

Life Skills 101 Podcast – Ep. 3 with Keenan Reynolds

Becca Weston – BW

Keenan Reynolds – KR

BW – 0:00

Hey, I'm Rebecca Weston and you're listening to the Life Skills 101 podcast from the Student Experience Office.

Today, we will be joined by current Carleton Raven, Keenan Reynolds. Keenan is studying Political Science with a focus on International Relations. Prior to his time at Carleton, he played three hundred games of junior hockey over a five-year period with the Ontario Hockey League and the CCHL. Keenan is the co-founder of the Front Nine Project, an Ottawa-based non-profit organization that gave opportunities to disadvantaged youths within Ottawa community housing and the Boys and Girls club of Ottawa.

Hi Keenan, thank you for joining me today.

KR – 0:52

It's my pleasure.

BW – 0:54

So, last year, you were the one that was interviewing a guest for Life Skills. What does it feel like to be getting interviewed?

KR – 0:59

Definitely a full circle moment. Since I got to Carleton in 2019, I've tried to definitely become as ingrained within the Carleton community as I possibly could. Leaving behind a career in junior hockey when I was constantly surrounded by twenty of my best friends at all times, I really enjoyed that comradery. And I've tried to seek it out in the academic sphere of Carleton, and I've been really grateful to meet and experience a whole bunch of new things. And that interview with William Johnson, a former Political Science graduate from Carleton was really enlightening. It provided me with the opportunity to see possible career paths that I could take with my degree as he's found a considerable amount of success post-graduation. And as somebody who really enjoys just speaking with people and having conversations, it felt like a really solid application of the skills that I've developed.

I really just enjoyed the fact that after that conversation, William and I were just chatting, and he just said “Yeah, I think you could have a future in that discipline.” Interviewing, or just using my voice and being able to speak well. I took that as a huge compliment from somebody who’s accomplished so much.

BW – 2:06

Where did your volunteering journey begin?

KR – 2:12

So, I was fortunate to be raised by a mother who is a self-proclaimed activist. Same with my dad. They’ve always felt a very strong connection to the community because they both relied on social programs growing up to find success in their lives. So, I was instilled with the values of volunteering, the importance of not only being a participant within your community, but helping in your community. And taking active steps to help your community.

As a hockey player, I was fortunate enough to be a community leader. I was tasked with going into grade schools, high schools and speaking to them about the values of academics, leadership, respect. I took that role very highly. I knew that as somebody who had the power to affect real change on these young people, I wanted to focus on the things that have helped me find success. That’s definitely something that was taught to me by my parents early on, and it’s just something that I’ve now incorporated into my everyday lifestyle. Is trying to make everybody I meet, make their day a little bit better. A smile, a small conversation. These have been tumultuous times these past 18 months. I feel like everybody needs a little spark of joy in their day, and it’s always just been my type of personality to try to do that. Whether it’s interpersonal, whether it’s through volunteering, or whether it’s through a more professional sphere.

BW – 3:39

So, you talked a little bit about your hockey career, and just based off of our previous chats, I know that you were almost drafted to go into the NHL. What was it like going from hockey all the time and being in athletics all the time to mainly just academics?

KR – 3:58

I was fortunate enough to play in the Ontario Hockey League as a sixteen-year-old, so a very rare feat to be done. What that allowed me to do is to move six hours away from my family when I was sixteen years old, go to high school in grade eleven in a completely different town and environment, while also trying to combine academic excellence with the athletic expectation of excellence that comes with being a high-level athlete.

So much of who I am was forged in fire through mostly the downs, honestly. I find in life, when I'm looking back in retrospect at my athletic career, most of my foundational characteristics were built in the lowest times and overcoming adversity. And I learned how to balance a schedule, I learned how to be accountable with deadlines, I learned how maintaining a very high level of discipline and detail is vital for success in any sector of society, but mainly in academics and athletics. And most of all, I learned that academics are, at the end of the day, the most important thing. Obviously, hockey was just a game. It's provided me with the opportunity to travel and experience amazing things and meet amazing people and attend Carleton on a full scholarship, which I will be ever grateful for from the OHL.

BW – 5:24

What made you decide that you were no longer going to pursue hockey?

