Episode 9 - So You Want To Change The World (From the Top-Do...

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**SPEAKERS**

Nathan Clubb, Meredith Benjamin, Nicholas Lampietti

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:09

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

I'm Meredith Benjamin.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:18

Meredith, What did you do this morning?

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:21

I overslept, I forgot to eat breakfast, and I watched Dance Moms instead of finishing my history essay.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:28

Well, do you want to know what I did this morning?

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:32

Is it going to make me feel guilty?

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:34

I launched a political campaign.

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:36

Did you actually?

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:37

No. But our guest today did.

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:40

When Nathan Clubb, class of 2011 was student at Grinnell, he decided to run for the Iowa State House of Representatives to advocate for issues he felt were going unaddressed by elected officials.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:51

This launched a political career that has led him all over the country. And in each place he's gone, He's tried to impact his community in longstanding and meaningful ways.

**Meredith Benjamin** 01:00

Most recently, he ran for city council of Atlanta, and today he's here to speak with us about everything he learned in the process.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 01:07

If you're interested in electoral politics, or maybe even hoping to run for office someday yourself, stay with us.

**Meredith Benjamin** 01:19

Welcome Nathan, we're so excited to talk to you.

**Nathan Clubb** 01:22

Lovely rainy day here in Atlanta like it sounds like it is in Grinnell.

**Meredith Benjamin** 01:26

It is it is a rainy day here in Iowa. But we are really excited that on this rainy day we get to talk to you. So can you just start off by telling us a little bit about yourself and what you do?

**Nathan Clubb** 01:39

Yeah so I currently live in Atlanta, with my wife Victoria and we had our first kid Abigail last year. I've been here for just over seven years now working for the Georgia Department of audits. My title is a Senior Analyst I lead a team of programming evaluators and performance auditors. Then by night, I'm a little bit of a community activist. I previously lead a civic association representing seven neighborhoods in southeast Atlanta. I still serve on a city neighborhood planning unit and the board have a group called beltline rail now, which is currently advocating for an expansion of our light rail transit system.

**Meredith Benjamin** 02:14

I love the Beltline. I have family in Atlanta, and that is the coolest space. I've almost been taken out by quite a few bicycles and scooters. But it is a really exciting thing.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 02:25

So let's talk about your time at Grinnell. And I understand you decided to run for office while you were a student at Grinnell. So what was that experience like?

**Nathan Clubb** 02:34

It was tough. It was exciting. The house district that I grew up in, which included part of Poweshiek county at the time, there was no Democrats that were going to run in 2010. And I was very unhappy with the leadership that we had in our state at the time. This seemed like a good opportunity to get out there to get the real world experience. Not just volunteering on campaigns, but actually being involved in actually running the campaign and just kind of push for all the things that I felt like were being ignored, particularly when it came to rural economic development, lack of education, investment, things like that.

**Meredith Benjamin** 03:06

I mean, that is that is so impressive. Just to imagine as a college student as like where we are right now to getting so involved. It feels really unimaginable. But so kudos to you. And so you started your political career at Grinnell, clearly. But what happened after you left? What did that path look like? And if I'm not mistaken, it brought you to running for political office again later in life.

**Nathan Clubb** 03:30

Yeah, it was kind of funny after my first run I said, I was gonna wait at least a decade before I did it again and did it 11 years later. So after Grinnell, I was able to actually take advantage of connections that I made through the Grinnell in DC program. I spent a semester.. I was kind of a little bit lost after losing the election didn't really know what I wanted to do. There's a ton of Grinnellians, who live in DC so there's a good network out there. And so I went there, I spent four years working for the Department of defense, I was able to use a lot of what I learned Grinnell because a lot of it was focused on critical thinking, research writing, I went to graduate school at night in American university to get a graduate degree in public administration, largely because I saw it as a very flexible degree. I met my now wife in DC and I knew that she wanted to leave DC. She was working in campaign finance and was kind of burnout of campaign finance. So I thought this would be a great way to give myself the skills I needed in order to be able to go wherever she wanted to go to be able to support her and her career. And that's what ultimately led to us moving to Atlanta about seven half years ago. One thing I thought was really unique about Atlanta is they have a system called the neighborhood planning unit system where the city is broken apart into basically citizen led organizations that work with everything from transportation to land use and zoning. It's really anything that's under the overview of city council. That's a really great way to get involved to be impactful though, all the different nonprofits associated with that, all the people I met through that system, yeah, that's really kept me busy between that and my day job.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 05:04

