economic philosophy and not the kind of direct training students use to start businesses. In your reading of the curriculum, is the goal to teach a certain type of economic philosophy, or impart business skills?

Joy: That's a really good question. I think as we documented in the story and as we learned from the email that led to the creation of this program, initially what Charles Koch wanted was [inaudible 00:09:48] sure economic philosophy program, and that we're going to create a new generation of liberty-minded thinkers, and we're going to expose them to free-market ideas by people like [inaudible 00:10:04] or von Mises.

They tested that out on a group of prep school students at a private school called Wichita Collegiate. According to the emails that they traded among themselves, it turned out that that approach didn't really work. Surprise, surprise, teaching very hard, advanced-level econ to high school students isn't exactly going to penetrate. Their critique of the results that they got on the pre- and post-testing of these students wasn't only that they weren't learning all that much, but not only were they not absorbing the ideas, they didn't have ... and these are their words ... an affinity towards markets. Even though Tony Woodlief is saying in these emails that he thinks that the build-your-own-business-plan [inaudible 00:10:52] is schlock, I think they learned that a spoonful of sugar helps the medicine go down. In order to get these bigger, broader economic ideas effectively taught and truly digested, we have to make it more hands-on, and so we see an increase in more experiential learning.

What's interesting, though, is that YE is also starting to move away from this. Vernon Birmingham told us that at the end of YE, not all that many students have created businesses. They're teaching them now to be the most valuable employees they can be rather than how to create a business, and that will include more of that econ we saw in the prototype course.

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- Emily: I'm curious, Joy, what did you learn from this project as a reporter? Any tips for us to add to people's toolboxes, anything that you discovered that was a particularly useful approach in the reporting or in the data collection?
- Joy: Sure. This is pretty practical, but I found a lot of documents by using Google ... [inaudible 00:11:56] Google ... and searching for in-site things. I would type in quotes "Youth Entrepreneurs" and then site-colon-USD501.org, which is the Topeka school website, I think.
- Emily: Could you say that again, just a little slower?
- Joy: Sure. If you plug in a term for what you're looking for, and then you put in "in, colon," a school district website ... so in my case, it would have been USD259.org, which is the Wichita Public Schools site ... that's a really easy way to surface contracts and documents that might not come up in school districts' own search functions, which are often obsolete. That's actually how we found the memorandum of understanding with Topeka, because it didn't come up in any other searches. It's a interesting way to, I guess, get around school districts' often-inefficient sites.
- Mikhail: This really speaks to the need to know how to ask advanced questions in Google, how to ask queries, because Google crawls everything, even PDFs those districts don't want you to see.
- Joy: Yes. That is definitely true. Also, we had a lot of success in using the Wayback Machine. At one point, we found one ... It was just a lot of finding tags and phrases that were often on a lot of these documents and plugging them in in as many different ways as we could. I'm forgetting exactly what it was, but we found one document with YE's logo on it for an activity called Greed Bowl. We thought, "Oh, that's interesting," so we Googled direct quotes from the document to see where else we could find it online, and that led us to Taylor Davis's curriculum page, which we wouldn't have found otherwise.
- Mikhail: The Wayback Machine is a website that people can use to observe what a website looked in the recent past.
- Joy: Yes, thank you for explaining that. One more thing on that note, something that we did, we had a feeling that a lot of these pages would be taken down right after we published the article or between the time we contacted the Kochs and we published the article. That indeed did happen with the curriculum website. Knowing that, we plugged it into a website called Web Archives, which preserves the page on the date on which you plug it in, so there's always a cache on the internet.

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- Emily: That's exactly right. It's a really good reminder to folks to get screen grabs and to never assume that something you see on day one is still going to be there even hours later on the same day, never mind days or weeks later when your story actually runs. Preserving that document trail is incredibly important.
- Joy: That's absolutely right. Christina, who has covered lobbying for way longer than I have, is really, really strong on that. I learned a lot from her.
- Mikhail: Your article mentions that students who took part in YE received money for attending Koch-approved seminars and events outside of the school setting. How much money are we talking about here?
- Joy: It varies from student to student. These are generally small denominations, but you could rack up as many points, I think. I will have to find the precise number in my notes. I think the maximum you could earn in a year is 2,500. You could use that to get a laptop or towards your higher education, which is what one person we interviewed did. We had a student named Louis that we spoke to, really, really interesting guy. He took the YE course his junior year, and then in his senior year, he enrolled in the YE Academy, which is the online component where you can earn points and make money. From that, he got 2,000 dollars, and he has applied it towards his education.
- Mikhail: He was a junior and senior in high school, right?
- Joy: Yes, that's correct.
- Emily: Joy, just one last question before we wrap up. Was there anything that surprised you about this story?
- Joy: That's a good question. I think what surprised me was how much ... I've been writing about national education for a little over three years now, and not once have I written a story about curriculum acquisition, which is I guess one of these school processes that you take for granted but are actually quite loaded. I guess if you're a reporter in Texas, you don't take it for granted so much, because that's where you have issues like creationism and sex ed coming up. I think in general, there are so many things that happen that aren't necessarily the big, sexy education reform stories, or reformers-versus-union stories, or just the day-to-day churn of politics, that have a much more direct effect on students than do these lofty conversations about saving students or closing the achievement gap. I think it's important to take a closer look at these often-banal processes that are happening every day, no matter who's in charge.

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Emily: Joy Resmovits covers education for The Huffington Post. Beginning this fall, she will be a Spencer Education Fellow at the Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism, where she'll be using that time to assess the state of education for American students with disabilities. Joy, we're going to miss your daily reporting. We wish you the best of luck off on Spencer Fellowship, and we can't wait to see what you find.

Joy: Thanks so much. I'll also be doing some daily reporting.

Mikhail: Such an interesting story. There are so many threads in that piece that on their own could be the focus of an article, like if prescriptive curricula from a conservative foundation is fine, why isn't the Common Core, which isn't even a curriculum? Or, is it even ethical to award public school students with cash rewards for learning conservative economy theory?

Emily: I think you raised a couple of excellent story suggestions, Mikhail. I think it's good to point out that Joy and Christina's story is a good example of how much homework reporters have to do behind the scenes before they even start the actual process of writing, and it's a reminder of how much information is available online that doesn't require a public records request, provided you know where to look.

Mikhail: Yeah. This may sound banal, but learning how to use Google Search's more advanced features can really make a reporter's life easier. Just knowing what to paste in quotes or searching by type or file, like PDF or Excel, can reveal information that a school website may not have archived well. If you're not a Google fan, Bing's powerful, too. EWA is search-engine agnostic.

Emily: Well put, Mikhail. Just a reminder to check out EWA.org for the latest news, our handy topics features on the hot issues on the education beat. We've got you covered on everything from college affordability to classroom technology and, yes, the Common Core. You also can find a calendar of our upcoming events, including webinars and in-person seminars for journalists. Have a great week, everyone.

Mikhail: Bye.