

Yale Talk: Conversations with Peter Salovey

Episode 24: Honoring Dr. King's Legacy

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FULL TRANSCRIPT

Peter Salovey: Hello, everyone. I'm Peter Salovey and thank you for joining me for Yale Talk. Today is Martin Luther King Jr. Day. At Yale, and around the country, this is a day to learn about Dr. King's leadership, his vision, and his lifelong fight against racism and injustice. One of my favorite quotations is from one of Dr. King's sermons when he said this: "life's most persistent and urgent question is What are you doing for others?" My guest today is someone who can easily answer this question. Patricia Melton, a 1983 graduate of Yale College, has dedicated her career to helping young people in our community. Since 2012, she has served as executive director of New Haven Promise, a Yale-funded program that provides scholarships for the city's public-school students to attend college. Promise Scholarships put the dream of college within reach for young people who otherwise wouldn't be able to afford it. Patricia, thank you so much for joining me today on Yale talk.

Patricia Melton: Thank you, Peter, for inviting me. It's great to be here.

Peter Salovey: Well, it's my pleasure. Let's start by talking about New Haven Promise. I'm proud to say that Yale is a co-founder and the primary funder of the scholarships in this program, and I'm very proud to chair the board. But why don't you explain to those listening how the New Haven Promise works? Who is eligible? How do they get a scholarship?

Patricia Melton: New Haven Promise does provide scholarships as an economic incentive. A student has to live in the city with their parents for minimally the full length of high school: 9th through 12th grade. The scholarship is more generous if you're living in the city from pre-K all the way up through the 12th grade. Students have to have a B average, a 90 percent attendance rate, which is a little less than one hundred and eighty days. They have to do 40 hours of community service, and if they do all these different metrics, they will qualify for up to a full tuition scholarship at in-state public institution such as UCONN or Gateway Community College or Southern, and then a smaller benefit up to \$2500 at a private institution such as Yale.

Peter Salovey: So, I know New Haven Promise's motto is "To, Through, and Back."

Patricia Melton: What does that mean? "To" is sort of college access, so we interact with students and families at critical times. So, in the public schools, from pre-K up to the 12th grade, we're motivating students. We're interacting, we're helping them to understand what they need to do, showing up to school, being eager to learn, learning about different careers, focusing on their academics, that sort of thing. So that's what we call the college access. The "to" before they actually get to college. And then once they matriculate to college, that's the "through" part. We're there right along with them for the entire four years: their freshman year, up through their senior year. And during that time, we're interacting with them, helping them to understand how to stay on track, and to start preparing for their careers through internships, through extracurricular activities. That's the "through" component. And of course, the part that Yale supports fully is the scholarship. So, we're giving them tuition so that they're not falling off track or falling into debt. And then once they reach the senior year of college, we also help them to reintegrate into their community and the city with landing entry-level jobs. And as you know, Yale has

been very involved with our internship and career launch component, where many of our scholars have come and landed full time jobs at Yale, as well as at other organizations throughout the city. That's the "and back" part.

Peter Salovey: So, to college, through college and back to the city of New Haven from college.

Patricia Melton: Yes.

Peter Salovey: So, we know there are a lot of obstacles for attending college if you're from a low-income background. Talk a little bit about those obstacles and what you do to support students, helping them to navigate those obstacles.

Patricia Melton: There are a lot of obstacles. I would say that for many families, cost is the number one obstacle, and the cost to go to college these days is astronomical. And so, we work with students and families to help them to figure out what the costs are, and to apply for FAFSA, the federal student aid program that is connected to Pell. Many of our students, 70-75 percent of our students are first-generation, low-income students. And so, the FAFSA is very critical, and just the cost of college. So that's one obstacle students don't have to worry knowing that the scholarship is available, they know that they can go. So, we've removed that barrier. The other barrier is students just understanding about careers. So, we have the 40 hours of community service. It helps to connect students to valuable resources and organizations throughout the city that can help them to explore what they're good at, what they love to do. For instance, we have a number of students who are really interested in the arts and their various arts organizations that they volunteer at. That helps them to discover their love for the arts and then to actually get a career in the arts. And then, I would say the third barrier is just generally we provide, not just through us, but through many of our partners throughout the city, resources that help students to stay academically strong. So, if a student is falling behind in academics or maybe they're not reading at grade level, we can bring in New Haven Reads. We can partner with all of these incredible organizations that exist here in the city that are here to strengthen students' academic preparation. So, we make sure that students can be the best that they can be in a community of service providers. And that's another way that we can help students overcome barriers that are real for them.

Peter Salovey: So, I know you also have a personal story that provides you with great empathy for our New Haven Promise scholars. You came from Cleveland, Ohio. You were the first in your family to go to college, and the college you went to was Yale. Maybe you'd like to share that story with those listening.

