

Disrupt Yourself Podcast

EPISODE 167: GREGORY HAILE

Welcome to the Disrupt Yourself podcast, a podcast where we discuss strategies and advice for how to climb the S curve of Learning™ in your career and life, disrupting who you are to slingshot into who you want to be. I'm your host, Whitney Johnson.

About a month ago, I had the opportunity to interview Gregory Haile, president of Broward College in Florida, in the United States. Greg has an amazing story and is a classic disruptor, and I've been excited to bring you this episode to illustrate the power of embracing constraints and doubling down on strengths to help us grow.

However, at the time of my recording this intro, racial tension in the United States is exploding. We didn't plan it this way, but I'm grateful you will be hearing this episode for the first time right now.

One of the most potent derailers of disruption is entitlement. We must battle our entitlement if we want to grow and disrupt. There are a few different types of entitlement, as I outline in Disrupt Yourself, but they all stem from seeing people as "other." Making them objects instead of individuals. One of the ways we combat our own entitlement is by learning about and being in proximity to people who don't look or think like we do. Listening to their stories and experiences, building relationships that will help us see them for who they are.

As I said, our guest today is Dr. Gregory Adam Haile, president of [Broward College](#), one of the ten largest community colleges in the United States. He grew up in South Jamaica, Queens in New York City, graduated magna cum laud from Arizona State University, has his JD from the Columbia University School of Law. He also teaches a course on Higher Education Law and Policy at Harvard and is married with two young daughters.

WHITNEY

Welcome to the podcast President Haile.

GREGORY Oh, thank you very much. It is an absolute privilege to be here.

WHITNEY So tell us a little bit about where you grew up because New York has lots of different parts and what was your plan? What did you want to be when you grew up?

GREGORY I grew up in an area called, South Jamaica, Queens, New York. Frankly, I didn't think very much about a career at that time. It wasn't something that I had a lot of conversations around or and certainly college wasn't something I had many conversations around.

I grew up in the 80s and 90s in that area, during the height of the crack epidemic, and needless to say, it was a very challenging and dangerous area. The home that I lived in had bars on every window. I vividly remember even a bullet coming through my living room window after someone had been shot right in front of my home.

But to be honest with you, I didn't think about it in any unusual way. Whether it was helicopter flying over the home or whatever it may be. It was just something that we experienced, but my mother knew better. Around the third grade. My mother made what I thought was a really powerful decision and that was to essentially lie about my address, to send me to a school in a better neighborhood. And so what she decided to do was send me to a school in an area called Kew Gardens in Queens as well. PS 99 was my elementary school. And as I continue to reflect on the change that she created, just by frankly lying about my address, it really did have a significant impact on the rest of my life.

One key component being the fact that I was graduating elementary school, sixth grade in 1989 and I said to a friend who was from at least a more affluent background than I was from, I said, "Isn't this amazing? We're going to be the last class of the decade?" And he says to me immediately without any hesitation, "No, we're going to be the last class of the millennium because we're going to graduate college in 1999."

And that was the first time that I had the benefit of even hearing the word college. And again, I didn't think a whole lot about it than other than wondering what it was and not realizing how later on that conversation would prove to be incredibly potent for me.

WHITNEY How long were you able to stay in that neighborhood school?

GREGORY I continued to go to school in that same neighborhood through middle school, and by the time I was going to high school, it became clear that I was no longer going to be able to perpetuate this false address narrative that I had created up to that point.

So I ended up going to the school in my neighborhood. It was called Springfield Gardens High School, the school that I was zoned for. At the time, it had been selected among 40 schools in total to be the first cohort of schools to have metal detectors, to go in and out of the building all day, every day. And so you would walk up to the school and you see the line around the corner and get on line and eventually you'd get to the door where you'd have to go through several layers of metal detectors before you got in.