Wow. So you have done it sounds like a lot of different things. You've gone where the wind has blown you

**Meredith Benjamin** 05:10

and it's funny, you're actually one of several Grinnell alums. We've talked to you with a degree in public administration. And you're all doing such completely different things, you're running for office, and somebody else is writing books, and somebody else is, you know, working on public health, like it's really interesting to hear that.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 05:27

So we'd love to talk now a little bit about the issues that are important to you, and what ideas have sort of grounded your campaign,

**Nathan Clubb** 05:35

a lot of it goes around equity. Atlanta is a wonderful city. I mean, it's largely the birthplace of the civil rights movement, a lot of political things have happened and have occurred in Atlanta. But we also suffer from a lot of systemic inequities. There used to be the old saying that in Atlanta, you didn't go south of I-20, which was our East West interstate, because it was just a poor disinvested communities. This district that I ran for, is it 95% of its south of I-20, I felt like there wasn't really a sense of urgency in addressing policy challenges that play a big role in that in terms of affordable housing, it seemed like whenever a neighborhood would finally get invested in there'll be large scale displacement because there was not really much proactive thoughts on how we can preserve existing affordable houses and how we're going to build new affordable housing, the Beltline that we're talking about earlier, and it's been a wonderful project, it's a trail system that goes all the way around the city 22 miles, and it's supposed to have transit along it someday in the future, that's the width it's also brought a lot of wealth and wealth can lead to displacement. So trying to figure out how to find that balance of of really ensuring that we had neighborhoods that were welcoming new folks with the financial resources to really help the community without displacing a lot of longtime residents. And then kind of tied into equity, cost of living, even a lot of our climate challenges is our transportation system. And Atlanta is a fairly sprawling city that really tries to be thoughtful and increase the amount of public transit we have changing our roads to make them safer. So we have actual bike infrastructure, sidewalks, particularly a lot of communities that have been disinvested, in who never had the opportunity to even have those basic things like sidewalks and streetlights, people dealing with things like a lack of parks and illegal dumping going on. So there's all those things are kind of the things that kind of drove me.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 07:24

So you're passionate about all of these things, you're noticing things you want to change them. So let's talk about what the process and steps look like for launching and running a campaign, what's sort of required, and then maybe What would surprise people?

**Nathan Clubb** 07:39

the most important thing is, you can't do it on your own, you have to have a good team behind you. You have to have friends, dedicated volunteers. First thing I did when I thought I wanted to run for this seat is I went to have coffee with our former State Representative just to kind of figure out okay, how can we actually build a game plan to be successful running for office, the things you have to do really quickly early on, is figuring out who the influencers are. There are certain people who are just been deeply involved in politics forever. People who have been community leaders, those who've run for office in the past, like identifying those people and getting on their calendars and having coffee with them is one of the most impactful things you can do early in election, because so many people vote not necessarily on what they hear from you. But obviously what people they trust, tell them, I thought that I could just go out, knock doors, talk to voters, and that would be enough. There's already coalition is being built where certain people are going to run for office reached out to 20 influencers before they even announce and they're rolling out with a deep list of endorsements and the credibility that goes along with that, particularly when you're looking at what is probably the second most important thing, which unfortunately is money. It costs quite a bit of money to run for office and it keeps increasing every year looking at city council races in Atlanta in 2013. People are winning with $40,000 in 2017, their winning with $70,000. In the district next in line, there were two candidates who spent more than a quarter million dollars

**Nicholas Lampietti** 09:05

That's crazy

**Nathan Clubb** 09:07

for a city council race. This understanding that you're gonna have to dig deep and figure out where you're going to get the money to run a successful campaign that requires you to literally sit down and write down every person you know. A fundraising consultant was the first person I hired had me set up the contact list out of my cell phone just put into a spreadsheet, we sorted it and we wrote out how much money we thought everybody can contribute. Then we went through and called every one of them. And it's hard to ask people for money, but it's shows a certain level of credibility if a large number of people are willing to give you small dollar donations and also you have to pay for things and they add up and they're more expensive than then I initially projected.

