Episode 4 - Advocating for the Arts

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**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

grinnell, arts, people, dc, political science, iowa, nicholas, world, job, des moines, career, years, political science major, helping, graduated, americans, person, bit, skills, states

**SPEAKERS**

Meredith Benjamin, Jay Dick, Nicholas Lampietti

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:10

From the center for careers, life and service at Grinnell College you're listening to Going Forth. I'm Nicholas Lampietti.

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:17

And I'm Meredith Benjamin. And Nicholas, whose ear are you talking off today?

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:22

Thanks, Meredith. But in all seriousness, our guest today is Jay Dick, whose career in and passion for government, the legislative process, and grassroots advocacy has spanned from Iowa to Washington, DC.

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:36

Well, he sounds pretty cool.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:37

He really is. Jay has done it all. He's a wealth of knowledge and has endless advice for both breaking into DC politics, staying connected to Grinnell and just living a life of meaning and purpose.

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:49

Which, of course, is what we're all about. I can't wait. Coming up, Nicolas and Jay, stay with us.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 01:06

So to get started, could you please tell me a little bit about who you are and what you do?

**Jay Dick** 01:12

Perfect, well thanks for having me today. Because I'm a 1993 graduate from Grinnell. I was a political science major. I'm from Iowa. I'm from a small town called Colfax, which most of your listeners probably have driven past if they ever went to Des Moines or flo...flown into Des Moines. It's about halfway between here Grinnell and Des Moines there on Interstate 80. Population 2000 people. So I grew up there but you know, three miles down, down the road. After I graduated, I came to Washington DC. I think I graduated on May 21. And on June 1, I started an internship with Senator Tom Harkin of Iowa, my state senator, which was set up because I was a Grinnell alum. At that point, I just graduated, and then switched over to Senator Frank Lautenberg of New Jersey's office, in his office, and a couple of different roles, ended up as a legislative assistant to advising the Senator on various legislation. And I came back to Iowa, after that, I was a field director for US House race. At that point it was the first, I'm sorry, the third congressional district in Iowa. And that went from Des Moines west to the river and then down to the bottom to Missouri and then it stepped up. So I think it was 13 counties of that. So I got to really know an area of Iowa that I hadn't known before. And we lost. So then I came back to DC and I needed a job. And so I found the nonprofit association world. And so I work for a variety different group for about two to three years each, the society of the plastics industry. I dealt with transportation issues with them. And then I went to the Society for Human Resource Management, or Shrm and I was there, in charge of their member advocacy program, so getting 300,000 people to contact their members of Congress or their governors or whatever, to talk about HR laws and rules there. Then went over to the private sector. So this place called capital of NH, which got bought by Fiscal Note, which got bought by Roll Call. And so they've been bought by everyone. But they provide online legislative advocacy platforms for nonprofit groups. And then for the last 17 years, 17 plus years, I've worked for Americans for the Arts. Americans for the Arts is the nation's largest umbrella research and advocacy organization representing all different art forms, we actually don't define art. So art touches your soul, it's art for us. Unfortunately, the federal government does define it, but we don't. And so I'm in charge of all of their state and local government affairs programs. So governors on down, it's my responsibility. And so I have a 501(c)(3) nonprofit group in most of the states that I oversee the do a lot of the direct lobbying to the states. But I do a lot, I get to do a lot of travel, visit a variety of states, I've been to 48 states of the 50. So I have to get to two more. And just generally make sure that elected officials think about the arts in a different way. So oftentimes, elected officials have a preconceived notion about the arts or other things. And in this case, I always joke that a lot of elected officials think the arts are just those SOBs, so symphonies, operas and ballets, but the arts are so much more. And that's what I try to educate them on is the arts are these juvenile justice, educational prevention programs. The arts are after school dropout prevention programs, the arts, our public arts, the arts, our arts, and our workforce development. The arts are just economics, jobs and taxes. And so I can have a chance to get to know some of those elected officials, re-educate them about what the arts actually do. And so that's kind of my long bio. And then, you know, I'm very proud of my time at Grinnell, and I volunteer for the school as much as I possibly can. I've been back I taught a short course a few years ago called the arts and integrating the creative modern economy into the arts, or something like that. Basically, how the arts are more than just those SOBs that are out there. And so I live in Washington, DC metro area. I actually live in Fairfax County, Virginia. I've been with my husband now...uh...24 years. So our 25th anniversary will be next year. Have a couple of puppies. I love to travel. I'm a big Disney fanatic. Go couple times a year and to your listeners. Yes, it is much better to go to Disney without kids. I have a lot more fun than you do with your kids.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 05:22

