



December 2020

THE PRATT PROMISE

Why We Matter - Our Story

Special Edition

**A Series of Fireside Chats: The Pratt Center
Hosts Extraordinary Conversations for Extraordinary Times**

WITH A GLOBAL PANDEMIC TOUCHING STUDENTS OF ALL LEVELS, COLLEGE STUDENTS ARE EXPERIENCING UNKNOWN TERRITORY WHEN IT COMES TO THEIR EDUCATION. TRANSITIONING FROM IN-PERSON CLASSROOM AND CAMPUS EXPERIENCES TO VIRTUAL ONES WOULD BE DIFFICULT IN THE BEST OF TIMES. A CRITICAL FACTOR IN THIS SHIFT IS UNPACKING THE DISSONANCE STUDENTS ARE FEELING AS THE WORLD ADJUSTS.

FOR THE PAST SIX YEARS, THE FOSTERING SUCCESS AND LEADERSHIP PROGRAMS AT CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY (CSU) GEARED TOWARD TRANSITION-AGED YOUTH HAVE HOSTED A SUMMER FIRESIDE CHAT SERIES. THESE INFORMAL, INTIMATE DISCUSSIONS HAVE BEEN A VEHICLE TO GATHER FORMER FOSTER YOUTH AND NON-TRADITIONAL STUDENTS TOGETHER WITH CARING ADULTS – ON CAMPUS, IN THE COMMUNITY, AND ACROSS OHIO – WHO ARE AMONG THEIR ARDENT SUPPORTERS AND ADVOCATES.

BUT 2020 IS, WAS, AND WILL END A YEAR LIKE VERY FEW OTHERS. IN THE WAKE OF THE COVID-19 GLOBAL PANDEMIC, STAKEHOLDERS SUPPORTING THIS POPULATION HAD TO PIVOT. STARTING IN THE SUMMER OF 2020, THE PRATT CENTER BEGAN ORGANIZING A NEW FALL FIRESIDE CHAT SERIES, SPECIFICALLY FOR OUR YOUTH - TO SUPPORT THEM IN SOLUTION-DRIVEN CONVERSATIONS THAT TOOK ON A FRESH VIBE AND LOOK.

IN THIS SPECIAL EDITION OF THE PRATT PROMISE, WE SPEAK WITH JARRETT G. PRATT, M.ED., DIRECTOR OF STUDENT SUCCESS FOR THE PRATT CENTER AT CSU ABOUT HIS VISION FOR THIS SPECIAL EDITION FIRESIDE CHAT SERIES, EXPANDING A SIGNATURE PROGRAM, AND EMPOWERING THE COMMUNITY IN A VIRTUAL WORLD.

THESE ARE SOME HIGHLIGHTS FROM WHAT THE FALL SPEAKERS SHARED ABOUT OVERCOMING, MAKING IT SUCCESSFULLY TO AND THROUGH COLLEGE, HARNESSING RESILIENCE DURING COVID, AND MORE.

THE PRESENTERS SELECTED FOR THE THREE, FALL FIRESIDE CHATS HELD IN SEPTEMBER, OCTOBER, AND NOVEMBER HAVE SOME CONNECTION TO FOSTER CARE AND THE CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM – AND TO THE POPULATION OF STUDENTS THE PRATT CENTER SERVES. ANTOINE MOSS, PH.D. EXPERIENCED HOMELESSNESS AS A YOUTH, ROYEL JOHNSON, PH.D. SPENT PART OF HIS YOUTH IN KINSHIP CARE, AND JAMIE BENNETT, ED.D. AGED OUT OF THE SYSTEM.



Antoine Moss, Ph.D.: Community Relations Manager, NASA Glenn Research Center Chat topic: “Creating Opportunity from Extra-ordinary Circumstances.”

“ADOPT THE MANTRA, ‘COVID-19 OR NOT, I AM THE CEO OF MY DREAMS AND THERE AIN’T NOTHING YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT.’ ”
MOSS BEGINS HIS SUCCESS STORY WITH A FLASHBACK. THAT’S BECAUSE HIS ROUGH AND TUMBLE JOURNEY FORWARD IS
INTEGRAL TO HIS TRANSFORMATION AND ALL THAT HE’S SINCE ACCOMPLISHED.

