

Transcript: Ryan's Origin Story

ALC-NYC Summer '17



Ryan Shollenberger, ALC // ALC-NYC co-founder, shared his experience of the start of both to a group of ALC-NYC Summer '17 attendees on 6/19/2017.

I grew up in central Pennsylvania and had a good friend--probably met when I was 13-14--his name was Tomis Parker. Tomis after college moved to Brooklyn, and I came to visit him one day because I knew he was working with an alternative school out here called Manhattan Free School. And Manhattan Free school existed in this very space. They actually started off in a church, I think on 2nd street, on the lower east side, and then in their 3rd year they moved up here. And I came to visit him, naturally because he was my good friend, but I was also curious to hear about this weird crazy school he was working at where kids got to choose what they did every day. After hearing about it from him, I'm fascinated...and I came to visit. And I decided...well...at that time I was finishing grad school and I'm like 'well I don't know what to do, so I guess I'm gonna just move to New York--without really knowing what to do--and just figure it out.' So I moved to Brooklyn. I started volunteering at Manhattan Free School. I worked mostly with younger kids at that time. So what it looked like for me was, well, I was a personal trainer,

so I'd do that in the morning. Have some clients. I'd come in at lunch time and have lunch with the kids, then I'd take them to the park. I did that for...I dunno...maybe ¼ of the school year. It was unfortunate because I really wanted to spend more time here. I wanted to work here, at MFS, but it was clear they didn't have money or space for another facilitator, so I decided...well...I really want to be in education, so I'm going to go back to school. Because I thought that's what I was supposed to do. So I got a masters in education, from NYU. And I had all these ideas about self-directed learning, that I had seen at Manhattan Free School and I'd started to read about and incorporate, and I thought 'I'm just going to do this in public schools. Lemme try to take this self-directed education and do it in classrooms, and I'm just gonna blow minds. *Laughs* It didn't quite work that way. I taught 11th grade social justice for about half a year before getting myself fired for insubordination, which is a longer story that I'm happy to talk about at another time if people are interested...But at that point it was pretty clear for me that it wasn't going to work for me in public schools. And luckily just at the time I was let go, Tomis contacted me and said, "Hey, listen. It looks like Manhattan Free School is gonna close. They're not doing well financially. There's some families leaving. It looks like Pat, the director, is going to step down." Actually, at that point, the director had already stepped down, and a parent, named Art Brock, had stepped up as temporary director just to make sure the school didn't close. So Tomis and Art came to me and said, "Hey, we want to start something new here. We want to start fresh. We want to call it something else. And we want to learn from the mistakes and the struggles of Manhattan Free School and other self-directed learning spaces, and see if we can't do better. And so I was like 'Wow! That's perfect!' Cuz I literally had nothing to do...I just got fired! *Laughs* Art was running this program that summer, called Emerging Leader Labs, and it was essentially a social change incubator. There were a bunch of people there working on different projects. Tomis and I went with the intention of building the school to start in the fall. So we spent 8 or 10 weeks--I was only there 8 weeks; I went to Russia for 2 weeks--up in East Chatham. Up in this awesome old paper mill space that we made into an office. And we were brainstorming. And running a crowdfunding campaign. And getting our first couple students in line. By the end of the summer, we were here. Got our space set up. It was me, Tomis, and 6 kids. And it felt really...exciting. And it also felt really fragile. And, you know, because...that first summer was really important. Because we spent so much time really intentionally setting up how we wanted the school to look and really learning some lessons from what didn't work at Manhattan Free School. I'll just tell you a couple of those things.[04:51]

One of them was that we noticed, in democratic schools--in Sudbury schools, in other democratic free schools--people were spending a lot of time in meetings. Whether it was for democratic meeting. Whether it was just the morning meeting. Whether it was Judicial Committee. It was like, 50% of the day was spent in meetings and that seemed...not...right...based on the fact that this was supposed to be a place where kids had unlimited free time to pursue the activities they wanted to do. So that was the first thing we wanted to shift.

And the other thing was--and this was partially an internal intention and partially a external-facing thing--at free schools there's this...it can seem like people just do nothing all day.

Like...What actually happens there? A lot of that is because there aren't really tools to show that, and so that was another thing we wanted to shift: this perception. We wanted to have a way to be like 'No, this is what's actually happening...' and to have a physical place to share that.