Well, that is such a beautiful, comprehensive answer. And you have done so so much you've touched so many areas in your career, had such an incredible trajectory been so sort of inspired throughout that I am wondering about your time at Grinnell, and how that shaped you.

**Jay Dick** 05:42

Memories are flooding back. I'll start out with this. And so as I said, you know, I grew up in Colfax, 30 miles down the road, it could have been 3000 miles down the road. It's vastly different. So starting, you know, I graduated high school in 1989. Colfax, which I was a fourth generation resident, so my great grandparents started residing there. Very White, very Christian type thing. I think we had one Jewish family and one African American family. And that was the sum total of our, our diversity there. I think Newton had a Chinese restaurant, which was our, you know, the, our ethnic, you know, meal out. So then transport down 30 miles to Grinnell, where I was on James third my first year. And I think there's like 23 people on the floor. Something like that. And literally, there were, I think, like four other countries on my floor, certainly a lot of different states, a lot of different backgrounds. And it's from that, that I learned, wow, there's much more out there than what I'd had experienced so far in my life. And that it's something that I continue to hold on, there's still much more to experience out there, than I've experienced so far. I love to travel, I think there should be a law that everyone has a passport and we use it to get out and, and see the world and see the differences that are out there. I have a lot of privilege. I'm a white man, I make a decent amount of money. I live in a safe area, I don't have to I'm not food insecure, anything along those lines. But I have to be able to empathize and I have to understand what else is going on out in the world. And that's why I think travel is so important. So that's the first thing you know, what Grinnell did is really just opened my eyes. I knew from day one that I want to be a political science major. And so my freshman tutorial was the ever exciting comparative communist revolutions. Yes, I chose that. And that was my first pick. Yes, Professor Bob Grey, who's now a retired professor of political science, who I'm still friends with, we still chat. I didn't you get a lot of liberal science and a lot of American history because I felt that that linked in into that. But as I tell folks, half learning and college or Grinnell happens outside of the classroom, certainly the classrooms are is very important. It teaches you critical thought thinking, writing skills, things along those lines, research skills. But I was an only child. And now listen, I'm in a dorm with you know, 20 some people on my floor and 60 some people or whatever in the entire thing. And that's a whole new world. To me, I thought it was very positively and I'm friends with so many of my folks that I live with, in in Grinnell, to this day that we chat, we have a, we have a private group on Facebook. And it's named after one of a pet rabbit that one of my friends had in the dorms and so so yeah, it's a lot of fun. So I value the relationships that I built there, and we live across the country across the world, actually. And that was another thing where it was really helpful to, for me to, to grow, to continue to grow as a person to understand you know, what the world has and what the world needs to do. And so a funny story that we that we have there, there's lots of funny stories. I always used to say, if I went to, quote unquote, normal school, I would have been thrown out...for the stuff that we kind of used to do. Nothing bad. But anytime someone had a birthday, we would have, we would help celebrate their birthday, let's say that, and by celebrating we would have a theme. So it might be breakfast. It might be jello, it might be ice cream sundaes. And what that meant was this ice cream sundaes we'd buy whipped cream, hot chocolate sauce, take you outside and cover you in it, and have some fun with that. So we did that. So we have lots of fond memories from from that. So that's my fun little story.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 09:46

