JFY*Net* Podcast – *JUNE 2020,* At risk student now ED at PACE-leads student success

GREG: *Today's podcast features Jorge Santana, the Executive Director of the PACE Career Academy Charter School in Pembroke, New Hampshire, a JFYNet partner school. In this episode, you'll hear how Mr. Santana was an at-risk student while growing up…*

MR. SANTANA: I was attending a Transition Year Program at Brandeis. It was overwhelming. I actually left two months in. My advisor, Mr. Williams, was calling and calling. This is before cell phones. So, he kept calling New York on the emergency numbers I had left.

GREG: *Mr. Santana early in his career to find systemic solutions to help students connect with mentors…*

MR. SANTANA: *It was maybe a couple of months after they had aged out of the youth system, and they were panhandling two blocks away from my office. That really didn't sit well with me.*

GREG: *And PACE Academy students Sarah and Troy…*

SARAH: You definitely get the help here. You don't get homework here.

TROY: We have a lot of one-on-one time. We're seen as people instead of just students.

GREG: *This podcast was created by JFYNetWorks, a Boston based nonprofit provider of remote learning programs to schools, students, and parents. JFY's individualized, self-paced curricula help raise individual and school performance measures by maintaining grade level skills and combating learning loss. JFY provides online ELA and math curricula aligned to state and college standards from grades six through high school, with personal support online and via telephone from friendly instructional coaches like yours truly. For JFYNetWorks, I'm Greg Cunningham.*

PACE Career Academy Charter school works with students who are considered at risk by other school Districts. Jorge Santana can certainly relate to students who struggle with education due to other factors in their lives.

MR. SANTANA: When I think back to school, I remember moving around a lot. Always felt like I was the new kid coming in. I've gone to school in Puerto Rico. I went to school in New York. I went to school in Waltham. Between those locations, that kept me moving around a lot. I made it until about the 10th grade in Waltham High School and then moved back to New York because my mom was ill. I went to another year of high school in Spanish Harlem.

I was having a really hard time finding work. So, I moved back to Waltham, but when I went back to the high school, the registrar told me that since I had left, I couldn't go back. I didn't know that was a real thing, that you couldn't return to school. I just left and started working at a couple of jobs. I found out about Jobs For Youth through my best friend's girlfriend, now his wife. She had graduated through the GED program. She really liked it, and he and I decided to enter the program together. So that's how I got introduced to JFY. We used to drive up and get rides from Waltham. We were both living in Waltham and we had to get downtown to the location they had then.

I went there to get my GED, and it meant taking a lot of classes. We used to get some support around the different subject materials for each one of the tests. It was really about preparing us to be able to

pass the tests. I remember the staff being very, very supportive, and I remember being pushed and held accountable, but also getting the support I needed to be able to meet the bar they had set for us.

It took me about six months, to finish the program and graduate. I had the honor of being valedictorian of the class. I got to give a speech in our graduation ceremony at the State House. My grandmother and my mom got to come and actually see the graduation. It was one of the few times I made them proud. My grandmother cried for joy. You know, that was the best part of the whole thing, seeing them happy.

Waltham at the time….I have these memories of the high school. One of them is walking to class on the first day. I had gotten into an AP History class and before I even got through the door, the teacher said to me-- without any malice at all-- I think you're in the wrong class.

When I was there, all of the students who looked like me got sent to the basement to the shop classes. I was just struggling and had a lot of stuff outside of school that I was dealing with at home and different places. School just wasn't a support for me. I didn't really feel like anybody there was invested in me. That was the experience I had.

Now, that being said, I also do remember a science teacher who gave up her lunch period to teach me a science class, just me and her, because of my refusal to go back to that other AP class. So, I would say that, for me, high school had some highs and lows. But high school never encouraged me or students like me to go on to college or anything like that. The idea just wasn't discussed around me. So, I didn't see the need or the importance of graduating.

My most immediate concerns were where I was living, if I had food, if I had clothes to wear. That was what I was addressing at that moment.

When I was a kid, I went to Puerto Rico and went to school there till about the second or third grade, then moved to the Bronx. I grew up there so English became my dominant language. It was a challenge moving from Puerto Rico to the Bronx.

At first it was a lot more communal, school was a lot smaller. You knew everybody. You knew their families because they were all from the same kind of neighborhood that you were from. Going from what felt like a small city was the most jarring thing that stuck out to me.