And again, at this time, I wasn't thinking very much about it because this typified the neighborhood. When in the neighborhood movie theater that I used to go to, the Godfather Three had come out, there was a shooting where people were killed, and so what was the answer? They put up metal detectors so that by the time you walk through the metal detectors and got patted down, then you could buy your tickets and your

popcorn. Or if you walk to some of the neighborhood stores of bodegas, there would be a bulletproof glass between the vendor and the customer. And you would have to slip your hand through the two layered Bulletproof glass where you drop off your change and you'd get your bag of chips from the other side. So these weren't things that were atypical to me, they just were par for the course.

WHITNEY They just were.

GREGORY They just were par for the course.

WHITNEY What did your mom do to protect you at this point or to somehow safeguard you because now you're in, you can't go to another school. You said that they had gone to, you know, extreme measures to try to get you into another school. And you still managed to graduate from high school and go to college. Talk to us about how that came about.

GREGORY Sure. So, the conversation I had was very vivid with my mother. I was sitting in our kitchen and she was standing up by the stove and I'm sitting down at the kitchen table and she makes it very simple for me. She tells me, "You're going to go to this high school and you're going to make it, and I promise you that if you can make it there, there won't be any place where you can't make it."

And I listened to her, I think I believed her.

WHITNEY You wanted to believe her.

GREGORY I wanted to believe her. Right. She spoke with no quiver in her voice. She spoke with nothing but confidence about that. And, it was one of those things where, you know, whether that high school or in my neighborhood, there was rarely a day that went by that you didn't see something that you would never wish upon your child having to witness or experience. But it was just part of it.

And by the time I ended up graduating, and a dear friend of mine from high school, he and I still joke about it sometimes saying, you know, we didn't graduate, we survived.

I remember when I was graduating trying to figure out what to do, I remember just not having a major in mind and, and not having any particular career interest in mind. My focus was frankly trying to go as far as I could possibly go. And I had, at this point, started to recognize that if I go to college and graduate, I would realize that I was going to be the first person in my family to graduate from college. My mother, got her high school, diploma. My biological father stopped out of school before high school.

And I come from a very large family. I have about 130 cousins. My mother was,... and I spent most of my time with her side of the family. My mother was one of 13 children and, I was probably somewhere towards the younger end, but it wasn't the scenario that I idealized for young people. And that is the opportunity to reach out to someone and say, "Hey, what school should I go to and tell me about your experience in college and how do I navigate this process for admissions," and things along those lines. Those avenues just didn't exist. And so I just wanted to go far away-

WHITNEY Out of your 130 cousins, none of them had gone to college?

GREGORY None of them. Yeah.

WHITNEY

Can you tell us a little bit about your mother? Because she sounds like a remarkable woman.

GREGORY

Yeah, she is absolutely extraordinary. So my mother grew up in an area called Plantersville in South Carolina, which is outside of Georgetown. And she grew up there at the time of segregation and of course still, I harken back to what I've mentioned about her having a big family. More important than it being a big family, it was a loving family. It is a loving family.

Just extraordinary amounts of time just spent together. You know, one of the things that I learned from her and from them, because I used to actually spend my summers in South Carolina, usually for a couple of weeks at a time. And I remember the kid thinking that I want to live here for the rest of my life.

And because all of these cousins who were, who are just incredibly beautiful people, we would come together and we would enjoy each other's company and we needed nothing to do that. If we had a dirt road and a jump rope and each other, we were having the best of times. And what it taught me very early on was that you did not need, or I did not need a lot of things to find joy or to find happy or to find a different version of what success might look like. Success is a family sitting in a room enjoying each other's company and laughing for hours on end. That's what we would do. And I would often find myself sitting on the floor of my grandmother's home with all of my aunts and uncles just sitting around talking and laughing.

I was far too young to understand all the things they were saying and probably I... it was probably good I didn't understand some of it, but they were having a great time. And so, and my mother always carried that. She's just an incredibly kind and diplomatic person. But she's also the type, if you've heard the saying, don't mistake kindness for weakness. She was kind always but strong when she needed to be. And having the chance to see that in so many different ways, whether it's the conversation that we were having when I was sitting at my kitchen table or the times that I've had to see her, frankly in that very same neighborhood, take some chances and run into some challenges that she managed quite well because, again, that simply is just a part of the day to day reality, in those scenarios.