So going back...It's September 2013, and we start with 6 kids. And it was clear that...there's parents coming to us like 'Hey, we wanna enroll' and we're gonna need new staff...So we start running these things called ALF Nights. And they're like, the proto of what this training and other trainings have been. To find adults who are also interested in this same stuff. I guess it was...the first one? September-October, one of the first we ran, Abby showed up, among a few other people. She had been recommended to us from another person in the self-directed education world. And...It was apparent pretty quickly to Tomis and I--and to Art--Art was around the first few months to help us get started and then he stepped back and let us do our thing--but it was apparent that we needed Abby to grow the school. It was also apparent that we didn't have the money to pay Abby to be here every day to grow the school. So...Abby did something pretty awesome. She essentially took on a full-time nannying job but was also here every day from the morning until 2 o'clock. Quit her job at a charter school, and took a big risk to be here because...I dunno, guess she saw something in what we were doing. So, we had Abby close to full time that first year, until we were able to grow the school enough to be able to pay her to be a full time facilitator. Year 2, Abby was with us full time.

So she's with us full time, and we started to grow--we'd started with six kids and the second year we'd doubled in size. Time jump: the third year we'd doubled in size again. And this year, we've doubled in size again. So, you know, it's funny. Sometimes I tell people about the school and they're like 'Oh, how many kids do you have' and I'm like 'Oh, 30...' and that sounds like a really small number. But considering we started with 6 kids and 1 facilitator and 1 director, it feels like we've grown a lot in the few years we've been here. It's been a similar story for the other established ALCs as well, that they've grown a lot in a short time.

Hannah's part of the story, in that she was our first official intern...ALC official intern. Hannah...You were a huge help to us. It was the first spring into the second year. Hannah was here a lot, not every day, but a lot. You were essentially another facilitator in the space, which we really needed as we were growing. You first came to an ALF interest night? [No, she was at Emerging Leader Labs...] Oh, right. QIV-C, the Quaker ecovillage in East Chatham near where Emerging Leader Labs was held, used to have an ALC on their land, like in the basement of one of their houses. It was more of a homeschool co-op. One of the other important players in the first year or two, and he's still part of the ALC network is Eric Bear. He ran that school, and he'd often bring his kids down here, which was really nice...When you have only 6 kids it's nice to get an influx of other kids, especially when they're coming from an environment other than the city. We got to go up there for retreats and for tone-setting, which was amazing...to get to bring city kids up to this very remote farmland.

[Questions about QIV-C]

I want to back-track a little to our first year, because...one thing I didn't mention is...ALCs form a network. There is more than one, now; this is not the only ALC. When Tomis and I were setting up the school, we originally had no intention to make the network. We had the intention to make this one school and have it be awesome. But during our first year a woman named Nancy Tilton contacted us and said she wanted to come visit, because she had her own independent, free school already in Charlotte. And she was feeling really frustrated. She was not having an easy time of it. She was thinking of closing the school...She had formerly actually taught at a Friends' School and then left to start this thing. So she came to visit us and was like, 'so I like what you're doing. I want to make my school an ALC now. How do I do that?' And at that point, we were like...oh. More than one ALC? What do we do...So Tomis went down to Charlotte and helped that school transition to being an ALC, and thus the ALC network was born. And that summer, we had our first official ALF Summer, in Charlotte, where all the co-facilitators, aspiring facilitators, and people like you who are generally interested in Agile Learning Centers for different reasons came together in Charlotte to grow the network.

[Who started all this?]

I would give the most credit for the 'Agile' part to Art, because he was formerly involved in the software world. Art is the guy who was the parent at MFS who called Tomis and I and was like 'I want to transition this to something else.' Art tends to be a guy who has ideas, puts them in motion, and then steps back and lets people run with them. His son still goes to this school.

[Where in the world is Art these days // Holochain conversation...]

So I'd give him the credit for the name and the tools he gave Tomis and I, because he was familiar with them from that part of his world. I would definitely give him the credit for that and say Tomis and I were co-founders just in that we ran the first year and helped set up the school. This was the first one. It's the flagship still. Charlotte and New York are the two most well-established schools at this point. They've been around the longest, have the largest student bodies, have the most experienced facilitators...

[Did you make any mistakes? I ask as someone looking to start a school... -Dan Ports]

Oh, it was definitely not perfect. We did have one really big advantage, which is that we had a 501c3 status through Manhattan Free School. And a charter. Which was really important...In creating a real school, you need a charter with the New York State Board of Regents, which is the certifying body. So we were like 'yes, we're legit.' Without that...it's a lot harder. You can apply for one of those and get them, but it's a lot of paperwork and time. So that was a huge advantage to us. In other environments, it's easier to start as a homeschool collective and then transition to a full time school. Or maybe not...

