The Upstander Ripple Effect: The Positivity Project with Jeff Bryan - transcript

**Jackie Congedo** 00:00

Music. These are your superpowers, positive character strengths. You have them, all of them, some more than others.

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 00:11

What we are best suited to do in our lives connects with who we are and our character strengths,

**Jackie Congedo** 00:19

standing up strong, activating your superpowers is how you can change the world

**Dr. Neal Mayerson** 00:25

and you're pioneering the future of humanity.

**Jackie Congedo** 00:27

Let's start right now. I'm Jackie Congedo on this episode you're gonna meet Jeff Bryan. Jeff and his friend Mike Irwin both graduated from West Point where they were taught the importance of character strengths. The men were deployed multiple times overseas following the terrorist attacks on 9/11. Jeff and Mike served their country alongside people from all walks of life, who differed in many ways, but were unified in service of their mission. Once Jeff and Mike finished their military service, they wanted to bring the lessons of character strengths to civilians and today, the two brothers in arms lead the Positivity Project, a non profit organization that brings character strength lessons to schools all over the country. So it's so great to be here today with you, Jeff. Jeff Bryan, co founder of the Positivity Project, coming to us from sunny I'm hoping sunny Savannah right now.

**Jeff Bryan** 01:19

Yes, it is a beautiful day here.

**Jackie Congedo** 01:21

It's a privilege, because we're talking today about your work, sort of organically, coming to this framework of character strengths, and sort of understanding it as this untapped opportunity to reach people and to bring out the best in them. And you've done it in this amazing application for schools, but actually, you didn't come to it from a school setting, which is really interesting. You have a military background, so I'd love for you to just sort of start with your own personal story, serving in the U.S. military graduating from West Point, and how did you stumble on character strengths in that space?

**Jeff Bryan** 01:56

So I attended West Point, I graduated in 2004 so 9/11 happened when I was a sophomore, and there was a good friend of mine there. I was a lacrosse player. He played baseball, and we had a lot of common friends. He was two years ahead of me. His name was Mike Irwin, and so Mike and I, after we graduated, we both deployed multiple times overseas. Mike deployed to Afghanistan once in Iraq twice, and I deployed to Iraq twice. And after his last deployment, Mike went and studied positive psychology under Dr Chris Peterson. And Chris Peterson is one of the founders of the field, as you know, he helped develop the classification of these 24 character strengths that the video uses. And so Mike told me all about his work with Dr Peterson, and it really stood out to me, you know, being able to see people's character strengths and see your own character strengths. And so in 2015 we were just looking at the state of the country, and we started a Facebook page, and it was called the Positivity Project. We had this logo. We had a a design company in Chicago called Rule 29 they created it for us, and we just had a Facebook page talking about character strengths and positive relationships, because Dr Peterson said that he could sum up positive psychology in just three words, "Other people matter," period. And so that's why our focus was on relationships, but through character. So that's really how I came to learn about positive psychology.

**Jackie Congedo** 03:21

Wow, yeah. And, you know, Dr Peterson, along with Marty Seligman, right? Dr Seligman, founding this field, thinking about our friend here in Cincinnati, Dr Neal Mayerson, who was part of that sort of team early on, that thought we maybe should think about this differently. You know, instead of talking about what's wrong with people, to talk about what's right and how we can help people lean into that. So you came out of this military space, you and Mike and identified this started as a Facebook page, but it's grown into something much more. Now you are in a whole network of schools with this. So how did you get from a place of and I also actually would love to hear a little bit more about how you see the strengths framework. I'm imagining that pieces of your military background latched on to this as well, right? And obviously with Mike. So I'd love to hear about it a little bit more, on the military application, sort of, why do you think that resonated with you in the spaces you're in, and then how you made the pivot to schools?