LIKE MOST OF THE CHILDREN AND FAMILIES THAT SURROUNDED HIM IN EAST CLEVELAND, ONE OF THE MOST IMPOVERISHED
NEIGHBORHOODS IN NORTHEAST OHIO, MOSS HAD VERY FEW ROLE MODELS. A BRIGHT FUTURE FOR HIM LOOKED BLEAK.
“THEY (HIS FAMILY) DIDN’T KNOW WHAT SUCCESS LOOKED LIKE,” SAYS MOSS, BUT HE WAS DETERMINED TO FIND IT – AND NOT
REPEAT THE CYCLE.

AT THE TIME, HE WAS PART OF A BAND OF BROTHERS, ALL HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETES FROM THE EASTSIDE “WHO DID SOME
GANG LIKE THINGS” BUT WERE “MOSTLY GOOD GUYS.” THEN, “I HAD AN EPIPHANY.” THE WAY FORWARD MEANT THAT “I
STOPPED LOOKING AT MYSELF AS A LITTLE THUG FROM EAST CLEVELAND; AS A STATISTIC OF SOMEONE WHO WOULD NEVER
GO TO COLLEGE. INSTEAD, I DECIDED TO SEE MYSELF AS A CHAMPION WHO COULD MAKE MY DREAMS COME. I FLIPPED THE
SCRIPT.” WITH IT CAME PLANS FOR COLLEGE AND THE DESIRE TO INSPIRE OTHER YOUNG PEOPLE WHO WERE ALSO GROWING
UP ON THE MARGINS, WITH FEW PROSPECTS AND SUPPORTS. MOST OF THOSE WHO MOSS NOW CREDITS BEING AMONG HIS
VILLAGE AS A YOUTH NEVER EARNED DEGREES AND COULDN’T TELL HIM HOW TO GET TO COLLEGE, BUT THEY WERE
SUPPORTIVE AND “POURED POSITIVE THINGS INTO MY LIFE.”

MOSS GRADUATED HIGH SCHOOL AND AT FIRST, COLLEGE WAS A STRUGGLE. BUT MOSS (MPA ’07, PH.D. ’11), NOW A
PHILANTHROPIST, AUTHOR, AND SOUGHT-AFTER MOTIVATIONAL SPEAKER MADE IT. IN 2011, AT AGE 28, HE BECAME
THE YOUNGEST AFRICAN AMERICAN MAN TO EARN A DOCTORATE DEGREE FROM CLEVELAND STATE UNIVERSITY. TODAY, HE
CONTINUES TO FULFILL ANOTHER DREAM HE HAD AS A YOUTH.

SAYS MOSS: “MY JOB, MY PURPOSE IN LIFE IS TO HELP TRANSFORM MINDSETS AND DEBUNK THE MYTHS AND STEREOTYPES
THAT HOVER OVER UNDERSERVED KIDS. THAT’S WHAT I DO EVERY DAY OF MY LIFE.”

IN HIS SEPTEMBER FIRESIDE CHAT, MOSS OFFERED THIS GUIDANCE FOR LEARNING AND LIVING DURING COVID AND BEYOND:

- ADOPT THE MANTRA: “COVID-19 OR NOT, I AM THE CEO OF MY DREAMS AND THERE AIN’T NOTHING YOU CAN DO ABOUT IT.”
- BE SMART AND RESPONSIBLE.
- DREAM AND DREAM BIG.
- TAKE CARE OF YOUR MENTAL HEALTH. DON’T BE ASHAMED TO ASK FOR HELP. WHEN YOU DO, TRY TO FIND SOMEONE WHO CARES ABOUT YOU AND YOUR WELL-BEING.
- EVEN IN A PANDEMIC, DON’T GIVE UP AND THINK ‘WOE IS ME!’ YOU STILL HAVE TO TAKE OWNERSHIP OF YOUR LIFE AND BE RESPONSIBLE FOR YOURSELF.



