

Penny Forward Transcript S2E3

The Winding Road to Success is Paved With Errors And Mistakes

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Chris: This is the Penny Forward podcast, a show about blind people building bright futures, one penny at a time.

Liz: I'm Liz Botner.

Chris: And I'm Chris Peterson.

Liz: We are blind people, learning what it takes to be successful in our personal, professional, and financial lives.

Chris: Do you feel like your mental health impacts your ability to be successful? If so, then you may be able to relate to this week's guest. Everett Elam is an assistive technology instructor with World Services for the Blind in Little Rock Arkansas. He's a pretty successful guy with a full time job. He's an accomplished fiddle player, and a successful world traveler. He's working on starting his own business, and he's raising money for the Massachusetts Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired by running the Boston marathon for the very first time this October.

This is an acknowledgement that success doesn't come easy for anyone. Everett has bipolar disorder. He's a recovering alcoholic, and has gone through a divorce. And all of those things contributed to his particular life path. We hope you can enjoy and relate to Everett's Story, and if you'd like to learn more about how to contribute to his fundraiser, you can find all of that information in the show notes. Before we start, I want to tell you about Taylor's Accessibility Services. Taylor Arndt can provide you with web hosting, but she can also provide you with so much more. She can help you to build a website from the ground up that is completely accessible to people with disabilities, or, she can help you to modify your existing website so that it's accessible. To find out more about what Taylor might be able to do for you, visit her website at

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Now, let's get started.

Chris: Everett, thanks for being here.

Everett: Well, thank you so much for having me, Chris.

Chris: I'm excited to get to know you, so let's get started with that right now. Why don't you tell me about yourself?

Everett: So this is when, in Ubers I start singing Lady Gaga, "I was born this way." So, yeah, I was born totally blind. I have cataracts and glaucoma. I also have optic

hypoplasia, which is where the optic nerve sort of checks out.

Chris: And how did that effect you growing up, and how did that get you to a career with World Services for the Blind?

Everett: I was a fat kid, and so I decided that fat was funny early on, to cope and to get through it. I then started running on the track team, and graduated, and went to college, graduated from there, and then it was time to get a job. And Eric Yarberry, who is now our director of education and training, and is also my supervisor now, he was in college with me and he had run our college prep programs. And so he said, "Hey, there's a braille teacher job. And they need someone to start on Monday." And so, (Chuckle.) I called, and I talked to Rachel Buchanan, who was an amazing first boss, and she hired me ... I think it was that Monday. It was September thirteenth of 2016. So I was their braille teacher for two years, had an amazing time at that. So, my braille career lasted two years, and then the gal I was with and I decided that we were going to move to Mountain View Arkansas. Which is way out in the Stix, and there's not a lot of employment prospects there, so I was like, "I'm going to play fiddle. And I'm going to run my own business. And I don't have too many soft skills and I'm a snowflake, but it will be fine." And I went to Sharon Jovanatso who is our commander and chief, I call her. She is literally the best boss for a snowflake, because she is not a snowflake. Sharon's tough. And I said, "Hey, this is my plan." And she said, "Oh. That's kind of silly, but

okay. You've already made up your mind, our AT position is going on line. And we need you to run it. So, here. Have a job. You can go to Mountain View." So we moved to Mountain View, and I worked from a back bedroom. I worked from porch swings and back bedrooms and stuff putting together this awesome AT curriculum that we have now. There's not anything else like it. And we're super proud of it.

Chris: So let's take a step back, and talk to me about what college was like for you.

Everett: My college career, I decided first I wanted to study radio and TV, and I had a job at NPR. My first words on the air were, "Hey. William. Am I on the air?" And he said, "Yes. Do the weather." So, I'd read through the weather on my braille display, and I'd study, and go to sociology and go to math classes, and I stayed in my room a lot. And I was up to like 240 pounds. I was on the Starbucks and Taco Bell diet. Again, the winding road is paved with errors and mistakes. So, then, after radio and TV, I decided I wanted to study music, and I taught myself braille music, in the midst of a break-up and a nervous breakdown. I quit college three times. So, there was that. And I taught myself braille music, and recently worked with the Hadley Institute for the Blind and Visually Impaired to finish their braille music course. Which is no longer available, unfortunately. So, all these things in college that I did, braille music and radio, I'm doing audio production now, I do braille, and I teach. So, and at another point in college, you know, I was working from my dorm room as

an AT consultant for our disability resource center. They gave me a job, and I would sort of sporadically show up. I had no time management skills, but I was pretty good at what I did. So that lasted about a semester or so. I say all these things, and I don't give clear cut answers because if someone who's as much of a crazy, flighty person as I am can do it, then, oh my gosh. You people sitting at home can, and should do it. And my prayers are super with you. We've got to kill this eighty percent employment. Unemployment. We've got to kill this seventy percent unemployment rate. Sorry.