**Jeff Bryan** 04:18

Yeah, so in terms of why it resonated so much. You know, in the military, you're working with people from all different backgrounds, all different political views, all different religious views. And you know, what really matters is the mission, and how do we all come together to achieve the mission? And when we're in Iraq, it, you know, that was really our focus. What do we need to do to be successful here, and when you're working with people from different backgrounds, you know, you need to understand who they are, and you're looking at their character. And I didn't have the vocabulary then, because I didn't, you know, realize that there were these 24 character strengths, but you were looking at things like, is this person honest? You know, do they have integrity? Are they humble? Can they take feedback? Am I humble? Can I take feedback when I'm wrong about something? Do you have gratitude for the good things that are happening? You know, when we were deployed, there were some really long days, you know, we'd be out for three days at a time, and then back for one at the base. So you have to find those little moments to be grateful for. You know, like seeing a sunset, or whatever that is. So as I learned about these character strengths, I thought back a lot to my time in the military, and specifically deployed overseas, and I saw the application of those, and I thought, you know, that this was a really powerful framework. And, you know, alongside Mike, we just said, you know, this is something that we think that the country needs. And when we started that Facebook page, it was a teacher who reached out and said, Hey, we need this at our school. And then so we just put together something quickly. And when we went to visit about three months after they started implementing it, they said, This is the best way we've ever taught character, and you should bring this to schools across the

**Jackie Congedo** 06:00

country. Wow. So what's the network look like now? Of schools that you engage

**Jeff Bryan** 06:04

There's 875 partner schools that we have across the country. They're primarily in. So there's 20 different states that we have partner schools in, urban, suburban, rural districts, public, private, charter schools, a couple of home schools as well, and even a couple of international schools in Australia, Hong Kong, where people just found out about us and and brought it to their building.

**Jackie Congedo** 06:29

Yeah, I love that, because it is, you know, in terms of the way it was developed. It's strengths that transcend culture, history, time frames through, you know, it's like, universally valued characteristics across cultures and throughout time, and so the fact that you've you've got partnerships all over the world, doesn't necessarily surprise me, but it is really cool. Can you share a little bit more about what you've seen come out of this integration in schools, like give me a couple examples of the change that you've seen or that you've seen or that you've heard about from your partners in these districts after they've started using the strengths framework.

**Jeff Bryan** 07:07

Yeah, so it's really, it's an upstream approach to building a positive school culture by consistently focusing on these different character strengths, students understand themselves better. They have more self awareness and also more self confidence because of that self awareness. So for example, if you score 30 points in a basketball game, you're not saying I'm a good person because I scored 30 points, but you're looking at what went into that, probably perseverance, probably some humility by listening to your coach, probably teamwork. You know you're not doing it on your own. So then you can take those strengths and apply them to other areas of life as well, both inside the school and outside, and at the same time, it's helping you understand and appreciate other people at a deeper level, you're understanding their kindness, their gratitude, their integrity, whatever those strengths are. And what we've seen is that's the formula for more positive relationships when you're understanding who you are and who other people are at that level of character. So in schools, you know, that's that's what we're seeing. We've got research led by Dr Justin Garwood out of the University of Vermont that he's seen students sense of relatedness increasing, and the most common response, you know, in this survey that he had and in this peer reviewed journal was the positivity project makes me feel understood. So students are feeling like through this framework, through these character strengths, other people are understanding who they are at a deeper level, and that's helping them build more positive relationships in their lives.

**Jackie Congedo** 08:40

Yeah, we. I was nodding because we do. I shouldn't say we. I can't take the credit. Our amazing education team at the Holocaust and Humanity Center leads a youth leadership day, actually, a series of them every year. And and character strength is heavily, sort of undergirds the whole thing. It's woven throughout. And there's one activity that we use. You may also use this with your schools as well the strength spotting right where, you know, you get strength certificates or cards, and the students can hand them to each other and say, I noticed leadership or humility or self awareness in you humor. And I want you to know that I saw that in you just now. And we always, you know, get feedback forms after the after the event. You know, the day is over, and one of the most powerful that we've received is someone, a student, I believe, a middle school student, saying I felt so seen. I just felt seen. And, you know, we think about sort of the I hate to come at it from like a deficit, really, it's it's all about the opportunity, but we think about all of the greatest challenges that we face in our world today, and I think so much of it, the underpinning, is that people don't feel misunderstood and don't feel seen, and they don't, they don't see themselves often. They can't, they don't understand the value that they have. And so it is so. So powerful. It feels, I feel like, when people first get introduced this framework, like it's, you know, it's all fluffy and like, it's, oh, how you know, it's, are we getting at the problem here? Is it just a bunch of, like, you know, talk, and when you see the empirical results of how this improves cultures and how it creates cultures of upstanding which I want to talk about next, it's really powerful. So,

**Jeff Bryan** 10:19

Yeah, it really is. It really is. It provides, you know, the vocabulary to understand yourself and to understand other people. Yeah, it's very powerful,

**Jackie Congedo** 10:33

Has it? You know, we're living in this world of total polarization and division and identity politics and you know, othering all over the place, right? Vilification of the other across political lines, across identities. How has the positivity project maintained its sort of position to work with everyone? I mean, I know that similar to the work that we do, it's one of the reasons we love this framework. But I'm just wondering, like, have you, has there been any bumps along the road in terms of having to navigate this terribly difficult time using this framework?