Antoine Moss, Ph.D

Royel M. Johnson, Ph.D.: Asst. Prof. of Higher Education, Pennsylvania State University Chat topic: "How to Renew, Refresh, and Restore after Drastic Change."

"THERE IS POWER IN YOUR STORY AND EXPERIENCES, NO MATTER HOW UNCLEAR OR IMPERFECT THEY MAY BE."

AS A PROFESSOR AND SCHOLAR, JOHNSON HAS LONG HAD "A CLEAR AND UNAPOLOGETIC FOCUS" ON STUDENTS WHO HAVEN'T ALWAYS BEEN WELL-SERVED" IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM. HE COUNTS FIRST GENERATION COLLEGE STUDENTS, LGBTQIA AND HOMELESS YOUTH, THOSE IN FOSTER CARE AND THE CRIMINAL JUSTICE SYSTEM AMONG THEM. HIS ONGOING RESEARCH, AIMS TO IDENTIFY FACTORS THAT POSITIVELY AND NEGATIVELY INFLUENCE STUDENT SUCCESS, EDUCATIONAL ACCESS, AND EQUITY.

"DURING THE RESEARCH PROCESS, I'VE BEEN ABLE TO REFLECT ON MY OWN EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES," SAYS JOHNSON WHO WAS PLACED IN KINSHIP CARE, HIS SAFETY NET. TO OBSERVE JOHNSON'S CHALLENGING PAST, MOST EDUCATION RESEARCHERS, HE SAYS, WOULD CONCLUDE THAT IT WAS TOO RIDDLED WITH "RISK FACTORS" FOR HIM TO ACHIEVE IN SCHOOL AND LIFE. "THIS IS WHERE SCIENCE AND MATH SOMETIMES FAIL RESEARCHERS WHO OVERLY RELY ON STATISTICS TO EXPLAIN THE AVERAGE STUDENT," SAYS JOHNSON WHO GRADUATED AT THE TOP OF HIS CLASS IN HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE, AND EARNED HIS PH.D. AT AGE 26. TODAY, IN HIS RESEARCH ON EFFORTS LIKE THE FOSTER CARE PROJECT, JOHNSON, THE SCHOLAR, CASTS A WIDER NET THAT CONSIDERS STUDENTS' LIVED EXPERIENCES – NOT RISK FACTORS – AND HOW THEIR STORIES CAN INFORM THEIR FUTURE SUCCESS.

IN HIS OCTOBER FIRESIDE CHAT, JOHNSON OFFERED THIS GUIDANCE AND LESSONS LEARNED FOR YOUTH IN CARE AND THOSE WHO HAVE AGED OUT:

- THERE IS POWER IN YOUR STORY AND EXPERIENCES, NO MATTER HOW UNCLEAR OR IMPERFECT THEY MAY BE.
- YOUR DIFFERENCE DOES NOT MEAN DEFICIT. THERE ARE LOTS OF THINGS THAT ARE UNIQUE TO WHO YOU ARE AND ABOUT YOUR STORY AND EXPERIENCES. REMEMBER THAT THOSE THINGS ADD VALUE AND RICHNESS TO WHO YOU ARE.
- YOUR NEGATIVE EXPERIENCES, WHAT SOME FOLKS SEE AS RISK FACTORS, ARE ACTUALLY OPPORTUNITIES. THOSE EXPERIENCES DON'T HAVE TO DEFINE YOU OR PREDICT THE LIKELIHOOD OF YOU BECOMING WHO YOU WANT TO BE.
- SHIFT FROM HAVING A FIXED MINDSET ABOUT LIFE TO A GROWTH MINDSET. TAKE EVERY OPPORTUNITY TO LEARN. UNDERSTANDING THIS CHANGED THE TRAJECTORY OF MY LIFE. SEE THE WORK OF CAROL S. DWECK FROM STANFORD UNIVERSITY.



Dr. Johnson in the chat!