Chris: You come across as a very positive person, although there clearly was some hard stuff going on in your life, but can you talk about what some of that hard stuff was, and how you made it through that?

Everett: So, during that nervous breakdown, I was diagnosed with bipolar type 2. I was also diagnosed with schizophrenia. These are all results, I think, of definitely chemical imbalances, but also not being our true selves, and of taking subpar care of our bodies. So, my advice to you is, first of all, not to listen to the people who say, "It's going to be okay," and, "You're just ... blah blah blah." Don't do that. Find a therapist. If you don't like therapists, then you haven't met the right therapist. One of the greatest advice I ever got when I was going crazy on my nervous breakdown was from a guy, Dave Wilkinson. He said, "This isn't you. Find a shrink." And he stopped communication with me. Because I was acting like a nut case. Your friends are going to leave you when you do

this. So, find a therapist, start running, or pushups or something, get your mind right, the body and the mind are linked, and say, "God, I really don't like you right now, but please help me." That's my advice for that.

Male Announcer: We'll get back to our interview in just a moment. But first, ...

Female Announcer: Do you know the difference between a checking and savings account? When you're in an unfamiliar financial environment, and need a hand understanding the lay of the land, Penny Forward is here to help. We provide affordable one on one, and group financial education programs that give you the confidence to get out there and achieve your goals. Visit www.pennyforward.com to learn more about who we are, and what we do.

Male Announcer: Do you have a short success story that you would like to share on the air? Leave us a message at 952-856-0313. If you missed that number, you can always find it at www.pennyforward.com/podcast

Chris: Can we talk briefly about the divorce and the alcoholism?

Everett: So, Emily and I met as a result of the violin. Yes, those things really do happen. So anyway, Emily came to an open mike that we were playing, and we were playing

like Beatles covers and stuff. If you want to, you can YouTube the Parlor Bears East Hall and you can kind of see where we were. And she did things with a violin, I've been around the world. I've never heard anyone play like Emily could play. She did something called cross tuning, which is where you tune the fiddle for square dances so that it resonates with itself, and I was just spellbound. And so, that night, I made a braille heart, and I put it in her fiddle case, and I said, "I want to go on a date at some point, and I want to have a fiddle lesson with you." And she said, "Well, okay, that's kind of weird, but okay." And so, (Chuckle.) We started hanging out, and we started running together, and it is so easy when you meet someone who is not perfect to judge them on their flaws. And that's very quickly what we started to do to each other. Because there was not too much that was wrong, so we began to make things wrong. The great bass guitarist Victor Wooten came to our school. And we both got to play with him. And I was so jealous of Emily that she was in this like student program, and so I created all this bad toxicity. Jealousy. Do not eat of the peanut butter and jealousy sandwich. It is a bad sandwich to eat of. So, it was a downward spiral from there in many ways because of what we did on certain tracks. And I don't want to go into it too much, but what happened was, I just stopped accepting that Emily wanted to play video games sometimes. Or Emily wanted to do this. I stopped accepting her for who she was, and she, in her own way, stopped accepting me, and once you do that, you know, "till death do us part," I mean we did kind of die in a way. And, you know, that stinks.

Chris: How did alcohol play a role in that?

Everett: I started to partake during like the third or fourth year. It culminated in me being horrible to Emily, and saying unforgiveable things. And I say this because it's a testament to what can happen because of alcohol. So, don't use it. You will spend years repairing the damages that you can do in a night. It is not a good thing.

Chris: What was the thing that caused you to decide to sober up?