And she worked for the post office for 30 plus years. She sorted mail. She essentially was responsible for looking at the zip codes on envelopes and placing them in a letterver, if you will, and sorting mail from around the country for eight hours a day. My stepfather worked there as well. And, another incredible person that I'm glad that my mother found who taught me how to laugh a lot and always knew how to challenge me when I needed to be challenged as well. So, those were between, I'll say those three features between my mother and my stepfather and my extended family. They taught me everything I think I needed to know and it didn't come with anything material, but the knowledge and character that they had on display was immeasurably valuable.

WHITNEY

Mm-hmm. I love hearing that. It's.. Hearing that tribute to your mother and your stepfather. Okay. I kind of took you off track, but I just think that just the way you were talking about her in particular felt important to have you share with people. All right, so you now survive high school and you go to college. Talk to us about that process because, did you have a guidance counselor that said, hey college, was it your mother, was it your stepfather? How did college come about and where did you go to college?

GREGORY

Yeah. So yeah. So I went to college at Arizona State University and I think when I start to talk about this, it was the reality that I didn't have any major in mind and didn't

necessarily have anyone who was guiding me in that direction. But I do remember thinking about this might be the only way out. And I'll tell you, you just, if I can back up a little bit. -

WHITNEY

Please.

GREGORY

... there was a moment when I really started to think about what it would mean to escape some of the challenges that we were seeing in our community, what I was experiencing. And there was, despite all the things that you see, and sometimes it's hard to dis-aggregate the impact of what you're seeing from what you're experiencing because it just becomes so ever present in so many different ways. But one certain moment that I'll never forget with being in my neighborhood, I used to play a sport called handball and I actually still do every once in a while and I don't know how familiar you are with it Whitney, but it's very-

WHITNEY

Yeah, my dad played handball.

GREGORY

Oh, really? Okay.

It's essentially a single wall, the wall's about 20 feet high, probably about 20 feet wide. And it's the little blue rubber ball, probably about two inches in diameter. And you hit it with your hand, it probably is most similar to racquetball. And I used to play it fairly religiously. If I wasn't home, my mother would guess that I was at the park playing handball.

And so I'm playing one day, it was Columbus Day and, it's a holiday. And I remember school was out and I was playing. And a group of older kids approached me, and again, this was not something that I would view as unfathomable at the time frankly, but, approached me and decided that what we would call jumping that they jumped me then and basically we got into a brawl where it was me against about a dozen or so kids. Needless to say, well, it didn't necessarily go well for me. In fact, it culminated in one of them throwing a bottle which crashed into my head and face.

And I leave the site, run home, and when I run home, I have a floor to ceiling mirror. And that's the first thing you see when you walk into my home, I had a white jacket on and white Bull Jackson sneakers, if you remember those sneakers, which were at this point drenched in red. And you know, it became a, a big issue in our community. And I remember, after being in the ambulance and my mother holding my hand sitting in the ambulance with me, and probably one of the most painful things I probably have ever said to her was, "Why do we have to be here and why do we have to experience this?" And now obviously no mother wants their child to be experiencing that, particularly at a time when she may not be able to do much about that experience.

And so I remember thinking long after that there must be some avenue for relieving myself of this environment. And college was the only thing I could think of. And I'm not sure why it became Silicon Creek for me, but eventually it did. And so I started applying for schools and before I applied, I would look at schools and their application criteria and Arizona State University is where I attended. And I told you my first criteria was that it was far and it was very far from Queens. So I appreciated that because I wanted to try something new. And then the other aspect of it was the entrance criteria. You had to have a decent SAT score, which I had, you had to have, at least I believe at the time it was a 3.0 or 3.25 GPA, which I did not have. And then you had to have two of the three criteria. That third criteria was you had to be in the top 25% of your class.