Jamie L. Bennett, Ed.D.

Chat topic: “So What, Now What: How to Capitalize on the Investment.”

“ESPECIALLY DURING COVID, CREATE EXPERIENCES FOR REST AND RECOVERY.”

THE THREE YEARS THAT BENNETT SPENT BUSSING TABLES, TAKING DRINK ORDERS, AND WAITRESSING FULL TIME WAS HOW SHE PAID THE BILLS. STILL, IT FELT LIKE TIME WASTED. “IT WAS TIME THAT I COULD HAVE USED TO COMPLETE MY DEGREE AND START MY CAREER,” SHE THOUGHT.

BUT WAITRESSING IS WHERE THE 20-YEAR-OLD BENNETT LANDED AFTER FLUNKING OUT OF SCHOOL. AT THE TIME, “I SAW MY DISMISSAL FROM COMMUNITY COLLEGE AS A FULL STOP. A HALTING OF MY GOAL.” BENNETT, WHO SPENT FIVE YEARS IN KINSHIP-FOSTER CARE BEFORE AGING OUT OF THE SYSTEM AT AGE 18, WANTED TO MAKE SUPPORTING OTHER CHILDREN AND TEENS WHO WERE ALSO IN CARE, HER LIFE’S WORK. COLLEGE WAS GOING TO HELP PREPARE HER FOR THAT ROLE.

IT TURNED OUT THAT THOSE SEEMINGLY UNFULFILLING YEARS IN THE RESTAURANT BUSINESS THAT BENNETT THOUGHT STOOD IN THE WAY OF HER GOAL WERE ACTUALLY HELPING HER “BUILD LOTS OF THE SKILLS” THAT SERVED HER WELL WHEN SHE RETURNED TO COLLEGE AND ULTIMATELY BECAME A SOCIAL WORKER AND RESEARCH PRACTITIONER. FROM TIME SPENT “MAKING SMALL TALK” WITH CUSTOMERS, RACING FROM TABLE TO TABLE TO TAKE DRINK AND MENU ORDERS, AND WORKING LATE NIGHTS, WERE THE KINDS OF TASKS THAT BENNETT SAYS TAUGHT HER ABOUT MANAGEMENT, HOW TO BE A BETTER COMMUNICATOR, FORCED HER TO USE MATH EVERY DAY, AND HELPED HER TO DEVELOP TIME MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONAL SKILLS.

USING A PAGE FROM NEUROSCIENCE ABOUT BRAIN DEVELOPMENT IN THOSE BETWEEN THE AGES OF 14 AND 26, BENNETT WANTS STUDENTS AND YOUNG ADULTS TO KNOW THAT THEIR BRAINS ARE AT A PEAK TIME TO LEARN, AND FOR ADAPTING AND CRAVING NEW AND EXCITING EXPERIENCES – EVEN AS THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC SWEEPS THE COUNTRY AND DISRUPTS MUCH OF WHAT WE THINK AND DO. TO FOSTER YOUTH AND ALUMNI OF CARE, BENNETT SAYS IT’S TIME TO TAP INTO THE RESILIENCY THAT HAS MADE THEM STRONG AND “ABLE TO SURVIVE” IN UNCERTAIN AND DIFFICULT TIMES.

IN HER NOVEMBER FIRESIDE CHAT, BENNETT OFFERED THIS GUIDANCE ON CAPTURING OPPORTUNITIES DURING THE COVID CRISIS AND WHAT SHE WOULD TELL HER 20-YEAR-OLD SELF:

- SEE THIS TIME DURING THE COVID PANDEMIC AS AN AMAZING OPPORTUNITY TO CAPITALIZE ON YOUR GROWTH, HEALING, AND HABITS. FIGURE OUT WHAT YOU CAN DO THAT WILL HELP YOU WIRE YOUR BRAIN FOR THE SKILLS THAT YOU WILL USE THROUGHOUT THE REST OF YOUR LIFE.
- EVERY SINGLE EXPERIENCE AND THING THAT WE DO COUNTS. THE HABITS THAT YOU PRIORITIZE, THE PEOPLE THAT YOU SPEND TIME WITH ARE LITERALLY WIRING YOUR BRAIN.
- RELATIONSHIPS MATTER. OUR BRAIN DEVELOPS IN THE CONTEXT OF OUR RELATIONSHIPS, A PROCESS THAT BEGINS AT BIRTH AND CONTINUES FOR A LIFETIME. WE ARE CONNECTED TO EACH OTHER.
- STUDENTS AND YOUTH REMEMBER THAT THE PEOPLE THAT YOU SPEND TIME WITH INFLUENCE YOUR EXPERIENCES AND YOUR BRAIN DEVELOPMENT. FOR SUPPORTIVE ADULTS, REMEMBER THAT YOUR PRESENCE, COMPASSION, AND CONSISTENCY IN THE LIVES OF YOUNG PEOPLE MATTERS FOR THE SAME REASONS – YOU INFLUENCE THEIR BRAIN EXPERIENCES AND BRAIN DEVELOPMENT.
- ESPECIALLY DURING COVID, CREATE EXPERIENCES FOR REST AND RECOVERY. THIS IS SO IMPORTANT. EVEN IN THE OVERWHELMING PRESENCE OF THE PANDEMIC, IT’S POSSIBLE TO FIND SPACE TO SHARPEN YOUR COPING SKILLS AND EXPLORE THE WAYS TO STAY WELL. BY CONNECTING WITH PEOPLE YOU LOVE, EXERCISING, DOING THINGS THAT MAKE YOU HAPPY, YOU ALSO STRENGTHEN THE PATHWAYS IN YOUR BRAIN.



Jamie L. Bennett, Ed.D.

The concept of the fireside chat took root in the 1930s when the country was in the throes of the Great Depression. President Franklin D. Roosevelt used his fireside chats to unite people across the nation. You borrowed a page from history to brand and shape the Pratt Center's series. Why was that?

Jarrett Pratt: The country was in great peril and the radio was a common denominator to broadcast a common message. That even if the country couldn't control what was happening to them, at least they were kept informed through fireside chats.

During the Covid – 19 Pandemic, our Pratt Center Virtual Fireside Chat Series was formulated with that in mind, focusing on being inclusive and having an open conversation where people can fill in the blanks.

That's because we are dealing with a population of students, who for many reasons, have had unstable and challenging home structures. We wanted to create a space for students to get a singular message and for them to share their successes. This is a forum for them to celebrate with those who understand what they have been through and what it takes to be where they are in higher education. Our students are resilient. They are overcoming and finishing the semester strong during a pandemic and at times that can feel scary, distant, bleak. Also, during these chats, students have the opportunity to ask questions and participate in solution - driven conversations.

We launched the series in 2015, and in the first two weeks we focused not on academics and coursework, but on our students' social and emotional well-being. Every day at 4 p.m., we came together for an hour to debrief. We also invited someone from the community to come and speak to us about their own experiences as a college student and as a professional. Then, we had dinner and fellowship. That became the template moving forward.



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The first Fireside Chat Series the Pratt Center hosted were in-person events. What did it mean to pivot to a virtual format and what does it look and feel like?

JP: Yes, we had to pivot in the direction of our best-served students. While we lost the physical ability to gather and fellowship, we did not lose our capacity to gather. We leveraged the situation and the technology and moved to Zoom. No, not like the three-hour Zoom meetings that most staff and companies are used to these days.

Ours feels different, just like in the 1930s when Roosevelt gathered people from across the country together. We've always opened with a warm welcome and ice breaker, with some of students sharing, but now that we are virtual, we follow that same format. We've been able to have live music and singers and connect with students from across the country. They include foster youth who are preparing to take the leap of faith that our Pratt Center students and scholars did.

Can you talk a bit about those early guest speakers that you brought to the table and their impact on alumni of care?