Patricia Melton: You're right, Peter. I do have a lot of empathy for students. I was the first to go to college in my family. My mother did not complete high school. She dropped out in the 11th grade to care for her family. She got married early and started a family, but she really stressed education. And so, as a first generation the college, the first in my family to go to college, a lot of the barriers that we just spoke of—not necessarily academics for me, I loved academics—but knowing what college is, and what it could do for you. That was somewhat of a mystery. And then when I did come to Yale, first, I didn't believe that I would get into a college and believe it or not, a lot of our students feel the same way. They are coming from an urban school district. They're not sure that they're completely prepared. And so, they do have a lot of fear around their success in college. And so, I, too, wasn't sure that I would even get into college. Not only that I would get into college, but even knowing what my choices were in college, going to a place like Yale. I didn't know anything about Yale. I was looking through my 6th grade graduation booklet and it said, you know, "college." And I looked, and I had written down "community," meaning I

didn't even know the names of different colleges. That's all that I knew. So, something like the community that we're able to create here with taking students on college trips, having college partners that come into the school district really are so critical to our students being able to realize their college dreams and to do it with confidence, that's really critical. So, in that sense, I do have a lot of compassion and empathy for our student population.

Peter Salovey: And like your mother, you also believe education is important and it was important to you. And it sounds like you knew this from a young age. Why do you think that is? And how do we instill that desire to further one's education in our young students of New Haven?

Patricia Melton: I do have to give a lot of praise to all of the different community-based organizations and nonprofits that are here. They're able to really help students to see all the possibilities that they have available to them, like the music program, or pathways to science, where they get to go to the Peabody Museum, or they can come on campus. Obviously not doing pandemic. These last couple of years have been difficult, but many of our students who have walked past Yale, and now some of them actually work at Yale and they are part of that community, or even our partnership with the art galleries. I mean, that's been just game-changing because families can appreciate the beauty that's right here in their own city. And so, as a small mid-size city that really cares for its young people, that lights up our young people to their possibilities. They see that they can go to Yale, they can go to UNH, they can go to University of Connecticut, and that is instilled in them from very, very early. They just have it all around them here in the city. They live and they breathe it. A city that has such an incredible history in terms of activism. It's just in them, it's in them in terms of what their possibility is, and they know that education sits at the crux, sits at the very center of their dreams and aspirations.

Peter Salovey: That's why we're so proud as a university to partner with New Haven Promise and support those students. Our current budgeted amount for scholarships is \$5 million a year, and we just are thrilled to be able to provide it and delighted when a few of those students end up at Yale University and Yale College. But I should say of the, what, 250 new promise scholars every year? What is it? Maybe about eight who are coming to Yale?

Patricia Melton: Yes.

Peter Salovey: The rest are going all over the state. We're proud of every one of them.

Patricia Melton: It's unique in the sense that there are promise programs throughout the country, and they're doing incredible work. But we are the only college in the country that is sending a big number of students to college at other colleges. So, there are other promise programs that are a promise program at a particular college, but that's to increase the number of students at that college, not at other colleges. So, in this sense, I think Yale can be very proud and the city can be very proud. And I'm proud as an alum that my alma mater is stepping up to help out to make college affordable.

Peter Salovey: Exactly. I always view it as something we can do for the families of New Haven, but also, it's something that Yale can do for the state universities and colleges, community colleges, and all the smaller private colleges all over the state. Every one of them, it seems, is taking promise scholars, and we're happy to help provide access to college for those students. Also, in your time at Yale, athletics played an important role. You were a track and field star, you were a champion, and I know you were

nationally ranked in the hurdles and that you were an Olympic qualifier. Tell us that story. What really was the role that athletics played in your education?

Patricia Melton: Well, actually, athletics was one of the main reasons that I selected to come to Yale. I looked around here and there, and I was really struck because I knew that Yale was academically stellar. But I did not know that they also had an incredible athletic component where you could play Division One Athletics as well, at a very high level, which I was very interested in. So, I decided that I would apply here because the field hockey coach at the time had a very competitive field hockey program, and it was that competitiveness of the athletic program that I decided to attend Yale. And when I got here, I played for one semester and then decided to run track and I was a walk-on. My education is most important to me. But I think equally important is this sort of co-curricular component of athletics, and the Ivy League does compete at a very high level. Many Olympians, Division One athletes, they've really distinguished themselves. Athletics prepares you for life. It's challenging. You really push yourself to your limits. You fail. That's very important. And from that failure, you have resilience to get up and to try again, or to learn from your mistakes. I think that's incredible preparation for leadership roles in life, and a lot of what I learned in athletics competing, I use in my work today around how to motivate students, how to encourage them, to have courageous conversations, for them to develop leadership and become the leaders that their city needs them to be. These are many lessons that are learned on the athletic field, and I can say that it's very much a part of who I am, how I lead, my sense of never giving up. There's always a way. It's just who I am, and it's what I bring to my life and the career that I've chosen, which is to work with young people.