So ding, ding, I within the top 15 to 25% of my class and I had a decent SAT score. So I decided to go to Arizona State University sight unseen. I didn't know you were supposed to visit colleges before you applied or figure out what the dorm you would look into would be like and all the other things that we typically do or hope to have the opportunity to do. And when I show up at Arizona State University, I have a tremendous sense of discomfort as soon as I arrive. And the reason why that discomfort exists is because I realize immediately that there are no metal detectors to get into the building.

And I say, how could this be safe? How could this possibly be safe? And, I still remember it still gives me chills to think about that moment because I remember it so clearly, but so I arrive there and, I'm getting adjusted and learning what getting adjusted is like. And, you talk about, you know, meeting a counselor and trying to pick your classes and I start to meet with the counselor to select my classes and she tells me that I'm going to need remedial education and I didn't know what that was. And remedial education is essentially when they tell you that you're essentially not college ready in certain course areas. And I had no clue, I was graduating from high school, I did not realize that I could graduate from high school and still not be college ready.

But that's what I learned and that's what I was. And this is when I start to learn after meeting people and adjusting my own attitude around things, because my attitude, frankly, was not one that was always receptive to strangers talking to me or people trying to get to know me or trying to spend time with me, all in very benign fashions. That's just not how I'd grown up, particularly when it came to communicating with folks outside of my home. And, but I learned to get over that as well. And I think when I remember learning about kids who had, you know, 3.5 GPAs and 3.7 GPAs and they weren't even in the top 25% of their class. And I was like, "Huh, this is strange." You know, where'd these kids go to school? And what was that like? So it was an adjustment period, to say the least., but, -

WHITNEY

Yeah.

GREGORY

... but with the help of a lot of folks in faculty, I was able to recover.

WHITNEY

All right, so you go to ASU, then you decide to get a law degree. How did you make that decision?

GREGORY

When I went to ASU, I still didn't have much of a major in mind. But I went there... I started school there in 1995, I was doing the typical thing of taking classes in areas that I might have an interest in and wasn't really sure. And I took a course in justice studies, which is a major that, it's really a cross section of criminal and social justice. And the first course I took and it justice studies 101, was at the time of the OJ trial.

WHITNEY

Mm-hmm.

GREGORY

And I'll never forget the faculty member who was teaching us, he leveraged every element of that trial to enhance our interest in the coursework. And it worked after his work-

WHITNEY

So smart.

GREGORY

... I, yeah, after his work I knew that I wanted to be in the area of law or justice and I didn't quite know what that was. So when I... I remember I told my mom, I said, "Hey, I think I know what field I want to be in." And, she said, "well?" I said, "I think maybe law

enforcement." And, she said, "Oh, you should become a postal inspector." because that's what she knew. Right?

WHITNEY

Mm-hmm.

GREGORY

I thought about becoming a police officer and an FBI agent and I'd met my girlfriend, now wife. And I remember thinking, well, if I became a field agent, that won't work because it might be hard on our marriage and those kinds of things. I just started to think about law school as an option. And, I'll never forget talking to someone. This was the Dean of Students at Arizona State University. He's the only lawyer I'd ever known and I'm not sure he ever even practiced, but he did have a JD.

And I'll never forget talking to him. He made it very simple for me. I said... and I had applied for law school at this point and I said, well, "What if I go to law school and I don't like it?" And he said, "First I think you're going to do well in law school if you go." And he goes, "I think you'd be a great lawyer. But if it turns out you don't like either of those, you'll just do something else."

WHITNEY

Mm-hmm.

GREGORY

And I think when you're 21 or younger or even older, sometimes we get caught up in the burden of if I make this decision today, have I predetermined the rest of my life based on this one singular decision? And the reality that he made crystal clear for me was that if I didn't like it, I could do something else. And it was nice to have someone who could tell me that, who I believed and trusted. And I also remember it distinctly enough reading, I think it was Fortune Magazine at the time. And they were talking about how Fortune 500 C-, Fortune 500 CEOs had diverse backgrounds and a significant component of them had a JDs. And I said, Oh, well maybe there is some truth to this.