**Jeff Bryan** 11:10

Yeah, I mean, there's absolutely bumps along the road, and it's tricky because people come in with different notions of what character education is or what social and emotional learning is, and we fall under, you know, both of those frameworks, but we have schools in red and blue states and districts, and we're really proud of that. And that's, that's why we started the Positivity Project, you know, because we could have continued to serve our country overseas. You know, I after the Army, I was in the State Department for a couple of years in Washington, and I was actually in Jerusalem for a few months as well. But you know, Mike and I both made the decision that we wanted to leave active duty and leave government service and and come home and be home with our families. But we also, we're asking ourselves, what can we do to continue to serve our country in some way, and this is our continuation of that service. And so we want to be able to support schools in all different walks of life across the country.

**Jackie Congedo** 12:09

And like the potential there, when you think about, you know, we certainly have threats externally, but the threats internally as a country in the way that we, you know, vilify each other and the social cohesion aspects, to have one framework, right, that our young people are understanding from a place of strength, a common vocabulary, to understand the value in each other and the humanity that we can see in each other, that is definitely service from the inside. And we need to make sure that we we pay attention to, you know, to that as well. Let's talk a little bit about upstanding you know, while I don't think it's necessarily, you know, your particular application or goal is to create cultures of upstanding through the strengths that that is really where we sit at the Holocaust and Humanity Center is trying to use this framework to talk about how people can use the best in them to stand up for themselves and for other people. Do you see that happening sort of anyway? I mean, what evidence do you have in terms of your work with schools to show that this character education, through this strength framework, is sort of enhancing cultures of upstanding

**Jeff Bryan** 13:15

Yeah. So what we talk about is that character strengths aren't about ignoring the negative, and we said that optimism, optimism is one of the 24 character strengths. We talk about character as being able to overcome life's inevitable adversities. So you're always going to face adversity in life. So what do you do when times are tough? You know, you can't show perseverance without first wanting to quit. You can't show bravery without first feeling fear. So we're teaching that to students, you know, all the way from pre K to 12, and we see behavior improvements. A school just wrote a blog post for us from Michigan. They saw a 75% decrease in bus referrals in just four months of implementing the positivity project from the year before, 50% reduction in behavior issues overall, in this, in what, referral and bus referrals, bus, yeah, so, just issues on the bus, you know? I mean, okay, there's always been issues on the bus, but, you know, they saw a 75% decrease in bus referrals. Wow, 50.

**Jackie Congedo** 14:14

And that's where kids aren't necessarily like, you know, there's no less supervision, there's less rules. There's less regimented activity, and so kids are kind of left to their own devices on the bus. So the fact, the fact that they're governing themselves better, they're more in check with their own, you know, their own behavior, and the way they treat each other is, I think, actually, yeah, sorry, keep going.

**Jeff Bryan** 14:35

Yeah, no. So you have to imagine that there's upstanding that's happening there, right, where someone sees something and they say, Hey, don't do that. That's not the right thing to do, and the other student stops,

**Jackie Congedo** 14:45

elevating to a referral. Yeah, exactly yes, yeah,

**Jeff Bryan** 14:49

yeah. And you know, a really powerful story that I heard two years ago at a school in Clovis, California, just outside of Fresno, is when we went to go visit the. Teacher asked the third grade students to say, you know, what character strengths have you used recently outside of school? And all these hands shot up, and she called on this one girl, and she starts telling this story, and the teacher had heard it before, said, Oh yeah, we remember that. And the girl told us a story about she was riding her bike in her neighborhood, and a car sped by and hit her front tire. Third grade girl hit her front tire and then sped away, so it was a hit and run. Hit the front tire of her bike. She said she was shaking, she was extremely scared, and she said she thought back to the positivity project lesson on bravery, and that she knew she just had to be brave, so she rode her bike home as fast as she could, straight into the garage, and then ran inside and started crying and told her mom what happened, but she said she didn't cry until she got home, and, you know, she thought back to that p2 lesson. So to me, that's one of the most powerful stories we've heard about the positivity project, because you're using it outside of school, and you're thinking back to those lessons that you learned in school, and applying it to a real world situation that is difficult and dangerous.

