

LEARNING CURVES: REIMAGINING THE STATE OF AMERICAN EDUCATION— IT STARTS WITH A TEACHER: A CONVERSATION WITH ARMANDO CHRISTIAN PÉREZ (PITBULL)

Announcer 03:52

Welcome to the session on “Learning Curves: Reimagining the State of American Education.” For part one, please welcome to the stage musician, education ambassador, and motivational speaker, Armando Christian Pérez in conversation with CEO of the Milken Institute Richard Ditizio.

Armando Christian Pérez 04:22

Well, first of all, I want to say thank you all so much for having us here today. We highly appreciate it, and we got to get some energy going in here. So y'all ready to go? That's what I'm talking about. Alright!

Richard Ditizio 04:35

So you and I did this earlier this year in Miami. We had such a good time, we had such a good time, we decided to do it again in front of all these people. So Mr. 305, Mr. Worldwide, you have an extraordinary reach given your fame and platform. This session is about education, and you started your philanthropic activities in your hometown of Miami. Tell us how did you first come up with Education as something you wanted to focus on at the beginning

of SLAM. And just for those of you don't know, SLAM is Sports Leadership and Management Academy that Armando started.

Armando Christian Pérez 05:09

The reason that we got involved with SLAM, Sports Leadership, Arts and Management, why I got involved in education. Living in Miami, I lived in a lot of different neighborhoods, good, bad, worst, ugly, and learned how to adapt to any environment. Now, I went to a lot of different schools, 20-25, I don't know. I lost count, not because I'm a troublemaker in any way, shape or form. Just always was around some trouble. Now, music was my escape. Music was something that inspired, motivated, and not only did inspire and motivate me, but inspire motivated a teacher who actually believed in me. So while there was a principal in a high school that I went to who was actually trying to get me locked up every now and then, thinking that I was into something that I wasn't, to be honest with you [pause] she stood up for me. She fought for me, and more than anything, she looked at me one day and she said, I believe in you. And with her, telling me that she believed in me. That changed my trajectory, it changed my direction, it changed my path in life. So when I got the chance and I partnered up with Academica, Fernando Soluweta and his whole team, I told him my story, and he studied my life, and he studied the way I grew up in Miami, and he said there'd be no better spokesman to be able to speak to these kids than myself, because they relate to you, and you are them, and they are you. So therefore that's how we got involved with SLAM. And SLAM being a school that's in one of my old neighborhoods in Miami called La Pequeña Habana, Little Havana, it's been up for a decade now. It's graduating at 100%, we're up to 15 schools around the United States of America. [pause] And thank you very much, I appreciate it. And actually just got the news on the way here from Miami that we have gotten granted to be able to replicate slam all through the United States of America. And out of all the schools that got granted, which is eight schools in the United States of America, we were the highest scoring school. So out of 120 points, we got 115 so it just goes to show you why I got involved, because a teacher believed in me and I believe in them, bottom line,

Richard Ditzio 07:16

And just one of HR schools recognized by the Department of Education. I mean, that's a great model. Tell us, what are the learnings you take away 10 years later? Like, what was easier than you thought it was going to be, and what's been challenging about working in education?

Armando Christian Pérez 07:30

I mean, the biggest room for improvement, or the biggest room in the world, is room for improvement. And the thing is being involved with the public charter school, being able to pivot, being able to take advantage of opportunities for these kids without dealing with the bureaucracy or the red tape of certain things. You know, unfortunately, sometimes politics become politricks. Now, being able to when you get involved with certain partners, certain companies that want to do something amazing for the kids, to motivate them, inspire them and further them, and whatever they're trying to do with their life, and you don't have to run it up the flagpole or have some kind of protocol—that really helps out. So there's always a new challenge. There's always you always— got to call an audible—you always got to be able to pivot. But that's something that we're used to, especially me coming

from the music business, and I got to say, we have an amazing administrator, amazing administrators, amazing teachers, amazing students. And I got to give a big shout out to the parents for believing in us, and that, to me, is the fun part, right? Always just finding new ways to make things happen for them.

Richard Ditizio 08:33

So as I've gotten to know you, you have a great set of sayings that you live by, and I'm trying to live by them too. One of your favorite mottos is there are no failures, only opportunities. So give everyone an example of a setback that you endured and how you overcame it and what you learned about yourself.