JP: They have been just outstanding. We've had community leaders, corporate executives, state government officials, and global thought leaders. We even had two presidents of Cleveland State, President Harlan Sands and before him, Dr. Ronald Berkman. These presidents, like our other speakers and guests, took time out to break bread and have conversations with our students, and even pose for pictures. For students who have been marginalized and have lacked access to the people and resources they often need to get ahead, these kinds of engagements were important and powerful. They got to sit next to people who have accomplished so much but were willing to share that they had failed along the way, didn't always enjoy their professors, or like their major. Those were real and humanizing conversations. Some of our guests include: Jeff Hoffman, serial entrepreneur from Priceline; Ariane Kirkpatrick, founder of AKA Construction Management; Radio personality, Jimmy Malone, who hosts the Malone Scholarship Golf Classic which raises funds to assist high school students with attending college, to name a few.

Although we lost the ability to meet in person because of the pandemic, by operating virtually, we are now able to extend our reach and open the series and these conversations up to other students pursuing undergraduate degrees across the country and to those who may also be experiencing challenges during this time.

These conversations are relevant to students, administrators, social workers, those in academic affairs and student affairs, and others who have been on these fireside chat calls this fall. They got to hear from students about their challenges, the strides they are making, despite the pandemic, and what matters to them. Unfortunately, that important opportunity to listen doesn't always happen when administrators and practitioners direct the messages and influence students with their own conversations and thoughts about what's possible, or not, for their lives and learning. These chats are an opportunity for us to listen and to learn.

Both the Pratt Center and the Fireside Chat Series have existed for a relatively short time. For the series, is it too early to talk about your vision for the immediate future and format of the series?

JP: No, it's not too early at all. The first thing that the fireside chats have shown us is that proximity and location don't matter. I'm thrilled that we have been able to use these hour-long conversations, this fall, to connect nationally with more students, as well as practitioners and stakeholders. When I looked at the Zoom screen in November to see who was joining us, representatives from local, state, and national agencies were sharing our screen. No matter what happens in the coming months or next semester, we will continue the fireside side chats, to some degree, with a virtual format. This will allow us to reach more students, and include a global lineup of speakers. Looking forward, these fireside chats will also have a research focus. What we are learning from these engagements can serve other higher education institutions and organizations that are facing similar challenges with continuing to support and connect with this population when meeting in-person is not an option.

And when you consider the impact of the fireside chat series, what comes to mind?

JP: I consider the feedback we've received. The fall 2020 fireside chat series has been more inspirational than people imagined. We've heard from students, our guests, and those in the field who've told us that they come away feeling like they participated in something meaningful and lasting. That's special, and it was by design. When you're cooking with love, I think people feel it and taste it in what you are serving.

What we've been able to assemble this fall is an even bigger community of people who are all interested in one thing, the success of our students. Students may be saying, 'I don't know anybody on this call,' but I want them to know that there are people on this chat who desire to support them and are cheering for them.

But aside from this and all of the other great things that will come from this series, like the best practices and relationships that will be built, even in a virtual environment, what will matter most is that we were a beacon of light and a symbol of hope for this population of students and for youth in care who need support making the transition from care, especially at a time like this. They can end this tumultuous year with purpose.

For Jarrett Pratt and those who organized the virtual fall chat series, it was important to have students see and hear from speakers who are ascending in their professional careers and who are close to them generationally. Says Pratt: "As they spoke, each of them was willing to be transparent about how they are dealing with their own professional evolution. As a result, I think that the students immediately saw and heard authenticity. Among our students and this population, authenticity matters and is a necessity."

This year's Pratt Center Fall Fireside Chat Series was like no other – virtual and far reaching. With the old adage, "where there's a will, there's a way," in mind, we were determined and pulled it off. And in Spring 2021, we will do it again. Plan to join us then for the next fireside chat series.

In 2015, The Sullivan – Deckard Scholarship Opportunity Program was created to provide resources for highly- motivated youth who have aged out of foster care and plan to earn an undergraduate degree. As of 2020, the Program has assisted in graduating ten of 18 Scholars eligible for graduation. For more information, please go to <https://www.csuohio.edu/engagement/pratt-center>.