GREG: *One thing that helped Mr. Santana succeed was a personal connection with an adult who not only helped with his studies but kept pushing him to finish them.*

MR. SANTANA: I was working in restaurants during that time and by happenstance somebody on the board of JFY (Jobs for Youth) had a connection to Brandeis University. There was a program there, a transitional year program, and that's how I got connected to Brandeis. Through that program I met a gentleman, Tony Williams, who was running the program. He was the one who took over the support that I had been getting from Jobs For Youth. His encouragement and insistence on finishing the program pushed and pulled me through.

Then my mom got sick again. The first year that I was attending the TYP program, I left two months in. Mr. Williams would keep calling and calling – this is before cell phones-- the emergency numbers I had

left. He was trying to get me to come back. One of my favorite stories about him is that he was not getting through to me, I was not responding to his calls. So, he found a female student that he knew I was interested in before I left and got her to start calling. He managed to get hold of me and I was able to come back to the program the following year. That's the year I finished the Transitional Year Program.

I had the option to apply to any other school. But because of that relationship, I stayed there. The TYP stands for a transitional year program. What that meant was a program targeted at young people like myself who had this kind of untraditional path through education. It was a way to enhance where I was at and get me to the level of college work, and that's how I got introduced to going to college.

When I first started going there, I couldn't work as much, and I was actually homeless and living in a shelter. The director of the program called me into his office. "Are you living in a shelter? he asked. I said yes. He said, "We have dorm rooms here." That was such a new concept to me. He got me into a dorm room. Those were pieces that removed barriers. There were creative ways to do it.

These experiences have guided me in the way that I do my work. Now, those are the things that I look back on and draw upon that inform the way I work with young people. A lot of that I tripped into by luck. Jobs For Youth happened because a friend's girlfriend was going there. The JFY board member had that connection to Brandeis. If a random kid like me could find those pieces by luck, there has to be a systematic way to catch those young people and help them succeed. I had thought that when I messed up, it was over. But a few key people knew otherwise.

After Brandeis, my first job was at an organization called My Turn. It was a GED program working with reentry and young people at high risk or that had dropped out. I partnered with an organization called Roca. This was back when the idea of young people starting businesses was gaining traction in nonprofits. But what they were finding was that young people not only needed hard reading and math skills, but a lot of soft interpersonal skills as well. So I came in to do the soft skills to complement the work.

GREG: *Not only does Mr. Santana understand the importance of teaching students academic skills, but also teaching soft skills, which include interacting with other people.*

MR. SANTANA: We had this young person who we taught how to work on a cash register, how to balance a checkbook, how to figure how much taxes will be taken out, how to fill out a job application, all those different pieces. But the first day of the job, this young person saw another young person that they didn't get along with and got into a huge shouting match in the middle of the store. And the young person lost the job the next day. It was like this light bulb moment where you need to be able to do both. So that was where that came from.

From there, I moved to the Department of Social Services (now called DCYF). When I first got there, I told the director I just worked with adolescents. That's what I do. So, of course, like a good director, he gave me nothing but toddler cases and put me in a domestic violence unit. So that's where I started my work, which was actually great as it expanded my skills. But it was also when I stopped caring about my car because I learned quickly that having a bunch of toddlers in your car does not bode well for the car.

While I was there, I started to gravitate back to adolescents who were very high risk and especially young people who had already been identified as likely to be in foster care until they aged out. I remember this one adolescent, a couple of months after they had aged out of the system, panhandling two blocks away from my office. That really didn't sit well with me. So, I started digging and found that the data for that population was just atrocious countrywide.

I had started attending my master's program, but I was able to start a new unit with my manager. We called it the Connections Unit. It was specifically targeting that population with an approach using different techniques and styles and really changing some of the rules around how to reach out and engage that population. The model was based on harm reduction. Some of the policies the state had put in place, though they were protecting the state, they were actually raising the risk of the students. That was the last big project I did before I left working for the state.

I left the state because I was in a three-year master's program at Boston College. I decided to go to Boston College because Mr. Williams had told me he felt Boston College wasn't diverse enough. So again, I had no idea of these things, and I decided to go to BC due to the relationship I had with him. I applied and was accepted and did the three-year program.

The state at the time had a program for employees which allowed us to continue to get a full salary while attending school, as long as we promised to stay at the state twice as long as the time we took. So, the first two years of the three year program, I took the minimum classes because my plan was for the final year, I was just going to go to school full time. I was scheduled to graduate in 2010, but 2008 was when the economy crashed and that was the first program the state got rid of when they started making all of the cuts.