And so I took a shot and I applied to a Columbia Law School, so and large part so that I could go back home and do some things. And my girlfriend, now wife went to..., who I met at ASU, went to NYU and we went there together and went to law school and did reasonably well there as well. And, but I will tell you one of the biggest catalysts was being able to go back to my old high school because I still remember, I remember two feelings, or two sentiments from back then is that I used to always think about, why there aren't people who come to our community to say something good, to do something, to be active.

WHITNEY

Mm-hmm.

GREGORY

Right? And, , and so you think about all the kids who go through my high school or the many high schools in America where there are multiple layers of metal detection between the inside of the school and the outside and the need for people to come back and say on the other side of these metal detectors is success, is the potential for opportunity. And so, despite the fact that in law school, certainly at Columbia, they didn't necessarily want you to be doing a whole lot of things outside of the community.

I did have a chance to go back to my old high school and meet with folks and meet with students. And that meant a lot for me. Unfortunately, my high school does not exist anymore in the same fashion that it did. It was broken up because of how dangerous it was and because of the high dropout rate. But at that time I just felt like it would be a neat opportunity to let folks know that there is something on the other side of the challenges that they are currently facing.

WHITNEY How did it feel when you went back to your high school?

GREGORY It was emotional. And I'll tell you, I think the most emotional part for me was because I know that there were teachers in there and leaders at that institution who cared about those students, who cared about me, who protected me. They have every reason in the world to say I shouldn't be doing this. And particularly as we all know, when we distance ourselves from something and we come back to it, sometimes we can see it a little bit clearer. And when I was going through the institution, I didn't know or feel a whole lot about what I was experiencing. But when you come back and you say, kids and students, they shouldn't be experiencing this.

And to know that there were folks who are, many of them even taking risks to some extent to be there for those students because they have a passion and true and genuine spirit of love for them, that means a lot. And so I remember that and I remember people at that institution who made a difference in my life as well. So that was probably the most important part of the return for me, if you will.

WHITNEY It's interesting. So it's interesting, so being able to go back and see in part what you've been able to accomplish and look at the waters you had been swimming in. But what I hear you saying is this just deep sense of gratitude for your teachers. And what they had been willing to give to you and were continuing to give to the students. Am I hearing that correctly?

GREGORY That is correct. We always, I think take the right sense of pride in the value of the work of teachers. But, don't think it could ever be enough. And it's one of those things that I certainly had a chance to experience when I was at... look, when I was at Arizona State, I was not a confident student going into Arizona State University at all. I had no reason to be confident.

But I will never forget a professor who was known as one of the most challenging professors at this institution. And I'll never forget when I had done a paper for him and he pulled me aside after class and he said to me that you may be the best student that I've ever had.

And that changed everything. The reality that a professor of his caliber, but any professor who takes the time to share with a student and whether he knows that student had the doubts or not is irrelevant, but to share with that student, his belief in that student's ability, can have a tremendous impact. And it had a tremendous impact on me and it's still a gift that he gave me that I carry through every day regardless of the challenges, regardless of the deprivation I think I might have. He helped me believe that the capacity was there, notwithstanding.

WHITNEY Oh, that is so beautiful. You just made me cry. Wow. Does he know, what's his name? What's the professor's name?

GREGORY Yeah, his name is professor James Jarrett. And it's a great question because I've never told him the influence that he had on me.

WHITNEY I dare you Greg.

GREGORY Yeah.

WHITNEY I hope that in the next couple of weeks you will call him or send him a letter or zoom chat him.

GREGORY Yeah.

WHITNEY ... and talk to him.

GREGORY No, sir. No, I appreciate you and, well... you've inspired me now to make sure that I do that. Because I've told his story enough and he's had enough of an impact on me as have many, but that is a moment that he gave me confidence that would exist for a lifetime that he probably never knew would occur.

WHITNEY It's so beautiful. All right. So here you are. You are now the president of Broward College. Tell us a little bit about the college and how you came to be the president of this college.