I absolutely love that. And it's very interesting that you mentioned the pet rabbit that lived in James because the only other pet I know that lives on campus lives in James so I guess there must be some kind of animal affinity they're in. Anyway. Great to hear. So I know you mentioned this a little bit in the first question, but I'd like to come back to it about sort of your career path and trajectory. And you moved sort of in similar spheres, but doing very different things. And I was wondering if you could walk me through some of the differences and similarities between those those fields, and then what sort of, what sort of led you to, to make the switch,

**Jay Dick** 10:27

So you'd be surprised they're not as different as you think. So I'll start out with that little teaser with that. I was probably 10 years out of school, and I was back in Iowa for actually a work meeting. I worked for the Shrm, at that point, the Society for Human Resource Management, and I had lunch with my parents, that came from Colfax to Des Moines. And we were sitting down, you know, and having a nice little lunch or whatever. My father, who worked in Maytag Corporation his entire life, you know, that point, I think he's retired, actually, at that point. So he'd worked 20, 30 years at Maytag, and he looks at me, you know, and as we're talking, he's like, So, Jay, what are you doing wrong? And I'm like, What do you mean, Dad? What do you mean, I'm doing wrong? It's like, you've had like four jobs, and you're only like 27, or 28. What's going on? Again, from the man who had one job is basically his entire entire life. So I had to explain to him that in order to quote unquote, move ahead, get ahead in the world, you have to kind of move around a little bit. But in order to grow in your responsibilities in order to grow in your experiences, you had oftentimes change companies and move back and forth. And that is quite what I did, as far as what are you doing wrong, and I had my air quotes here, I wasn't doing anything wrong I had, that was my career path. And that's a career path a lot of people in politics or in political science, is you have to, you know, work your way around, I always talk about the best political resume in Washington, DC has three points to it as a triangle, you have campaign experience, you have Hill experience, and you have association, nonprofit experience, if you have all three of those points, you will never really have to worry about a job, you will always find something that's going on here. And I was not hired at Americans yards actually, because of my artistic skills. I was hired for what have I done? Who do I know? That's, that's a political science thing. You combine that with the writing skills, good research skills, I think stuff that was taught at Grinnell. And networking skills, again, something I'll come back to it's building upon your skills. And so I started, say, you know, at the Senate, if you're getting some great political experience, stuff like that, then go into the hill, or I'm sorry, go into campaign, getting a whole bunch of different experiences, and then go into, into the nonprofit world where I was building upon. I always did government affairs and each of the jobs that I did, I just was adding layers of experience to that. So when I was at Americans for the Arts, I was familiar with Americans for the Arts, I actually didn't apply for the job. The boss is the last president at that time, knew me, and this happens a lot in DC, and said, Hey, we got this brand new job, they just created this new job. And you want to come and work for us. You know, I thought about it for a while said yeah, this sounds like it would be a lot of fun. And notice I use the word fun, because you have to enjoy yourself. And the one way that you enjoy yourself, is you have to agree with the mission statement of whatever you're working with. So with the arts, promoting the arts to all Americans, and everyone in the world. Okay, I agree with that. I support that. I play saxophone, and, and a little bit of clarinet, I certainly appreciate the arts. I have a plaque around here somewhere that my mother say that he got Student of the Month for arts in second grade, I guess my stick figures was a little bit better. So when I was closing down our house, I found that and so I made sure I framed it and put in my office at work. And so those skills just kind of built upon each other. I have kids, you know, that are applying for jobs, you know, and they say, Oh, I'm perfect for this firm to work for Americans for the Arts. I have my master's in theater. Okay, let's talk about that. You know, I really don't care. I care about writing, research, customer service, you know, which theater can actually help with, with interactions and stuff like that. But they think because they have an arts degree that they would be a shoo-in for a political job at Americans for the Arts. And that's not the case. That's not the skills that I'm looking for. And so again, it's who do you know, what have you done? What are your experiences, and that's what makes me, I think, valuable. I don't have an advanced degree. I was always thinking about going back and doing it, but I never finally say never got around to it. And I realized at that point, I didn't, I don't need to, because again, unless I do it for my own personal sake, which is fine, you know. It's not going to add to my career. What have I done? Who do I know? And what are my experiences? That's that's what makes me as a political person marketable here in DC.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 14:52

Wow. Well, you mentioned so many fabulous, fabulous details there. And I think it's really, I'm really glad you brought up the fact that you didn't end up pursuing an advanced degree and were still able to go and have such a, such a successful career transitioning and doing all of the things you do. You touched on this briefly. And I'm wondering if you might, might expand on it. But the value of blending your professional, your professional goals with your sort of personal, personal passions.

