

Evan Schneider:

Good morning, Trinidad. How are you today?

Trinidad Rodriguez:

I'm well, how are you?

Evan Schneider:

I'm good, I'm good. Yeah. I'd like to take an opportunity to just give you a chance to tell us a little bit about how you came to the work that you do, and what sustains you as you go about that work day to day.

Trinidad Rodriguez:

I've been working with the YMCA for about 19 years now. I've gotten a whole lot of experience, not just from my childhood, but with working with the Y in Princeton Family YMCA. I've helped oversee the Princeton Young Achievers program, which served many of the kids in the district, the Princeton district, who are in kindergarten through fifth grade, it's a tutoring program. And just being someone who comes from Princeton, born and raised, I know what a lot of the kids are going through. Living in a home where the parents speak Spanish, have no idea how to help their students or, I mean, sorry, their kids. I just feel like I can relate to the families, and I feel like through experience, that has helped build the relationship with the families. And also because I speak Spanish and I speak English.

Trinidad Rodriguez:

So, with that, I'm able to help not only the parents, but the teachers, when it comes to congratulating the kids on their good work, or not only just congratulating them but also if there're any issues or concerns, I can help communicate it with the parents. And then teachers and social workers need that type of help. So, I build the relationship, began to build more of a strong relationship with the principals in the Princeton school district, and now have a strong relationship with Steve Cochrane and Annie over at the Princeton district because of my relationship through PYA, known as the Princeton Young Achievers.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah. I've had the opportunity to get to know probably some of the same kids as they get a little older through the Community House program at the Pace Center. I can tell you, it's really interesting to watch the tutors and the kids interacting with each other in that space and seeing what we call at Princeton, the FLI students, the first generation low-income students. There's so many FLI students that volunteer at Community House, and so most of them probably aren't from Princeton, but they have a similar background of maybe having a parent or two that don't speak English, or that don't have a college education. And so, they've been through that and understand where those students are coming from. And it's such a valuable resource to the kids to have those mentors. I'm sure that when they see you, they see someone that they want to be when they grow up.

Trinidad Rodriguez:

Oh, thank you.

Evan Schneider:

Can you explain just a little bit, how did that position at the Y evolve into this more overarching coordinating position with the Y and the school district there in Princeton?

Trinidad Rodriguez:

So it's a hybrid position. Last year I worked closely with Monique Jones who was also in my position. And basically we work together with the Latinos en Progreso, which is through the YMCA. And we also communicated about the kids who are in PYA. As well, she helped with that. And we just had that, we built a strong relationship throughout the year, two years I would say. And honestly I don't know all the details. The position was basically brought to my attention and I accepted it knowing that I could help make a difference, knowing that the community needs it, knowing that it would be a whole lot more work, but worth it.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah, it's really interesting because when people come to Princeton, whether they're students or visitors, we have a lot of just people from all over the world that come through the town. It's not something that most people are ever aware of that there are lower income folks in Princeton too because their houses aren't on Nassau Street and you can't really see them from campus. But there's been a lower income neighborhood in Princeton for years and years. And so the work that you guys do is really helpful and vital to helping their kids keep up basically in school and get the support they need. When parents are working, and I'm sure you could probably tell this story a lot better than I.

Trinidad Rodriguez:

Yes, yes. I actually also come from Princeton Community Village, which is one of the affordable housing homes. And to see that the school was working closely with the YMCA, with Princeton Young Achievers, we also have Marcy T. Crimmins at the Village now. And I sit there and witness all this and I said, "What happened? How come we didn't have this when I was growing up?" I get jealous. Like, I wish I had something like this. We needed it, but it's a good thing to see that now. It's all work in process and I feel like it's all helping.

Trinidad Rodriguez:

Any volunteers to they help with anything that's going on in school is always greatly appreciated, especially when it comes to education. That's that's key right there. The education for the kids, just through experience and just to have someone model for them, the importance of education and just talk about college, something. The conversation that I didn't have in my household was with college, "College is important, these are the college that you can go to." And just knowing, bringing awareness to the financial help that there is out there is also important.

Trinidad Rodriguez:

I don't want to say that everybody who lives in affordable housing, you don't want to assume that they don't know anything. So I'm not speaking about everyone because assuming it's the worst thing you can do. But I can say there are a good amount of families that need that assistance and about college, about everything.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah, I mean, I was just, I was talking to Jason Klugman yesterday who runs the Princeton University Preparatory Program known as PUP and it is really easy to start to make assumptions and things like

that. But you're right, I mean there are some major challenges that lower income families face, and a lot of time education falls by the wayside because there are more pressing issues. Like, where are we going to get food? How are we going to balance all our schedules because people are working multiple jobs just to make ends meet.

Evan Schneider:

So I know that the work you all do is so important and vital to the community. So thank you so much.

Trinidad Rodriguez:

Thank you.

Evan Schneider:

I want to talk about how you guys partner with Princeton and the Pace Center and what are some of the most successful ways that you've seen that partnership play out?