GREGORY So I graduated from Columbia Law School in 2002, probably about a year earlier than that. I, as I mentioned, my then girlfriend now wife was in New York as well, and we were living together. I woke her up in the middle of the night to fly her to Miami to surprise her with a marriage proposal. She says, yes, and then she says almost immediately thereafter, I think we should live here. And so I agreed. And so I started to look for opportunities and started my corporate litigation career in Miami in South Florida back in 2002. And we, while it wasn't quite sight unseen, we had four days of experience in South Florida. We didn't have a lot of contacts, other than the folks that I'd worked with.

So I started to get very engaged in the community while contemporaneously leading the life of a corporate litigator. And, I'd been very involved in a number of organizations, all of which have a material impact on our community. But I remember after having, a lot of involvement on a number of different organizations, I remember talking to a colleague and starting to think about if I could do one thing, what would it be? Instead of diversifying my service in all of these different areas, what would the one area that I would focus on? And it became very clear that if I was going to dedicate my life to something, it was going to be to something that has had what I would consider to be the most profound impact on any success or any turnaround than I've been able to have in my life. And without question, it's been education. And even more focused, post-secondary education.

And the truth is when I reflect on my high school experience, I don't reflect on it negatively or reflect on it with an understanding that that situation exists throughout our country and beyond. And it gives me a better understanding of the kinds of challenges that students who have a desire to be successful but don't know what that looks like may face. And I stumbled upon an opportunity to apply to a position at Broward College back in 2011. And Broward College is a, as was mentioned, as you mentioned, a very large institution with over 60,000 students. It's been ranked very, very highly by the Aspen Institute and it is laden with students who are trying to enhance their lives but maybe don't know how to do it. Most of our students are first generation college students like I was. Many of our students require remedial education just like I did. Many of our students, most of them are Pell eligible or Pell grant recipients, which means they are coming from the low income levels of the economy, just like I was, as I was a Pell grant student going to school.

And so all of these things that I had never thought about before are now in part reflected within the students that we have. We have over 150 countries of origin represented

among our student body and most of our students, again, are fighting to do something that those in their families have no experience with. And when I learned all there was about this institution, I fell in love with it. And I was there for about a month before I decided that I would be doing this work for the rest of my life in some form. This time I had never anticipated pursuing the presidency at the organization. But eventually on May 9th of 2018, the board of Broward College blessed me with an incredible opportunity to serve this institution in my current role.

And it's been an absolute blessing to work with the folks that I work with whose sole desire, much like the teachers or the security staff or members of Springfield Gardens who probably could have gone anywhere, would have wanted to, at the very least, who want to make a difference in the lives of folks who are just hungry for that difference and may not necessarily know how to accomplish it.

WHITNEY Did you apply it to become president or did they tap you? They have to do a search, right?

GREGORY Yes. Yeah. No, I applied for the position and a search was conducted at the national level. And eventually I was able to succeed and just exceed the previous president.

WHITNEY So you have your dream job.

GREGORY Indeed. I cannot imagine doing anything else, I wake up every day and I can't wait to do what I do. It's hard to sometimes get me to go to sleep because I love thinking about what I do and doing what I do. And, you know, it's, you know, we know the cliché, right? But I just have an extraordinary passion for this. And every time I think about the work that I do, I think about the students that were doing it for, right?

WHITNEY Yeah.

GREGORY I think about students, I mean, look, we have students who are homeless and come to Broward College. They've made the decision that notwithstanding the fact that their challenges are that, which I cannot even imagine, they're going to get their education. We have students who take several buses to get to school. We have students who are single mothers with children and working part time jobs and full-time jobs and they're getting their work done between the hours of midnight and 2:00 in the morning.

We have people who are managing challenges that for some of us would break us in a moment, but they're figuring out a way to make life happen. And so when those are the folks who are serving themselves and you get the pleasure and gift of serving, how do you not want to do that for as long as you possibly can? And, which is why I feel incredibly blessed to be here.

WHITNEY So it's not a job, it's a calling. It's a mission. It sounds like.

GREGORY Yeah.

WHITNEY When you wrap up as president, what are two or three things you'd like to say? We did that, we accomplished that at some date in the future.