Armando Christian Pérez 08:51

Well, with that, said, my mother put me on to Tony Robbins when I was about, I don't know, 19 years old, I lived in a neighborhood called Carroll City in Miami, and believe me, we were not trying to listen to Anthony Robbins at the time. So with that said, it gave me a certain mentality, which is no losing, only learning, no failing, only opportunities and no problems, only solutions. And in my life, yeah, you got dealt a certain hand, but it's what you learn how to do with the hand. And that mentality has worked in music. It's worked in life, and it's worked in especially in education, when it comes to these kids. My setback in life—funny story—the man who gave me a chance in music. His name is Luther Campbell, Uncle Luke from 2 Live Crew, someone that you know fought for the First Amendment in order for us to be able to have free freedom of speech when it comes to music. A lot of people don't know about that, but either or he gave my first chance in North Carolina. We call it North Cackalacky, in Charlotte, Queen City. This was about 2001-2002 and I was in front of 10,000 people. And at the time, the crowd was full of what they call rough riders. How can I say, not an easy crowd to impress. So when I got on that stage, I was so nervous that before that, I had a bunch of drinks, and he knew what he was doing. He was setting me up for failure to see if I would succeed. And when I got on that stage, I swear to God to everybody here, I thought I was rapping. In my mind, I was making all the sense in the world, but really, what was coming out of my mouth was [sings gibberish]. That probably sounds better than what I was doing on that stage in North Carolina. But I tell you that story, why? Because that could have been the beginning of the end of my career. But in turn, I turned to Luke, I apologized, and I said that would never happen to me again in my life, and it hasn't to this day. And he calls me Chico. He said, I knew that would happen, Chico, that's why I put you through that. That's why I kept telling you, knock yourself out, Chico, knock yourself out. And to this day, I say thank you to Luke. And to this day, that day, like I said, could have been the beginning of the end of my career, but in turn, it became the beginning of my career that will never have no end due to learning a lesson like that and being able to apologize, admit, accept, and move forward.

Richard Ditizio 11:09

So I want to talk about the role of a role model. And I think you have a very compelling story, and I love that the women in your life set such a strong example for you, your mother and your grandmother. What did you learn from them?

Armando Christian Pérez 11:24

I would say to women in my life, a woman made me a man. To me women are the most powerful thing, things on God's green earth. My grandmother, Abuela, was a rebel in Cuba and fought with Castro, what they call a ser romanist. She was up there with Fidel Castro, y Che Guevara, Camilo Cienfuegos. And obviously she figured out that what they call the revolution, communism, socialism, fascism, whatever -ism you want to put on it was a lie. So she had to find a way to get my mother to the United States of America out of Cuba. My mother was 10 years old at the time. It was an operation called "Peter Pan, "Pedro Pan. My mother went from Cuba to Indiana. Now my grandmother's sister, Tia Nena, she became a political prisoner who was basically creating safe houses and moving arms back and forth, and when they were trying to figure out how to get out of Cuba. And bottom line, get to the most priceless thing on earth, freedom. So, therefore I got a chance to learn from my grandmother that was up there with the rebels, my aunt, who was a political prisoner, and my mother who came over to the United States of America, not knowing the language, not knowing the family, not knowing anything. Just knowing one thing that she was going to get out of Cuba. So I learned from these very, very powerful women that taught me how to think with strategy, always with morals, manners, general principles. And that, in turn, is what has helped me to be able to not only thrive in life, well, not only survive in life, but thrive in life. So I want to say thank you to Abuela, to Tia and to Mami, because without them, there's definitely no way I'd be on the stage. And also to Hope Martinez, that teacher who gave me hope when I was hopeless, and ironically, her name is Hope Martinez.

Richard Ditzio 13:22

So a lot of other celebrities have enormous reach and access, just like you do, but they honestly don't do as much and don't leverage their platform for the good that you're trying to do in the world. Why is that so important to you? And how do you decide what to focus on?

Armando Christian Pérez 13:38

Well, first of all, I don't consider myself a celebrity.

Richard Ditzio 13:41

Well, you are.

Armando Christian Pérez 13:42

I consider myself a hard worker. See, celebrities sell a lot of things, and they're willing to sell anything, even their soul, and therefore they don't understand the kind of reach that they have, the kind of impact that they have, what they could really do. One of the neighborhoods that I lived in in Miami called Wynwood, which is now the design district, you know what went from the heroin capital to the art mecca of the world at this point. Unbelievable to be able to see that kind of change, but it gives you that inspiration, that motivation, right? But in that neighborhood,

they had a saying, says, don't talk about it, be about it. And I live by that. I'm not going to tell you about something if we're not going to produce, if it's not going to be real, if it's not tangible, if you can't come see it and feel what's really happened, what kind of impact. So music has given me the opportunity, and when I say me, I mean us, I mean we. I don't do this by myself in any way, shape or form. It's an amazing team that has the same vision, same goals, and also love to make things happen. Okay, not just talking about it. So unfortunately, a lot of people talk a good game. They can write a good game, they can rap a good game, but they really don't step up, and they don't show up or show out in their community, for their culture, for what they say they believe in. So with that said, I don't knock anybody, I don't knock anybody's hustle. What I try to do is lead by example. So when I tell them, hey, I believe in my community, my culture, my city, my people, so what do we do? We build schools for them. Because education at the end of the day, that is bottom line, what you need as the blueprint, as the cement to anything moving forward in life. And when these kids get somebody that actually believes in them and knows what they're going through in their neighborhood, whether it's drugs, whether it's violence, whether it's domestic violence, whether it's sexual abuse, whether it's coming from another country, whether it's gun play, meaning gun violence, you name it, and they have a home to come to, to somebody that goes, "Hey, I relate to ya'll. I understand you". But guess what? If I could do it, you could do it, bigger, better, better, stronger. And that, to me, is if we can get that message across to celebrities, the impact would be priceless. So, again, just leading by example, and hopefully they get the message.