**Jackie Congedo** 16:11

How many years has this been happening? Have you all been working in schools since 2015 so you've got almost 10 years of data now. I mean, are you all working on any you mentioned you've got a researcher, you know, you've engaged. I'm always curious, like, the more you do this longitudinally, what can you see about how culture shift, and how are you looking at that in the research you're doing, in terms of the longitudinal impact

**Jeff Bryan** 16:37

we are and you know, we need them. We need the resources also to fund that longitudinal study. So that's also expensive. Yeah, it's expensive. So just in the research route of Vermont, he's written three peer reviewed journal articles on the positivity project. He just recently, just barely missed a US Department of Education multi year grant. That would have been really nice to do this kind of work. So hopefully he gets a next year and we can do some of that research. But what we have seen is, you know, students sense of relatedness, so the quality of their relationships, their behavioral and emotional development also improving, and he's just finishing up a quasi experimental design study now on relationships as that. I think it's the distal factor. The proximal would be character. The distal would be relationships. So he's focused on that to see, you know, this focus on character strengths. How does it impact your relationships?

**Jackie Congedo** 17:38

Wow, yeah, it's incredible work that you're doing, and I'm so excited, you know, just to be able to tell other people about it, folks in our networks, and for people who might come to us through the particularity of the history of the Holocaust, to understand, you know, the broader implication for this, this science, and how it can be used. I'm wondering, if you know, for folks who are listening on their commute or while they're working out, and, you know, they're going to put their phone down and go on with the rest of the 7 billion inputs that they have today, what do you want to stick with them? I mean, what do you hope people take away from this? If there's just maybe two concrete things from what your experience has been working with this framework as it relates, you know, to to using it that you would you would want people to do right when they put their their phone or their device down?

**Jeff Bryan** 18:26

Yeah, I'd say focus on character and focus on relationships. So those are the two things, character and relationships. So from a character standpoint, think about your own character. Are you acting with integrity, gratitude, humility, you know, the list goes on, creativity, humor, there's, you know, this broad range of character strengths. What character strengths are you bringing to the table? And then your relationships? Are you being present with people, giving them your attention, which is really tough today, and are you identifying and appreciating what's good in other people? Are you seeing their character strengths? So I think that's it. If you focus on character and relationships, you know, life is going to be a lot better

**Jackie Congedo** 19:02

Well, Jeff Bryan, thank you for your service. Thank you inside and outside our our country, and thanks for all you're doing to lean into the positive and to try and create these communities and these school communities and beyond. Because you said it doesn't just stay at school, this really is, you know, lessons for life that channel the best of us as upstanders in our world. We certainly need it. So really appreciate all you're doing and thanks for being with us.

**Jeff Bryan** 19:28

Thank you, Jackie.

**Jackie Congedo** 19:30

Our thanks to the Mayerson Family Foundation and the VIA Institute on Character for supporting this series. We have a link in the show notes so you can take your own free character strengths survey and learn more about your strengths. We'd love to hear about your experiences with character strengths and how you're using them to stand up. You can reach us anytime by email, and you can listen anytime on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, or visit Holocaustandhumanity.org/podcast. You can also connect with us on Instagram and Tiktok @holocaustandhumanity and X and Facebook @CincyHHC. The Upstander Ripple Effect is a production of the Nancy & David Wolf Holocaust & Humanity Center. This series is part of the Cynthia & Harold Guttman Family Center for Storytelling. Visit us in person at historic union terminal in Cincinnati, Ohio, or online at Holocaustandhumanity.org. Executive Producers are David Wise and Jackie Congedo. Managing Producer is Anne Thompson. Consulting Producer is Joyce Kamen. Technical Producer is Robert Mills. Technical Director is Josh Emerson. Opening sequence is by Ken Furman. Select music is by Kick Lee, and this is recorded at Technical Consulting Partner studios in Cincinnati, Ohio.