Peter Salovey: It's a wonderful, wonderful personal story, and I know it continues to motivate you today. There is no better place, I think, to learn resiliency, to learn, to pick yourself up after failure, than on the athletic field or court or ice or rink. And I see that resiliency when I teach our athletes. So, let's talk a little bit about this generation of young people. They're digital natives, as they say. Social media has always been a part of their lives. They're living through a pandemic. From your work with young people around New Haven and elsewhere, what do we think is special about this generation, for better or for worse? What are they excited about? What makes them tick?

Patricia Melton: Yes, they are digital natives. They're very connected to not only their own community, but to people all around the world. So, I think they're much more aware of issues here, and nationally, as well as globally. When we think about Black Lives Matter, a lot of those folks out there marching were young people. I mean, it was all of us, but particularly young people in terms of gun violence. Young people in terms of climate change. So, this is a generation that has a lot of aspiration to make sure that this planet is around, to make sure it's a better place to live. They have a huge affinity for social justice, for succeeding, but succeeding in a community, in a world that I think is a world that we ideally want it to be better for them. There are some things that are better, but there's still a long way to go. And I think this generation is willing and able and want to step up. They believe in their destiny to make a change and to go to places that we have not been successful in this generation. I think they're fearless in that sense, and maybe you have to be that young and idealistic to be that fearless. I'm not sure, but certainly as a generation, they seem ready for the challenge and they're embracing it. I think that's what they want, and I think that's going to be their legacy.

Peter Salovey: So, I think you are completely right about that. Well, for a final question, maybe you could tell us the story of a promise scholar and how the program helped them achieve their goal of attending college, and what they're doing now maybe.

Patricia Melton: I can choose one right here in our office right now. A year or so after I came here to New Haven Promise, which was in 2012, and I approached the board about developing sort of a last-chance scholarship called Passport to Promise. So as long as an applicant can achieve the 40 hours of community service, lived in the city, had the 90 percent attendance rate, but they may have had a very difficult freshman or sophomore year and so weren't able to quite make the 3.0 GPA, the Passport to Promise, if they achieve all those other metrics, they are able to compete for a last-chance scholarship where in the freshman year they would write a competitive essay and be selected. They could become what we call a Passport to Promise Scholar, and they would just have to maintain good standing in the freshman year, and get 24 credit hours, and then they could earn the full promise scholarship. So, we have a young person in our office, and this gentleman, his name is Deven. He applied for Passport. He was able to attend Eastern Connecticut State University. He earned the promise scholarship and went on to graduate in four years. So, it didn't take him five. It didn't take him six. And he achieved very good grades, well over 3.0. He came into our office from this summer internship program that we offered, and I think he was working with Dalio Foundation. We had National Intern Day and we had some goodie bags and he came in, and I was just listening because I'm always listening every time a scholar comes in, and I knew we were looking for another fellow, and I walked out, and I just started talking to him and then then the rest of the team started talking to him. So, we actually hired him here as a communications fellow. He started as a Passport and yes, he had had some difficulties in his freshman year of high school, but working hard in his junior and senior year, he was able to nab one of these Passport to Promise scholarships, went to college, thrived there, was able to earn a full promise scholarship, and is now working here as a communications fellow where he'll train for a year and work on communication projects. And then we will transition him to a great entry-level job in communications. That is what Promise is about. And we do that, whether it's for Passport or whether it's for just regular Promise scholars who, once again, are the first in their family to go to college, their families are not from white collar backgrounds, so we're able to, with our partners, help to fill in that knowledge base, to make sure that our scholars can realize their dreams: their career dreams, their academic dreams, their community dreams in their city. And that's what we do at New Haven Promise.

Peter Salovey: What a great story. So, there's Deven: to, through, and back.

Patricia Melton: Yes.

Peter Salovey: Patricia, I want to thank you for speaking with me today. This is such an inspiring program because it highlights the incredible potential in our community, especially of our young people. New Haven Promise is providing vital opportunities for young people in the city of New Haven, and I know this investment in education today will pay tremendous dividends well into the future. So today, as we honor Dr. King, I'm reminded of the many Yale students, faculty, staff, and alumni who carry on his legacy of service, serving others as volunteers, changemakers, leaders. It's truly part of the Yale experience on campus and beyond. And as we learned from Patricia today, that commitment to service continues, it continues long after graduation.

To friends and members of the community. Thank you for joining me for Yale Talk. Until our next conversation, best wishes and take care.

The theme music, Butterflies and Bees is composed by Yale professor of music and director of university bands, Thomas C. Duffy, and is performed by the Yale Concert Band.