KR – 5:30

Yeah, it was a tough decision. I felt as though I had accomplished everything I could in hockey. Injuries had caught up with me and my body was breaking down a little bit. I basically understood that it was the right time for me to do it, and since retiring, I've been able to experience and try so many new things that I was never able to because of the sheer time commitment that went along with trying to pursue my goals, and it's been super exciting. Super rewarding to try sports that I've never tried before. Flag football, basketball, intramurals at Carleton. Soccer. I used to play soccer a lot. Golf I'm playing a lot more of. And then, as we talked about, being able to dedicate more time towards that civic engagement, volunteering, professional opportunities that I never would have been able to do.

BW – 6:15

Going off of that, since stopping playing hockey, what have you done with Carleton? What roles have you taken on within the Carleton community?

KR – 6:25

I'm the student representative of the Faculty of Public Affairs academic planning curriculum committee, which basically oversees changes to any classes. We look at the actual courses, what they're taught, why they're taught the way that they are, and we approve changes to that. I was elected by my peers in the Faculty of Public Affairs to represent them on the CUSA Carleton Student Association, which was obviously an honour.

It was a virtual election. I was elected by my peers, and that was crazy too because when I initially began my campaign for that, I only knew thirteen people within my faculty. As people saw my campaign, saw that I was very transparent, they just wanted me to be a voice for them. Be a voice for change. And that was super humbling to have happen.

BW – 7:08

That's awesome. So, is that kind of where you think you might want to go, into politics?

KR – 7:16

Honestly, not really. The more that I learn about politics, the more I understand that a lot of the systemic problems that plague our society are fixable. I feel as though you can affect more tangible change from the private sector in our society now through fundraising, non-profit initiatives, corporate donations through hosting fundraisers, etc etc.

BW – 7:39

I saw that you are the co-founder of Front Nine Project?

KR – 7:43

The Front Nine Project, yup.

BW – 7:45

Why did you decide to start doing that?

KR – 7:48

We are polar opposites in personality. He is essentially the perfect lawyer. Analytical, deliberate, very rational with his decisions, and I am more of the outgoing, visionary, idealist. Macro versus he's the micro.

We isolated golf as a sector that was poised to boom with COVID. The first year that COVID hit, there was a growth in the golf industry that had not been seen since 1997, which was the first year that Tiger Woods broke onto the PGA Tour. And Tiger Woods is credited with growing the game of golf to levels, to new heights that had never been seen before. So, we understood that there was going to be an opportunity to capitalize on this second boom with COVID.

We understood that there was a whole segment of the population in Canada that had been ostracized from joining golf because of their socio-economic status. And specifically, those kids of those families will just never be able to play golf, once again, because the area codes they live in and the financial situations of their families. Golf is a sport that is very expensive to begin. The costs associated with getting a green fee, which is the industry term for just paying for a round of golf, renting a set of clubs, buying a set of clubs, balls, tees, the apparel, transportation to and from the course. It starts adding up really quickly.

And William and I decided to put our money where our mouths were and we fundraised \$15,000 from community sponsors in Ottawa. We collaborated with the Ottawa Sports Entertainment Group foundation. And we pitched them the idea, their director, Janice Brassy, and the chair off their board of governors, Roger Greenberg, they loved the idea and they agreed to help us out and from there we hit the ground running and it turned into an amazing thing. And the adage it takes a village to raise a child – let me tell you, it takes a village to start a non-profit too. Obviously, William and I are the co-founders, but it couldn't have been done, couldn't have been accomplished without the help of so many amazing people along the way.

BW – 10:05

After your experience with volunteering at Carleton and then starting your own non-profit, what does volunteering mean to you?

KR – 10:12

I truly believe that it's your responsibility to give back in some way. And being a good leader, being a good volunteer, is about understanding that where you might have advantages, you might have opportunities, other people through no fault of their own, may not. And I've always been very passionate about giving opportunities to others. This Front Nine project, it wasn't about creating the next generation of PGA Tour golfers at all.

I still remember meeting the kids on the first day. We gave them all of their apparel, we gave them hats, shoes, backpacks, the whole nine yards. All outfitted with our Front Nine Project logo. And just seeing the joy on their faces and being able to know after speaking to their parents that they were going to be wearing these shoes to their gym classes and using these backpacks in school and bragging to their friends, just saying "You'll never guess what happened to me this summer." As the kids that participated all came directly from either Ottawa community housing projects or the Boys and Girls Club of Ottawa.