**Jay Dick** 15:22

so what I tell folks is, when you're looking for a job, never apply for a position, whether it be nonprofit, for profit, that your core self, what values you have, are going to be violated. So for example, I could not go work for the National Rifle Association, I don't believe in their, their mission, I would hate working there, and they would probably hate me as an employee working there, it's not worth it to you as a as an employee, you know, to try to work for some place, that would just suck your soul out of you. And so I have, you know, people say, Okay, I want to I would love to work for Americans for the arts, you know, well, we only have so many jobs, you know, we're only one company. So I tell people find those other industries that are out there that you also would, would identify with their mission, maybe it's working for animal rights, or the environment or things along those lines. Because the skills that you build there, you know, political skills, writing skills, research skills, customer service skills, are transferable to when your dream job at Americans for the Arts opens up and you say, I got all these skills. And because I've learned them over here, so don't limit yourself to just that one industry that you're passionate about. What else do you have passions are care about? And as Grinnellians I know, we care about a lot of different things that are out there. So figure out what those things are, figure out what makes you say, I want to get out of bed this morning, I want to make a difference. And that's the other thing is, at the end of the day, I think I make a difference. I help pass laws that make the arts more readily available to help people in their lives. So let's take juvenile justice. I mentioned that earlier. So the idea is a youth makes some mistakes, they get into the correctional program, and they get put into juvenile detention facility. So how can we make those facilities more apt to rehabilitate that person in a positive way? So first of all, okay, why don't we just paint the thing, so it's not, you know, gray, you know, let's make it a little bit more, you know, quote, unquote, inviting, that's a horrible example. But so they feel even more comfortable there. And then let's offer programs often, you know, with the arts that helped them take their anger, and redirect it in another healthier way through the arts. So when they get released, because they will, because they're juveniles, that they're less apt to recommit a crime because they have a better control of their emotions, of their thought process. And they can use those things that they learned, as you know, in when they were in detention, that makes sure they don't go back into detention. So that's good for the for the kid. It's also good for government, because it doesn't cost a lot. It doesn't cost anything, to not keep someone in jail, where it does cost stuff to keep people in jail. So that's just one thing. So there's lots of great little ways there. That, that makes me passionate about, I'm actually doing things that you know that I think the matter on generally enjoying what I get to do, I think I got a good gig and I got to travel around, I get to deal with a lot of great people. I've not met an elected official that says I hate the arts. I've met people who said I don't believe in public funding for the arts or whatever. But I always will get you to say yes to me in some way. And that's my goal, as a government affairs professional, is to get the elected official to say yes to me, I just have to ask the right question. So they say yes to me. So that's why I love what I do.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 15:22

So I'm wondering, then if you could share a little bit about a moment of, of triumph or a really positive moment in your career, and then perhaps also a moment that was challenging and how you sort of overcame it.