Trinidad Rodriguez:

So I've also become really close with Charlotte Collins. We've been communicating by email, phone calls, text messages. We really want to see the kids succeed and move forward, and help the parents. So one way is through the CHASA program, what's working, what's not working. At the beginning of the school year, the kids, we had more kids enrolled or, I can say the kids are still enrolled but as the days got colder the kids walk up and so they were just stripping off and I guess going elsewhere or going home and just they weren't making it. So we came up with a plan. And Steve Cochrane approves along with many others for transportation services to pick the kids up from the Pace Center after the tutoring program with CHASA.

Trinidad Rodriguez:

Unfortunately it was all in the works, and now we've been slammed with COVID-19. But that's a whole different story because it's a whole different world now. But yes I do want to acknowledge all the volunteers and the CHASA program because they are doing a great job. Their dedication to our kids is very important. I walked in a few times into the Pace Center and it's been a complete calm, calm area, and I believe a well area for the kids to learn in. They have their computers or laptops, they're playing games. It's a calm scenery when you walk in there and you see everyone trying to work and everyone looks happy when I walk in there.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah. So Charlotte Collins is the Associate Director at the Pace Center and she's the director of Community House. And then the CHASA program that you mentioned stands for, I think it's Community House After School Academy is that, that's right. In any case, she is really, really great with the kids. She has a special relationship really with all of them. She was on leave last year, she had a beautiful little baby girl and I helped fill in and got to know some of the kids that way and they definitely missed her when she was gone. We all missed her when she was gone.

Evan Schneider:

So given your experiences, I just want to shift a little bit into specifically what's going on right now with the pandemic crisis, what do you feel people need to know that they may not know about youth and the impact on education that this crisis is having?

Trinidad Rodriguez:

So we have a good amount of children in the district who do you know how to go into Google Classroom, do know how to check their emails, who do know, or not only just know, have the parents that can sit behind them and guide them through their assignments and their emails. And we also have a good amount of children who do not know. Unfortunately, it's something new to a lot of us, just remote learning, it's a whole new world. And not only remote learning but COVID-19. So we have kids and families who have been impacted by either both parents lost their job or if there's a single parent household and the one parent are no longer working. We have those stressors in the home along with the remote learning and not understanding what's going on with learning remotely.

Trinidad Rodriguez:

Also, I don't know, what we've been doing now is, is just making sure we communicate a whole lot with the kids. The teachers are calling, the teachers are emailing, they're Zooming. I've been helping with the calls, Zooming in with parent conferences. Just so that we can help the parents and they understand the world of technology and what their kids are doing, the assignments. And looking for ways on how we can help them. It's my understanding that right now the aides are stepping up and they're helping the kids with their homeworks. Or I don't want to say homework with their assignments, sorry.

Trinidad Rodriguez:

So yeah, a lot has changed. It's a new world to all of us and we're all stepping up to the challenge and I believe that we can do this. It's going to take some time, but I believe we can do it as we work together. That's important.

Evan Schneider:

In terms of your work, I know that in education, youth development theory is really important. And so I'm just wondering, how do you think about that and how do you feel like it might evolve in light of everything that's going on right now?

Trinidad Rodriguez:

So what the youth development theory, it's important to connect. It's important to build a relationship. And right now remotely, we're all trying to make that happen. We all need to make sure that we're connecting and if it can't be remotely, just calling. But making sure that the families are okay and that the students are understanding what's going on. And it's important to be patient with what the students.

Trinidad Rodriguez:

It took me an hour, just about an hour to help one of our students get into their email so they can check their message from their teacher. But it's just about having that patience, being on the other side, and guiding the student and just asking them questions, "What do you see? What do you see on your screen? Just explain to me what you're seeing and do you see this? Do you see that?" And then just to hear that, "I got it. I found it. Yes, it's right there." And you know, "Do you hear the ding?" It's just

something, it helps them build confidence, which is also something else that we're looking for in youth development. How do we help the kids gain that confidence?

Trinidad Rodriguez:

And it's through building that relationship and being patient and understanding them. You don't always have to agree with everything. Just understand. Just understand and hold their hand and be there for them. And also teaching the kids responsibility. With youth development, you have to teach them responsibility. And I think this is going to help them learn responsibility, learning remotely. But it's like I said, it's going to take time, but I believe in our kids.

Evan Schneider:

So I'm was really interested in, you've mentioned remote, obviously remote schooling is the crux of what's going on right now and everything succeeds or fails at that point. So I'm just wondering, have you seen any positive results from a move to remote schooling? And then also what are the challenges that you've encountered?

Trinidad Rodriguez:

Something that I've seen more, which is positive, is the teachers connecting more. I mean I saw some of it before, but now because I'm more involved remotely and I was in meetings before, but something about this remote learning is I'm seeing that the teachers are calling. I can guess, I'll just want to say maybe more. I'm hearing about them calling and really trying to get in touch with the students. Before it was maybe more when we're concerned or parent-teacher conferences coming up, "Could you help us schedule this?" But now it's more like, "I want to make sure that they're receiving the assignments." "I need to make sure that they're okay."