And just meeting and interacting with these kids, it was such a long, arduous journey from when I initially conceptualized the idea to the end. The culmination. But seeing how much fun they had, seeing the looks on their faces and understanding that in some small way, I may have positively affected their lives. It made it all worth it. I'm getting emotional here thinking about it.

Because this is the first thing in my life I'd ever done with no safety net, if that makes sense. In the sense that I had always had a team behind me in hockey, it's a team game. So, when I made a mistake, I had my teammates to bail me out. And academically you have the support system of your professors and the TAs and your fellow students. Whereas, this was something that I conceptualized with my co-founder. And it was him and I just every single day, waking up and solving problems. It was really nice, and it's instilled me with a lot of confidence, because that was something that I had never tested before.

And I was confident in myself prior to that, but now, I would just urge people... William and I, we just woke up every single day, and we just solved the problems that were in front of us.

All of that to say, if you're ever sitting on the side and thinking "Wow, I wish I could do something." It's possible. Everybody is capable of what I did. I had an idea. I was bold enough to run with it and I'm glad I did. Because there were so many times where it looked as though our idea wasn't going to work at all. And if you look at the picture of the Front Nine Project, of the kids... Just seeing that will warm your heart and make sure it'll help prove that this is all possible.

I'm not articulating these thoughts perfectly because I feel so passionately about this and it's difficult to articulate it, just like I said. This was the first thing I'd ever done with no safety net. And if I can install anybody listening to this with one message, it's that you can do this too. If you have an idea, just run with it. Every great thing in our society started with an idea and was pursued by someone who just didn't want to give up. So, anybody can do this.

BW – 13:35

That's actually a perfect segue into my last question for you. And it is, what is the biggest advice that you would give to students looking to get involved in the Carleton community specifically?

KR – 13:44

If I'm jumping into a swimming pool, I'm not walking down the stairs. I'm doing a cannonball right into the deep end. And that's something that I haven't always had. I often like to portray myself as confident but I was a little insecure back then, and what helped me build up that confidence and become the person I am today was facing failure head on.

Very few people in life are going to be very successful with the first idea that they have. Often, it's a process of trial and error of dusting yourself off, getting up, and just recommit to trying again. And I was fortunate enough to have that taught to me through hockey, to have that taught to me through athletics, other people are going to have to develop that academically, socially, professionally... I would just urge you just do it, just do it. Don't think about it. Don't weigh yourself down with the possible repercussions of an action. Obviously, weigh the pros and cons and have a good plan coming in, but if you think something's a good idea or you want to do something, don't get in your head about the possible negatives of doing it.

The biggest piece of advice that I've ever gotten was just to trust your gut. And for me, I used to talk myself out of things. I used to say "Well, I want to do this, but I don't want to embarrass myself." I have no reservations anymore and I'm never going shut a door simply because I was afraid of failure in that situation. And I would urge people to adopt that mindset because what you'll find is you're going to have conversations and be able to experience things that you never would have been able to do if you weren't willing to put yourself out there in that capacity.

It's a testament to your character. It's a testament to your integrity and your perseverance when things aren't going your way to pick yourself up and commit to just staying on the course. That's what I had to do with Front Nine. Like I said, there's a lot of times where I didn't think it was going to work, but I knew that I was passionate about it. I knew that if it was going to turn out well, it was going to take 100%. And I just committed myself fully to it and it worked out in the end.

And if it hadn't have worked out, I still would have been very appreciative of the entire experience. Because once again, failures are what define you. There're people out there that failed hundreds of times, thousands of times before making it big. A guy like Mark Cuban, for example, owner of the Dallas Mavericks, I was listening to a podcast and he said "I became incredibly wealthy on my 600th business idea." But what people don't see when they see a success story is the decades or the hours upon countless hours of grinding, getting rejected, getting turned down.

So, failure is a part of life and those who succeed are the ones that understand that it is a part of life and welcome it with open arms and take the good from it. Throw out the bat, and just keep building on that towards a better future for yourself.

BW – 16:52

That is all of the questions I have for you today, thank you so much for speaking with me.

KR – 16:55

Thank you so much.

BW – 17:04

And that's all for today. I'm Rebecca Weston, this podcast comes from the Student Experience Office. Thank you to Keenan Reynolds. You can find more information about the Front Nine Project on LinkedIn. Thank you to you, the listener, for tuning in and talk to you soon.