In the first year, it was a lot about survival. We were just doing whatever we had to do to keep the school open. So, not that it was necessarily a mistake but, with admissions and what students were coming to the school and sometimes less the students but more the way the parents related to the school--we would get these calls from parents 'Hey, my kid is doing terrible in their current school and I just need something, anything, now. Can we enroll now? Can we enroll yesterday?' And we'd have to be like, 'Yeah! Hey! We need students... so come on in.' It led to a few students and families that didn't work out over the long run. They weren't really suited...they weren't really into it. They were just like 'I need to get out of the current thing I'm in and don't really care what the alternative is...anything's better...' So, those mistakes were made out of necessity, and they were made. And now we have the opportunity to be a little bit more discerning and have more membranes with people. We can say, 'Hey, maybe you should look into this a little bit more...Understand what you're getting into before you jump into it.' Honestly, it's not that often that we have to say that...Now more often people are coming to us knowing what they're getting into. But, we at least have the freedom and ability to do that now.

[Abby: Less a mistake than a challenge of being a new entity in the world?]

We also didn't have at first, but realized we needed, was a conflict resolution process. Cuz when it was six kids and me, it was really easy to just sit everybody down. We would call Change-Up meetings on the fly...'Everybody come into this room and we'll talk things out!' Which works great when you have six people...But when you start to have too many people to have those kinds of conversations or you just can't bring everybody into a room all the time, we had to come up with something. That's called Culture Committee. It's a way of both honoring the kids and letting them work through their own issues and conflicts and also offering them support as a facilitator without shoving it down their throat and saying 'This is what you're going to do and this is the consequence and that's it.' So that was definitely a mistake, to not have that from the beginning, but we learned and built it pretty quickly. Came up with something that worked, that's been adapted since then.

So...I was at Nancy, first ALF Summer, network starts growing, Abby's already in the picture...Fast forward a little bit more--

[Where did your kids come from? -Dan Ports]

--In the beginning, a lot of our interest was coming from people hearing about the Manhattan Free School and who would ask about that. Like, we were called The Agile Learning Center at Manhattan Free School for the first year, so we benefited some off that name. There was also some bad publicity tied to them...You can still find that Huffington Post article where the writer describes some kid running with scissors...It was framed as this place where anything goes...which was one of the reasons we decided to completely change the name. There was a lot of good and bad attached to the old name, and it didn't really feel like ours anymore. It didn't reflect what we'd become. So growth came at first from that left-over interest. A general shift in people's I-understand-that-conventional-school-is-not-working to let-me-look-for-something-else,

so we'd get these people looking for something different. And maybe it was us--7 out of 10 times--and then we also tried marketing. We tried Google AdWords and, if you search 'opt out of testing' or 'alternative schools.' Google gives \$10,000 to nonprofits in free advertising, but what they don't tell you is that that's nowhere near enough to get the clicks to get your site to the top of the search results. So we actually found out that doing a bunch of advertising wasn't worth our money, basically. Through word-of-mouth and things like the AERO conference and other alternative school databases...things that don't require a lot of time or money are actually a better way of getting students and facilitators.--

Our first six students: 3 were former Manhattan Free School students, two of which are still here. That was half of them. Douglas, who is still here, we met at the AERO conference. His family decided to enroll because Peter Gray spoke at Manhattan Free School at the end of their last year--we've since hosted him twice, and he's been a great support. The other two kids...another one was from AERO and the sixth kid, actually he was at MFS, too, so that's 4 who were from MFS.

[How did the kids who were around through the transformation feel and react? -Liliana Carrillo]

I think it wasn't that hard for them, and here's why: When Art stepped in that last year at MFS as temporary director, he started to put the seeds into things. Like, he had them start to use kanban boards, which is a great tool for intention-setting and reflection. He tried to cut back on meeting times. He'd do things here and there that started to get the ball rolling, so it wasn't like these kids were suddenly hit with all this new stuff and overwhelmed by it. You know? Also, the particular kids who did stay on, were pretty agile kids. They weren't too set in routine or upset about change. But the way Art started those transitions before we actually changed over was really helpful in that respect.

[How were your finances? -Liliana]

Hard. Tomis didn't take a salary one month...I took a half salary one month...Yeah...We offer a sliding scale, so it's not like everyone is paying the full tuition. And even now, we are making less than New York City DOE teachers. Happily, because of how awesome our jobs are, but if you want to make it accessible to as many kids as possible and not make it just a private school for kids of privileged families, it's gonna be tough...

[Abby: Our tuition expectations are clear though, as is our intention to work towards being better able to compensate our staff. One of the reasons MFS closed is because people owed back-tuition (and were paying tuition in, like, cases of soda). And it's one of the things to be careful for--They talk about how, in nonprofit land, you have to be careful about this tendency to burn people out because of the general expectation that you're doing this because you believe in it, and so that makes it easier to underpay people and burn them out...One of the things that comes with that is, when you're dealing with a group of people who really really do want the thing to be as accessible for everyone as possible, sometimes you'll get leadership that can't

hold the boundaries it needs to. And it needs to in order to keep the organism or the ecosystem healthy. That's part of how Pat burnt herself out and the school ran out of money--it was trying to do more than it was actually capable of.]