Everett: I met a person of very cool nature here in St. Lewis, and that person invited me into their home, and I arrived shitfaced, and made an absolute fool out of myself, and nearly lost a friendship. I was also stealing alcohol from friends here in St. Lewis, and I was horrified. And I was like, "This is not me." And so I went to my preacher, and I said "Preacher Man," that's what I call him. I call him "Preacher Man." I said "Preacher Man, I need AA. Like now. Like stat." "We have a clean-up on Isle 5!" And Preacher Man said, "Okay. We've got a meeting tomorrow." And my good friend who I stole from, she said, "Do you want me to go with you?" And I said "No." Because I don't mean this as a sexist comment, but a man or a woman, when you decide that you need to do something, you need to do it by yourself. My opinion. My opinion. This is what I live by. Yeah. So, I went by myself, and I talked to ... He was a plumber, and he was an alcoholic. He'd been sober for about eight years, and he said, "Yeah. This is all it takes. You know, you get this big book," The big book is available on bookshare. Email me,

y'all, if you need help finding The Big Book. That's the Alcoholics Anonymous book. And you have to understand, like I was doing all this while I was doing all this while I was working on my Catus. And while I was trying to get my next album finished. And I was drinking. And it was just destroying my life. I was allowing it to.

Chris: Wow. So, a hundred days now, huh?

Everett: A hundred days. I ate a huge chocolate chip pancake in celebration, and it was delicious, and I may door dash another one in celebration of this podcast. cause I freaking love my Penny Forward.

Chris: So how do you get from there to starting your own business, and getting ready to run the Boston Marathon?

Everett: David Goggins is a retired navy seal. He came from absolutely nothing. He's a black guy. He grew up with members of the Klan torturing him. His dad was abusive. He should have been a statistic. His audio book, it's called "Can't Hurt Me." Listen to it. I recommend it to all my students, and I do warn them the language is a little coarse. He does use some questionable things that people of the feminist persuasion, women of the feminist persuasion, I love my feminists, might find a little offensive. But he's a navy seal, and if you can filter it out, he will change your life. I love my David Goggins. His mantra, were it to be distilled, is, "Knuckle drag your way through life. If something hurts, go for it." That's not for everyone, it works for me. I find people who I am terrified of, but who inspire the crap out of me, and I find any way

to communicate with them. Unless they're dead, and then maybe I'll dig them up. Yeah. I find them, and I say, "Please. Just let me spend an hour in your time." And that's what I do. It does not work for everyone, but man! If you really want to change, and you want to be reborn as who you truly are supposed to be, whoever God, whoever She wanted you to be, that's what you have to do.

Chris: Tell me about the business you started.

Everett: My business is called Connect the Dots. It is in its infancy, and ... My big mission is to create highly motivated, specialized blind individuals who can go out, and by virtue of who they are, can plant the seeds of change that are going to turn this planet around. So I don't expect, currently, with my skill set and terrible time management skills, that I will currently be able to do that. But that's currently what lights me up inside. That's my dot. That's my dot that connects me to my next dot. So how will I do that? I'm going to teach a whole lot of AT and braille, and I'm going to meet awesome people. I'm going to get connected as Venders with every state that I can, and teach for those states however I may. I'm going to take hits. I'm going to fail. I'm going to have miscommunications. David Goggins would tell me, "Roger that, get back up. Keep going." So that's what I intend to do.

Male Announcer: We'll continue our interview in a moment. But first, ...

Byron: So, you want to start a podcast, but you're not sure where to start. Here are some tips for creating a successful podcast. Keep your podcast focused. While it might be tempting to create a podcast that's all things to all listeners, successful shows tend to have a narrow, focused topic. 2. Be consistent. If you're going to do a show, do it once a week, twice a week, once a month. But whatever that time frame is, make sure you are consistent. And finally, use music segments to break up the show. However, don't use copyrighted music. Use royalty free music, or music that you have written permission to use. For more tips like this, and podcast coaching, check out

www.superblink.org We're here to help.

Male Announcer: Do you have a tip or trick you've discovered that makes managing your finances easier? Tell us about it at 952-856-0313. If you missed that number, you can always find us at www.pennyforward.com/podcast

Chris: So, let's talk, then, about the Boston marathon. How are you doing it? Why are you doing it? What is it that you're doing?

Everett: I went to California in 2019, and ran the California marathon, which is, by the way, the only marathon in the country, that I know of, that sponsors blind individuals to run it for free. So you sign up for it, you spend, again, in my case, money that I didn't have, and you pay it back on a card. And then you get that stipend back once you have completed the marathon. I'll give my contact information.