I was left in a position to either drop out or stay working on my master's full time. I decided to finish the program at BC, and that's how I transitioned out of the state. I would have probably stayed there. That was my plan and my goal. The reason I went to get my master's was that it was the only way to become a supervisor with the state.

That's how I moved into the master's program and in my last year at BC, I actually did a lot of work on raising the awareness of DSS as a career path. It was kind of like a family member I used to complain about, but I was still working in it. And when I got to BC, I felt that the program and everybody was always very, very hard on the department. They were actually discouraging people who could go into the system and make it better.

I was able to set up a conference at BC where I had social workers all the way up to area program managers. I brought some youth who had aged out of the system and we had a big conference at BC. I received an award from the school for that, called The Sister Thea Bowman Award. It was really nice to get that recognition. And it was nice to see some of my classmates, who had been thinking that the state was the worst possible place to work, actually begin to think about it as an option.

GREG: *Working as a social worker with an educational nonprofit seemed to be a calling until the opportunity to form and transform a school from the ground up came along. It was the last thing he ever expected to be doing after earning his master's degree.*

MR. SANTANA: That was my last year at BC, and if you asked me two years ago whether I would be running a school, I would have told you your mind wasn't all there. It was the farthest thing I was planning on. I've always worked with schools because of the families and young people, and school is always a big part of that. But I have never worked for a school, and I was certainly not planning on running a school. Once I got to that point, my dream and goal was a business plan for an organization I called The Other Half, my final project at BC. I thought I was going to start my own nonprofit and run it my way. That was my goal when I got to BC.

I went from that mindset into figuring out, after working for the state, the macro kind of social work. This was something else I learned a lot about, too, while working for the state. It felt like a revolving door. I went from wanting to do direct service work to wanting to design systems that provide better outcomes. Stop me if you've heard this before. Two social workers are in a canoe. One of them is a clinical social worker, the other is a macro social worker. A baby comes floating down the river. The clinical social worker picks it up, make sure it's warm, checks its reflexes to make sure it's able to respond correctly. A few minutes later, another baby comes floating by. The clinical social worker does the same thing. After a while, the canoe starts to fill up with babies. Finally, the macro social worker jumps in and swims upstream to figure out where all the babies are coming from. For me, that's the type of work I wanted to do, to figure out how can I have more of an impact than dealing with one young person at a time. That switched my mind and I started working toward starting my own nonprofit organization.

I found a niche for very interesting models that were unique but were struggling at the time. One of the first organizations I went to after I finished my degree was one in Lowell called UTEC. At the time, they were starting to expand and were really trying to develop their case management system. I had gone up there and helped them set that up. From there, I worked at a union for a year. In the union, a nonprofit provided English classes and citizenship classes to union members. I worked in an outreach team to expand the services not just to union members but to family members as well.

I did that for a year and then went to a 12-year mentoring organization. They identified children in kindergarten, observed them for a few weeks, and depending on different risk factors, selected a cohort of students, which they then matched with a one-on-one professional mentor who spent 16 to 20 hours a month with the student. They would follow that young person and work with that young person all the way through high school graduation. When I got there, they were having an issue with the young people in the program. When they hit their middle school years, they felt that the program was for little kids and they started to lose a lot of their cohorts. They brought me on board to design an adolescent program for them to re-engage all those young people and their families.

My last job was with an organization that had young people start their own businesses in the ninth grade. I helped them with the same kind of restructuring of programming, staffing, things like that. Once I finished that job, I decided to start looking at executive director roles. I had always been a program director or site director and I started looking for an executive director role. By happenstance, a friend of mine owns a vacation home up in the White Mountains and I had just gotten out of a relationship. My dog gizmo and I went up and stayed at my friend's house in Thorton. I was still looking and interviewing

in Boston, but just because I was up here, when this school popped up, I looked into it. Working here in New Hampshire was not in the plan. That's how I ended up here.

GREG: *Remembering what worked for him when he was a young student, PACE Academy helps students find success by keeping class sizes and the overall population of the school low and providing support to students not just for their academic courses but for their lives outside of school as well.*

MR. SANTANA: The number one thing is size. We focus on the fact that the school will not get bigger than 60 students. I think the other piece is our ability to individualize education. We have very small class sizes, so we can integrate a lot more project-based learning, and we also integrate workforce readiness, which includes internships, and job exposure from different places. That's the core of the school. Then, what we've been developing as well is realizing and understanding the whole child and that our young people need more support than just the academic. We've been able to set up a structure and go out into the community to support our young people in the community. We run life skills groups, ranging from conflict resolution and handling relationships to being able to work on a budget. Being able to individualize what each student needs is what sets us apart.