GREGORY Yeah. You know, you know, I think about the story I shared with you about how fortuitous it was that I learned the word college. And now, you know, I mentioned to

you, I have two daughters, eight and four and one generation apart and they, even my four year old could name at least two colleges that she wants to go to.

WHITNEY Besides Broward, where else does she want to go?

GREGORY Yeah. Broward, Harvard. Yeah. They know the schools. And so-

WHITNEY Yeah.

GREGORY ... but what's the real difference here? Right? The difference is nothing more than engagement and opportunity. You know, I think about conversations that I've had with family members and cousins my age who are just as smart as I am, just as hardworking as I am and frankly, better looking than I am. And those conversations revealing that they just didn't know how to change or how to get out of the challenges that they were experiencing. And so when I think about the work of our institution, and it clearly doesn't have to be just us, I think about how do we bridge that incredible gap that exists between ability and opportunity? No one should learn fortuitously about college. No one should have to go to a different neighborhood, more than 45 minutes away to go to school, to have a classmate in the sixth grade, the same grade that I was in, not only know about college, but know what year they're going to graduate. And nearly, I'm left relying on luck to learn the word.

And when you even look at it from a data perspective, and this is where our huge energies, our huge push is happening right now. Is that, you know, you think about the data and the data suggests that 50 years ago the bottom core tile of income earners had about 6% of their kids going to college. In the top core tile of income earners had about 40% of their kids going to college. This is 50 years ago. And you come to today and the top core tile have gone from 40% of their kids going to or graduated from college, from 40% to 77% and the bottom core tile has gone from about 6% to a mere 9% over 50 years.

WHITNEY Mm-hmm.

GREGORY And so when we... and I think we're having healthy conversations when we have these conversations around the wealth divide and the income gap and those conversations need to be heard, but those conversations need to be heard in concert with the education gap, particularly from a post-secondary perspective. And so what I think about is, how is it that we learned to make it impossible for everyone not to realize the opportunity to go to college? For everyone not to have the opportunity for post-secondary education. Every economist in the world will tell you that the better post-secondary attainment you have, the more likely you are to pull yourself out of poverty, to pull yourself out of unemployment to... Every data point in the world suggests that higher education attainment rates going to enhance your life.

You can look at that from a health perspective, you can look at that from an incarceration perspective, but still there are communities that are devoid of that conversation, devoid of that opportunity. And so, what we are taking ownership of in light of the 50 years' worth of data that tells us that the bottom quartile that essentially faced inertia is going into those communities. A lot of times folks don't feel comfortable in those communities, we have to get comfortable. We have to be in those communities and make sure people know that the opportunity exists and despite the fact that they may have been told that it doesn't exist for them, that it does exist. And we're here to help create that opportunity. You know, I think about times I've been told when I was in high

school, in a room full of classmates, 30 students in a class and a teacher told me that if I ever made it to college, that I would never survive.

Now people, people get told that story too often. There's some version of it being told right now, that we don't go to college, that's not what our family does. Or you're not smart enough or you're not capable or you don't have enough money. That conversation has to change. We have to own the opportunity to change that conversation. That means being proximate, that means being in those communities, not bouncing in and out. It means living there. It means talking to folks. It means realizing the connection between the power of post-secondary education and going into communities that need it most and make sure those folks have the opportunity to realize that power. When we master that, we will have done what we're supposed to do.

WHITNEY

So that's your legacy. That's, that is inspiring. Just a couple final questions as we wrap up. One of the things that's been interesting for me as I'm listening to you and something that I think a lot about is our, our head game. What are we telling ourselves in our minds? And at some point you started telling yourself a different story than all of your neighbors were saying, all of your classmates were telling themselves. As you talk to your students, what stories do you encourage them to tell themselves and, and what story are you telling yourself in terms of your own head game?

GREGORY

Well, certainly for our students, and this is probably aligned for me as well, is that our students face challenges and they need to recognize, and I hope they do and I'll continue to impart, that as unique as those challenges may appear, as insurmountable as they may appear, those challenges are going to be the bedrock for their future success. One of the things that's hard when you're in the midst of whatever challenge we're going through to realize is that particularly if it's a big one and one of those, you know, that you feel like it might cripple you, it might break you when they get through what they're experiencing now, by the time they get to their employer of choice or career of choice or build their business of choice, they will be able to lean on those experiences, which will make the moment that they're currently experiencing look nominal.