Richard Ditizio 16:04

So you're successful in both music and in business as an entrepreneur and both of those, you need partners, as you just mentioned. If you were seeking partners to expand your educational footprint, there's a lot of people here who have a lot of access. What would you be looking for to do that?

Armando Christian Pérez 16:22

I mean, when it comes to partnership, and anything that we got going on is all about sharing the same vision, same goals, which is just helping those that need it the most. And you're literally investing into the future. You're investing into those kids that I feel that nobody believed in. But yet, when they get an opportunity, they appreciate it. Their hunger, their drive, their grind, their fight. They're willing to sacrifice and put everything on the line because they are stepping every day in their life with purpose. Because they're trying to help their family, they're trying to get out the neighborhood. They're trying to break generational change. They're trying to be the first to go to a university. They're trying to be the first to do a lot of things in their family. So for those that want to get involved in true partnership with true meaning, that's impactful, that not only will you see today, but you will see in the future, that, to me, is what it's all about helping those who need it the most. Living is giving. Bottom line.

Richard Ditizio 17:25

So let's stay in the future for a minute. Your great-grandchildren are talking about you, and they're looking back on your life and career. What do you most want them to know about you?

Armando Christian Pérez 17:38

Well first of all, I want them to always remember that when I was around, they were having a good time. They were having fun. Okay. Because life is short. I always tell people all the time, live life. Don't let life live you. So anytime I'm around people that I love, I always want them to walk away with a very memorable, memorable moment. And for my great, great-grandkids, what I want them to talk about, no, is what they will talk about. They say, well not for nothing, but Abuelo. Abuelo was somebody that always helped, always looked out, always gave back, and always represented where he was from, whether it be Miami, 305, whether it be my family from Cuba, if you don't stand for something, you fall for anything. And with that, said that's how I would leave it. My grandfather stood for something, and when he said it, he did it. Don't talk about it, be about it. [laughter]

Richard Ditzio 18:49

So, as you know, the Milken Institute is about to open our Center for Advancing the American dream in Washington, DC. Part of that project is we're filming 10,000 people from all walks of life and all geographies around the world to ask them what their American dream is. And as I watch these videos in almost every one the person gets emotional thinking about the one person that helped them achieve whatever their dream might have been. Tell us who that person was, and then how you're going to be that person for someone else.

Armando Christian Pérez 19:31

Couple things there. My mother coming over in operation, Peter Pan, my father came over from Cuba, and this thing called, they call it the lottery, you don't get no money. You don't get no money. You don't get anything, to be honest with you, but you get the most priceless thing in the world. You get freedom. So when I was born in the United States of America, my father was going back and forth in the Mario boat lift and picking up Cubans, bringing them to Miami. And I was supposed to, my mother was supposed to be on one of those rides. My mother said, no, no, no, no, he's going to be born in the United States of America. He's going to be Cuban American. He's gonna be our first-generation Cuban American. So, anytime, as I got older, anytime my parents spoke to me, they would always say, we gave you the biggest gift already—you were born in the United States of America. You can be whoever you want to be and do whatever you want to do in the United States of America, right? So, to me, that embedded in my head and everything that happened to my family in Cuba, and coming from Cuba, a lot of people don't understand. And when I'm performing, I say it all the time—it's the United States, not the divided states. The United States is something that should be appreciated. It's something that for me, as the world runs around and does what it does—freedom isn't free, folks, that's for sure. Freedom can get ugly, especially when you got to fight for it, but freedom is priceless. So when I think about what my family went through in order for me to be on this stage right now, for to be somebody who lived in so many different neighborhoods, grew up around so many different cultures, did not graduate high school, but is able to build schools not only in my city, but around the United States of America. That, to me, is what the American Dream is all about, and that, to me, is why my parents gave me life and gift of being able to appreciate freedom. Bottom line. So to Abuela, you know, who figured out how to get my mother over from the United States—I mean, from Cuba to the United States. To Tia who fought, to my mother, who not only loved me, but gave me survival skills, and to my father, who tried his best to—to do the right thing by us, even though, in the '80s in Miami, if y'all don't know, there was a lot of entrepreneurs. [laughter] Just a different product, but they were all looking for VCs and angel capital, they were doing it all! Angel investors.

[laughs] So I learned a lot, and that's why any chance that we get to give back, you can sign me up, and when I say me, you can sign me and the team up and to everybody here, I just want to end this by saying thank you for the opportunity. Thank you for letting us to be able to tell you our story is. As always, Rich, I appreciate you. But more than anything—what we're talking about here is real, and that's hard to find in today's day and age. And it's not instant gratification. This is something that's a slow but of a show, and we say "paso corto, vista larga"— short steps, long vision. And that's what Pitbull has been about. Mr. 305, Mr. Worldwide. That's what SLAM is about, and more than anything, that's what freedom is about. So, thank you all for having me. I highly appreciate it

Richard Ditzio 22:55

Thank you, thank you for being a role model for everyone.

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