I'd be happy to give people more information at the end of the podcast, but suffice it to say, I ran that marathon, it was my third one, and then I was thinking, "Wow. You know, after I got out of the alcohol whirlpool, I was thinking, "Wow. What happens next? Well, I want to run Boston, but my time isn't under five. You know, all my times are above five." That's not a great time, for anyone who's listening. That's not even qualifying for visually impaired. So again, y'all, I'm average. I just work really hard, and I get around things that scare me. I met Chaz Davis at the marathon and thought he was amazing. He is a newly blind guy. He runs marathons in like sub threes. He's been to Reo De Genaro, and he's just humble, and he's awesome. cause you wouldn't know he was this awesome runner guy. And he told me about United in Stride.

www.unitedinsttride.org

which is a website for connecting blind runners to other people with vision. But basically, I wanted to do something here in St. Lewis that would make me work. That would make me figure out how to raise money. Figure out how to be a better fund raiser. A better public speaker, a better athlete, a better man. And the Boston marathon was what I chose, and so I saw on Chaz's page that there were a few spots left in Team with a Vision. And I did the math and I said "Oh my goodness! I would have 99 days," I think it was, "to raise ten thousand dollars." And I said, "You're going to do it." And so I filled out the information, paid a ton of money, registered, and I've raised almost two

thousand dollars so far. And I'm writing letters to sponsors, I'm making amazing connections here in the city because of this marathon, and I'm in the best shape of my life.

Chris: How can people contribute?

Everett: There's two main ways. First, I have a page on Give and Gain, which is a fundraising platform. And you can just google "Everett Elam Give and Gain raising money for Massachusetts Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired." So, I'm raising money for this nonprofit. The Massachusetts Association for the Blind and Visually Impaired. And if you want to know more about them, you can go to their website.

www.mabvi.org

And so that money goes directly to them. It's tax deductible, ... are corporate and you're wondering about that, that's the first way.

The second way, in the show notes, I think Chris is going to put my Venmo and PayPal and Cashapp information. And, you know, there's a lot that goes into running. That would cover my airfare. My guide is an amazing lady named Mindy. She's going to be running with me. That would cover our meals, and it's also more simple. I think I would prefer that if I were on the other side and contributing to someone. So, Venmo, PayPal, I would very, very much appreciate it. So, it's sort of a two-pronged approach. You can donate directly to Mabvi, and if you want to help me out, you can donate to me as well.

Chris: What advice do you have for other blind people, maybe are experiencing similar things to things that you've experienced, or maybe haven't experienced anything but just have anxiety about it?

Everett: Get out of your own head. It's going to be okay. Get out of your own head, and live. Get out of your room. Take a walk down the street. If you can get out of your own mind and find a way to serve other people, no matter how small that way is. If you do it on a video game. I literally spent two years of my life, like, on a video game. That's how I met Evan, a mutual acquaintance of mine. And he gave me like, the bible verse that I'm currently, you know, I run marathons with it in my pocket in a bag. Isaiah 42:16. "And I will lead the blind along paths they don't know. Along unfamiliar paths I will guide them." It's going to be okay.

Chris: Can you play us a fiddle tune?

(Sound of case opening.)

Everett: Absolutely. (Sound of fiddle being taken out.)

Everett: I can play some fiddle tunes. I can play one fiddle tune. I'll play you one, it's a very special tune. Thus, as is typical with fiddle tunes, I don't know the name. But it is about a train, and I learned it in Spain.

(Everett laughs, and his music takes us into the Penny Forward Production Team's final words.)

Chris: If you enjoy the Penny Forward podcast, please rate, review, and share it with your friends. We're supported by your donations. Please help us to continue producing Penny Forward by following the tip jar link in the show notes, or by visiting www.pennyforward.com.

Liz: The Penny forward Podcast is produced by Liz Botner and Chris Peterson. Audio editing and postproduction is provided by Byron Lee, and transcription is provided by Anne Verduin. Music was composed and performed by Andre Loui, and web hosting is provided by Taylor's Accessibility Services.

Chris: Penny Forward is a community of blind people building bright futures, one penny at a time. Visit

www.pennyforward.com/about to learn more about who we are, and what we do. Until next time, for all of us in the Penny Forward community, I'm Chris Peterson.

Liz: And I'm Liz Botner. Thanks for listening and have a great week.