WHITNEY

Mm-hmm.

GREGORY

And so I embraced the reality of holding on. A lot of people want to let go of their experiences and the challenges they've had to persist through. I say, hold on to them, some of them at the appropriate time because they will be the reminder of your capacity to overcome anything.

WHITNEY

Any final thoughts that you'd like to share?

GREGORY

I would like to thank you for this opportunity. But, I would only, I guess if I... if there was one final thought, I would... I guess I'd just add that we need to continue to raise the consciousness about the opportunity to help folks through post-secondary education. You know, one of my favorite authors is Malcolm Gladwell and he also has a podcast and I'll never forget one of the episodes he talked about education and the investment in post-secondary education in particular. And he compares the opportunity to invest a significant amount of resources in a few people against the opportunity to invest a significant amount of resources into many people.

And often, in the education context, you might be comparing a very wealthy institution to an institution like a Broward College. And I'll just share..., and both of them have noble qualities to them without question. But one thing I always think about is the opportunity to invest in institutions that are designed to lift the masses. And at Broward College, we

are designed to lift the masses. And I welcome others to think about avenues, particularly when it comes to one of the tools. And I think we all primarily agree to be a great lever to success. And that's a quality post-secondary education to think about how we can all make a difference in enhancing the lives of the masses and doing so through post-secondary opportunity.

WHITNEY Dr. Greg Haile, thank you so much for being with us.

GREGORY It's my pleasure. Thank you very much for having me.

Being in community and conversation with people who are not like us is hard work. Our biases from our own lives jump to the surface. We hear things that surprise us and seem unbelievable, but when we dig deeper, we realize they're things we just take for granted based on our own experiences - like Greg coming from a family of 130 cousins and being the first one to go to college. Or that in order for a building to be safe, it needed to have metal detectors.

To truly battle our entitlement, we have to start with examining our privileges as you heard in in episode 166 with Luvvie Ajayi Jones. Prior to my conversation with her, I thought of privilege as being determined by big identifiers like race or gender. While those are definitely in the mix in large ways, as Luvvie described privilege I became aware that it can be much more nuanced. She helped me understand that there's a difference between having things we've earned, and having things we haven't done anything to deserve.

"Privilege means you have a start...You are in a starting line that you didn't even walk to, to get there. You got there because of something you had nothing to do with."

Like the neighborhood we grow up in. The family we are born into.

There are advantages that come because of who we are, where we were born and what we look like, and there are barriers in place that come because of who we are, where we were born and what we look like. Part of battling our entitlement is to show gratitude for the things we didn't earn by being in proximity to others who got things they didn't deserve. A rising tide lifts all ships. Someone else's success doesn't take away from my own. Your own. Success isn't a pie that is going to be gone if we don't get to the table and grab our piece.

I think that tears came to my eyes when Greg told the story about the professor at ASU who pulled him aside and said that Greg was one of the brightest students he'd ever had because it was such a simple thing. It was a few minutes. A simple act that changed Greg's belief in himself and what he thought he could accomplish. It was an investment of time that made all the difference. That comment, along with the moments that preceded it - understanding that college was an option, his mom's courage in doing whatever she could to get Greg into a school where he had the most solid educational foundation available to him, family that loved him - added up over time and now Greg is in a position to lead a college full of professors and staff that believe in the students at Broward.

We need to listen to each other's experiences and stories.

We need to invest in each other's lives.

We know what that looks like for Greg Haile.

I'm thinking deeply about what that looks like for me.

I hope you'll think about what that looks like for you.

Thank you again to President Gregory Haile for being our guest, thank you to sound engineer Melissa Ruddy, managers Sarah Duran and Macy Robison, content contributors Emilie Davis and Nancy Wilson.

I'm Whitney Johnson
And this is Disrupt Yourself.