I feel that all youth are at risk, especially adolescents, and I think that resources can mitigate that risk. In New Hampshire, resources are sparse. I now know why there's no taxes up here, but with no taxes comes no support. There's no public transportation. The demographics are very different than what I was used to in Boston. Honestly, I remember when I first walked in to meet all of the students here, I was thinking, they're not going to get my jokes, they're not going to be able to understand me. But that wasn't the case at all. I felt like I knew them. I knew what they were going through and what they were struggling with. That was one of those lightbulb moments that made me realize it's a lot to do with social, economic. The lack of resources, whether rural or inner city, plays out the same ways.

In some ways, I find it even more challenging. In rural areas, one of the biggest challenges is transportation. I could get all of my young people amazing opportunities, but if they can't afford to get to the opportunities, then they're not going to be able to take advantage of them. I get young people who come here for a variety of reasons, from not getting the necessary one-on-one attention they need at their district schools to being bullied and not feeling safe. They want to be able to have close relationships with staff and they weren't able to get that at a bigger district school.

We have found that our young people are responding very well, and our families are also. I see how draining it is, not just on the young people, when their school placements are not working, but it's a big drain on the families as well. It raises stress and it causes a lot of conflict. When the young person starts to respond here very differently, I can just see the parents' shoulders go down. It has a really positive effect on the whole family.

So, yes, I do think that our students are benefiting. When I started, this school had about 18 students enrolled. I ended last year with a wait list for the first time in the history of the school. Right now, I have a list of young people waiting to start with us. I'm sure we will end this year with a longer wait list. So, there's definitely an awakening to the opportunity. I think it was just a lack of accurate information and too much misinformation about what a charter school is and what it can provide.

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GREG: *Gary Kaplan, the executive director of JFYNetWorks, was an early mentor in Mr. Santana's life. Even during difficult moments, he never gave up on their relationship.*

MR. SANTANA: Gary set me up one time to go live on Channel 7, to do an interview. I, being the adolescent that I still was in my early twenties, did not come through for Gary. I was mortified to reach out to him and let him know. I mean, he obviously knew that I didn't show up, but he was really upset at me, with me. Told me he was upset with me, but never severed the relationship. He didn't give up on me. He reached out to me again and I've been lucky to have people like that. Those memories are really what has dictated the way that I approach the work.

GREG: *Sarah and Troy, students at PACE Academy, discuss how they have found success with the help of Mr. Santana and all the staff members at PACE.*

SARAH: It's an amazing school. You get a lot of help here when you need it. You definitely get the help. You don't get homework here…

TROY: We have a lot of one-on-one time where we're seen more like people than just regular students. It's more of a personal experience. We feel more comfortable around the teachers. It's a lot easier to do your work that way.

SARAH: Because the class size is a lot smaller. The high school I used to go to was a big high school, so when I was in class, I wouldn't get the help I needed because there were so many students around. If I needed help, I wouldn't get it. So, my grades were dropping a lot. But when I came here, I got the help I needed right away.

TROY: I got in trouble a lot at my old school. My grades were bad, too. And then I decided to try out this school. I didn't want to, but after the second day here, I decided I was just going to stay. And now, I've been here for three years. They respect us, they're willing to listen. He's [Mr. Santana] trying his best. He's definitely a very progressive director.

GREG: *PACE Academy is a partner of JFYNetWorks and has benefitted from both the software we provide and the personal interaction with staff and students by Eileen Wedegartner, a blended learning specialist at JFY.*

MR. SANTANA: One of the great feelings for me is to come round full circle and get to work with JFYNet*Works*, being able to support my students here, especially with the math and English. This has been a challenge for some of our students who have had a more nontraditional path. This year JFY has helped us set up our East Art classes, which are college level online classes. It's the first time the school has ever had those. So, it feels really good and makes me feel very old that I started moving from a program where I got my GED, to now a program that's helping me in my work with young people. They work with us with the platforms of Mathspace and Achieve 3000 to help us further our personal mission of individualization for each one of our students. Both of those software systems allow us to meet each student exactly where they're at and allow them to work at their own pace. It aligns perfectly with our mission.

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GREG: *We would like to thank Jorge Santana and students Sarah and Troy from PACE Academy for joining us on this month's podcast. We hope their experiences have provided insight into the success PACE Academy has had working with students holistically and not just academically. For JFYNetWorks, I'm Greg Cunningham. This has been a production of JFYNetWorks.*