**Jay Dick** 18:48

So for the success, I'm going to talk with cumulative success. So one of the things that I do is I want to make sure there is a state MC apparatus in each of the 50 states to advocate for the arts at their state capitol, I'm one person, I said in DC, I'm not everywhere replaced, so having capacity around the country. And so I've helped create seven different statewide arts advocacy organizations in my career, that are now up and advocating in their states to promote the arts. And so it's this creation of a long lasting apparatus to promote the arts as opposed to one piece of legislation which is which is nice, you know, that I think that is my success at Americans for the Arts for that the lesson learned is I know these are, these are this is a question I know very well because I, you know, I know what my successor went by. Where I got my butt handed to me is one time when I was trying to help create one of these organizations. I didn't do enough background work to make sure that there was support in the state for this type of work and so they this guy parachutes in from DC. I'm here to help you and the locals were like we don't need your help, we don't want you, why are you even here. And so it's like, okay, I didn't do my background, I didn't do my thing. Okay, you have to have buy in from the people that you're trying to help. So again, is I don't know, best, I know, good examples of what has worked in other states or other organizations or with legislation. But at the end of the day, you the local advocate there, or you the local, you know, activist there, you're the one that's in control, and you're driving the bus, I'm just helping you, maybe with the gas pedal or something like that, but you're steering. And so that was the my biggest lesson was, make sure if I'm trying to do something that I get the buy in that you need, and that goes into the play with anything, especially in political science world, is, you know, government, you need 50 plus one, unless you're dealing with the filibuster, and then 60 plus one, it's all about compromise. It's about making sure that you have enough votes to get whatever you want done. And so I'll give you a very side example, but it works. So I'm on my homeowners association, I'm the past president, I would never call a vote unless I knew for sure I was going to win that vote. I had my votes already lined up, just because I, you know, don't do anything that you don't know what the end result is going to be. Sometimes that's hard to do. But that's the key thing is, you don't see Nancy Pelosi calling votes that she's going to lose. Because that's not the way you do things. And so, you know, always make sure you do your background, understand what people care about, address those cares and concerns and then proceed forward.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 21:27

So in that vein, I am wondering, if you wouldn't mind, let's say I'm an emerging political science major interested in government affairs, interested in pursuing a career in politics. I'm at Grinnell, I've taken a couple political science courses, how to go about making my plans, my dream a reality.

**Jay Dick** 21:50

So the biggest asset you have, you know, as an emerging Grinnell graduate, is the alumni that went before you. So in D.C., we have a, you know, a D.C., Grinnellians in D.C. program out here. Let me be more specific about that. There's a Grinnellians in D.C. academic program. And then there's a group of Grinnellians that as organized by the college that we get together have a picnic and stuff like that. There are a lot of us out here, there's over I think over 1000 out here, make use of us, I've been there done that probably, if I haven't someone has. So I always the biggest advice I give to folks that are coming out of the college there or even in the you know, even the first year is network, network, network. And you guys got an easier you know, you guys got LinkedIn, you know, you got Facebook or you know, things like that. LinkedIn is probably the best thing for you to use, because it helps link you to other people. So if you in the future, say, oh, I want to go work at the, you know, the Sierra Club, you can go and look at Sierra Club, oh, here's the three Grinnellians that work there. I need to go reach out to them. And if you've done your networking correctly, that will smooth the road and I can, I can only speak for myself but you know, we're more than happy to try to help, you know if I have a Grinnell you can call me up you just blank, you know, blindly, I will always say I'll gladly have coffee with you, I'll gladly to get on the phone with you, I'll gladly give you advice because I was you once too, and we were you wants to. And so it's kind of you know, the, the paying for things. So that's the first thing is network and do that now, you know and continue to that. That is my job right now is I network, you know, I build my, my portfolio of people who I know, who I can call upon. So do I know all 50 governors by first name? No. Can I get to all governors relatively quickly? Yes. Because I know someone who knows someone who can get there, you know, or I could serve as that for someone else who needs to get to know, a governor that maybe I know, for example. And so always network. The other thing that I always advise is guard your reputation. At all costs. DC is and as far as government affairs goes, it's very small world. We talk we know each other we have our own little groups that we belong to. And you never know, I might have observed you, worked with you and you were you lied or you misrepresented the truth or you threw me under the bridge or whatever. And then you never know five years later, you might be applying for a job and person, you know, sees Oh, he went to Grinnell, Jay went to Grinnell or last Jay knows that and I go oh my gosh, I know that person, stay away from them, you know, type of thing. And guess what? That's all it takes you will never ever be because you have so many great resumes coming in. One little note from a friend saying oh my gosh, stay away from that person. You're done. You know, there's no recovering from that. So guard your reputation. And so that's an important thing. And so but the base of your brand, is people see you and they trust you and they respect you. They don't always have to agree with you, but they have to trust you that you're not going to lie to them, or you're not going to throw them under the bus.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 25:03

So we're nearing the end here. I'd like to ask two more questions, one of which you've set up perfectly. But if you could tell your Grinnell self anything, so back however many years to Jay, living in James, and then wherever else you lived, what, what would you tell him?