That was another lesson we learned from Manhattan Free School: to be really clear with our tuition agreements and enrollment agreements. Getting clear about what it means to enroll helps keep people from getting the feeling it's just a drop-in center. We're a real school, with value as a school. And we want people to see it that way. And if they don't, that's ok but then don't enroll.

So. ALC network exists now. Abby's here. Hannah's been here as an intern. Since there were multiple ALCs, we started to get travel happening between the ALCs. This is something that's continued to be an awesome pattern and goal--to have kids from different ALCs travel to other ones. Mel took kids to Charlotte this year. I took kids to Montreal. There's been multiple trips to DC to meet the Charlotte ALC. I took kids to Puerto Rico, to an ALC there. Also in that second year, there was this really awesome project that happened here, called Galactic Nemeses. It's one of the most awesome tangible projects that I like to tell people about. It was a group of three kids who went to the Museum of the Moving Image with me and a parent one day and played this old-school arcade game for, like, three hours. Then they were like, 'We want to make our own.' So...they did. They programmed their own game, did all their own art, all their own animation. I think they used the physics engine from Super Mario Brothers as their base for the game they built. And then they built an arcade cabinet for it... It's been well-travelled. It's been to the Maker Faire, it's been to Microsoft's offices for indy game night play testing. That was, like, one of those moments that was like...when people ask 'What do kids actually do at a school like this?' we could point and say 'This is what they do.' So that was in the 2014-2015 year.

At that point, Tomis was still our director. Which I bring up, because the next step was Tomis no longer being our director and moving to Charlotte. We also started to develop some relationships with really cool resource people--guest facilitators who come in to offer specific things--like Yoni who you'll meet tomorrow, who offers partner acro, and Yasushi who offers Japanese lessons every week. A really important thing in ALCs is having people who are passionate about the thing they do and wanting to share that with kids, even if it's only for an hour or two. We're all here throughout the week, but it'd be impossible for us to offer everything that kids are interested in. So. Yeah. We also had two other apprentice ALFs that year--one from Australia and one from Ohau--with intentions to start up their own schools. Nina has done that. Abe is getting his masters in educational philosophy at some point.

By our third year, we're looking now at--we've had a second ALF Summer, which grew in size and intention...So we're not just thinking about these one or two schools, but we've got a Starter Kit that's being generated, people are downloading that all over the world, there's start-up groups in other states and other countries, and it's like...How do we keep track of this now? How do we make sure this thing grows sustainably? Not necessarily 'How do we control it?' because it was clear at some point that we couldn't and didn't want to. We wanted it to grow and spread

as fast as possible, but we wanted to keep coherence between different Agile Learning Centers. Because another thing we learned about democratic free schools and free schools is that they tend to make these little islands. And while they may share similar ideologies or practices, they aren't actively collaborating. Organizations like AERO are great for that kind of collaboration, but frankly, when you have one or two conferences a year it's hard to foster relationships. We were clear that we wanted the network to be a cohesive thing, and to have facilitators and schools in communication. Especially for the starter schools, we wanted to have the more established schools be like, 'Yes. Here are the mistakes we made. Here's how to not do that. And here's how you can get started a little easier...with less challenges than we did.'

At this point, without looking at the map, I can't even tell you how many start-ups there are. It's more than a dozen. And the Starter Kit has been downloaded by more than 1000 people around the world. This summer we've got...This is our first training (Congratulations!) of this summer, across the network. It's our second one here. There's also going to be trainings in Charlotte, in Sacramento, that Abby's facilitating, one in Greece, and one in Cairo that I'm going to be facilitating with a couple other people...They're going to look very different (the trainings and all ALCs) from community to community, because they're set up to be adaptable based on a community's needs. So the training in Cairo, for example, is going to look very different from the training here. They're going to have different intentions based on where they are. The thing that unifies all of us is the philosophy. Even the tools and practices look different from school to school. We use the Gameshifting board a lot; there may be other ALCs who decide that isn't as useful of a tool for them. As far as the root philosophies, those are the same across ALCs, and that's important to us. We wouldn't want a school that doesn't start from those basic places to call itself an ALC.

[Call to transition topics to "ALC Roots" and "FAQs." Lots of gratitude for Ryan's sharing.]

Transcription: Abby

Photo credit: Lilian Carrillo