Trinidad Rodriguez:

It's not just about education now. It's also about "Could you please make sure that they're fed or see if they need anything, any disinfectants, any cleaning supplies for their homes." So it's not just about the education with the teachers right now. They're also concerned about what's going on at home and just how can they help them?

Evan Schneider:

Yeah. Well, I mean that's not very, at least for me, it's not very surprising to hear. I know that teachers in a lot of ways, a completely unrecognized and thankless job and a lot of what teachers do is think about the details like that, that just go far well beyond the realms of what their official position is in terms of educating the kids in their classroom. And it's really inspiring to watch and to hear about what they're doing and how they're filling the gap in a lot of ways. It must be really challenging though to identify those needs remotely. Have you heard any successes, like ways of identifying needs?

Trinidad Rodriguez:

Definitely, definitely, with work, working with the community. The community has helped a ton. We've had parents reach out to us who are willing to donate food for the children. Have offered to help financially as well, which I am so grateful for. And just to witness that and experience it and then be able to deliver it as well, is meaningful to me. And I know that the parents are grateful.

Trinidad Rodriguez:

I have parents reach out to me, "Hey, is there any way I could get a mask? Do you know where I can find a mask?" From mask to, I need help with rents. I need help with utilities, internet. And thanks to the school, the school's [MAT] program, we've been able to provide devices for the families who are in the meal program. And not only families who are in the meal program, also there are students who their device just is not working right now, so Chromebooks are given to the students in the district as well.

Trinidad Rodriguez:

But with the MAT program, the students are also given laptops and they are also given hotspots. Right when this all started, a lot of that was with provided already, but because of the remote learning, a lot of the students came forward and said that they needed it. And we worked very hard, all of us in the district, in getting, making sure that they have their laptops and their hotspots and providing them with information on how they can get the free wifi through Xfinity. And giving the parents the connections for the phone number that the Spanish line and English line so that they can make that call.

Evan Schneider:

In terms of your work in Princeton, what do you see as the most pressing need for families trying to support their kids in a remote education setting?

Trinidad Rodriguez:

It all depends on the family. To say most, I want to say in the beginning the biggest concern was providing them with food because how can the student concentrate if they're not fed? How can they do their work if they're hungry? But right now there are other things as well. Are they safe? Do they have the disinfectants that they need, to make sure that everyone in their home is okay?

Trinidad Rodriguez:

Because imagine if a parent gets sick, a single mother, or a father who gets sick, and the student is trying to learn. We need to make sure that the families are protected. It's not just about the food, it's about other things as well. And then imagine if the families, if one or both parents lose work, and how are they going to pay rent? Yes, we've been told that it's okay not to pay the rent for a month, two or three during what's going on right now, but they're going to have to pay it later. So if we can help them now to prevent what could happen later, why not do it?

Evan Schneider:

What do you think, I'm just trying to think ahead, and at some point hopefully we'll be able to move away from all of our remote schooling. And I'm just wondering how do you feel education and teaching will change in the aftermath of all of this?

Trinidad Rodriguez:

This is a wake-up call. Many people knew that we have students who are struggling or families that are struggling, but I think now things are going to be brought to light more. I think it's going to probably change a lot. Maybe kids are going to walk away being more responsible, going back to youth development. Because at this time I feel a lot are definitely learning at their own pace. Maybe they're not able to get to our assignments in the morning, but they can get to it at night. It might teach them to be more responsible.

Trinidad Rodriguez:

I don't want to say it's a positive thing or a negative thing because you never know. It could affect anybody, everyone differently. Just like some of us learn better with online schooling. Some of us learn better sitting in a classroom. It could be the same thing for our kids, why not? Some of them might say, "Hey, I like this. I like learning online." Some of them I say "I can't stand it." So I can't say what we're going to see in the next few months because we don't know, because everyone's so different. But we can just help with the process and help them just be there for them.

Evan Schneider:

It's really easy to emotionally be dragged down by all of the realities that we're experiencing right now and the difficulties. But it's also helpful to think about what are the positives, and what brings us hope. So I'm just curious, what's bringing you hope right now?

Trinidad Rodriguez:

What's bringing me hope right now is our donors, our donors and our community working together. I have never seen our community work together. We have so many people in the community who care deeply about our children. And this is from the younger generation to the older generation. We have all types of families coming forward and wanting to help. And this is what gives me that hope that everyone works together, and puts their best two feet forward and keeps on moving. So just stop now, but keep it going because it's always needed and it's always been here. And I'm happy to see that, that we're all working together and trying to make a change and make it happen.

Trinidad Rodriguez:

And, unfortunately it had to be through COVID-19 but I just ask that we all don't think of COVID-19 as serious as it is, as a negative thing, because it could make a positive change. And we can fight that and make it positive.

Evan Schneider:

Trinidad, it was a pleasure getting to talk to you this morning. Thanks so much for joining us.

Trinidad Rodriguez:

Thank you.