**Jay Dick** 25:20

Do an off campus semester, preferably overseas for variety of reasons that I don't even remember, I did not do that. I look back and gosh, you know, Grinnell in London for a semester, that would have been such an experience. And so that's something I regret the most is I didn't do an off campus study. And I think part of that was I didn't want to miss what was going on on campus. And so that was a tough one was, you know, I'm gonna get, I only have eight semesters here, and, you know, traditional four years. And I'm gonna take one of those and go someplace else, I should have, and I think would have made me a little bit better of a person too. So that's my biggest kind of regret.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 26:08

Yeah, I, I'm definitely in that boat, where times quickly the eight semesters fly by, and I'm almost I mean, I'm pretty much more than halfway through with my second semester, which then puts me at my second year, which only means there are two more. It's crazy, just sort of fathom, fathom that. So I absolutely, absolutely understand. And finally, you have mentioned, you've dropped beautiful little nuggets throughout this conversation. But I'd like to formally ask it as a question. Why should you sustain a connection with Grinnell beyond graduation? What's the value of maintaining, maintaining a relationship with this, with this community? Years and years after you've, you've left the jewel of the prairie?

**Jay Dick** 26:49

So yeah, so the reason I, I sustained my relationship with Grinnell and why you you know, Nicholas, or everyone that's listening to him, who will eventually be an alum of the college, is there's several different things one, the Grinnell spirit of giving back, of helping other people. And this comes in small to large packages that are out there. And so it doesn't matter, any, any Grinnell person, if I see Grinnell on any of their profiles, they reach out to me, I will, I will accept the phone call or I'll respond to the email. And if you know someone says I'd love to talk with you have coffee or whatever, I will always say yes, I don't think I've ever said no, I'm gonna hit next year will be my 30th reunion. I don't think I've ever said no, and there are years of someone who's reached out to me, Tommy might be something I'm busy, but let's get to you in a week or two or something like that. But I will always say yes, and I think a lot of people like me will always say yes, so it's the idea of giving back and helping others, whether it be you know, just a one off, you know, on your one into some, some information about, you know, getting involved with an internship or something like that, or an ongoing mentoring type thing about how you should navigate the world of political science or stuff like that. So that's, that's the first thing. And then the other thing is, from a very pragmatic or personal level is I enjoy it, I enjoy coming back to the campus, I enjoy walking around, you know, north or south, you know, campus or going into into the new you know, bear or the, you know, stuff like that a lot of my friends, you know, I have several friends that teach at the work at the camp at Grinnell that I went to school with there. And so it just brings me pleasure, you know, to do that, and so it helps sustain me of, you know, maybe I've had enough, it's been a tough, it's been a tough two years, you know, for us, you know, and just okay, Grinnell keeps going on it, you know, and to be part of that or go back to the campus. And if you can revitalize, a little bit there too. And so there's those little personal, you know, reason for, for working, continue to work with the campus is, you know, just brings me happiness, and so, but I think that's okay, I think it's a good trade off a little bit of happiness and helping, you know, students, you know, become great professionals, who will go out and do great things, make a difference. That's what you know, Grinnell strives to achieve. We're, you know, at the end of our time spinning around the sun, that we look back and say, Yeah, I'm proud of what I've done.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 29:32

Well, I think that's an absolutely fabulous, fabulous way to end. Thank you so much for chatting with me today. It was wonderful to hear, hear your story and all of your great career career advice, and helpful tips and tricks for navigating a really rich and vibrant future. So I really, really appreciate it.

**Jay Dick** 29:53

You're a way to find Nicholas. Thanks for having me.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 30:01

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