**Meredith Benjamin** 09:09

Wow That is really interesting to think about. I guess like I don't know about you guys, I certainly get the text from you know, this is Bernie Sanders. I'm once again asking you for you know, but especially I think in a small community like that that must be really challenging. And so I guess that brings me to I guess a broader discourse question that I have. I think that people are in an interesting place nowadays where there's a lot of mixed opinions on the effectiveness of politics and the relationship between politics and social justice. And so I want to hear your thoughts on that. And why do you choose to pursue your community goals in this way? And what is the utility of working within the electoral system? And then on the flip side, like what are the limits of electoral politics, and where might other avenues be more effective at achieving someone's desired goals for the community?

**Nathan Clubb** 10:41

I figure the biggest benefits are working with electoral system is scale and longevity. Talk about the theme of social justice that ties in a lot of what we've had conversations in Atlanta over the last year or two when there was Shaw Brooks who was killed by Atlanta police officers and the protest that came after that it's really up to the mayor to help drive the conversations with what the policies procedures are going to be like for the police department. It's up to the city council to decide how our budget is going to be allocated, whether it's money going into policing what that policing looks like, whether it's investments into community based organizations, to be able to really fund those and scale those across the city. I think that's where working in electoral system is most beneficial. On the flip side, when you're talking about like some people looking through alternatives beyond electoral politics, we have nonprofits that are working on a lot of those issues, a community based organization over Mechanicsville in Atlanta, who are their elders doing group violence intervention training initiatives, and they're having a lot of really good impact within that community and bringing people together having one on one conversations about that and looking at addressing the root causes of violent crime, then in an another neighborhood near me is South Atlanta, we have these affordable housing challenges, rather than waiting for the city to step up and do something, they basically roll up their sleeves, and they're working on it themselves, they have put together a land trust to go out and purchase a lot of houses, and they sell the house itself at an affordable rate and they retain the land so that way, they can ensure it's permanently affordable, and that permanently affordable housing within their community. They also redeveloped an old commercial property into a community grocery store, they were able to be more nimble and be impactful. But at the same time, it didn't address the larger concerns about the city, they can only do it for their one community in order to scale across the cities can really require a lot of investment from the city itself.

**Meredith Benjamin** 12:31

I'm really glad to have heard that

**Nicholas Lampietti** 12:32

yeah

**Meredith Benjamin** 12:32

perspective, because I think it is I think it is an ongoing inquiry that people have as people get more involved with politics. And if they don't see things changing in the immediate, it can be disincentivizing to remain involved.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 12:46

Well, and I was gonna say electoral politics are often associated with legacy. And so it's really great to hear you as someone who is breaking into this world. So if possible, we'd love to talk about losing an election. We've all had moments in our lives where something doesn't pan out the way we want it. But I don't think they necessarily come as close or as sort of front facing as what it means to lose an election that you've been working really hard on.

**Meredith Benjamin** 13:16

I think we're also curious, like, What power does the process of running a campaign have in terms of community change, even if it doesn't win? And then after, you know, how do you remain involved, regardless of the outcome, because I do think that there's something to be said for just the process of running a campaign can shift the conversation in meaningful ways.

**Nathan Clubb** 13:36

It's rough, it hurts. There's definitely a personal level of rejection when you run for an office and you lose, it was very different between my two experiences because I when I ran at Grinnell, I wasn't experienced, I was running in a race so I expected to lose like quite a bit. I was I wasn't necessarily running as much to win in that race as I was to bring forth issues that I thought we should have conversations about this more recent one, it was probably hurt more because it was one I had a good chance at winning. I finished second by 1%. So it was really two elections. We went from the general election to then do the immediate 30 Day runoff, a lot of how I kind of move tasks fell off. And this marriage with your point about like what you can achieve even through losing is the connections and the relationships I've built through this process, even though I wasn't successful. I mean, I personally know everybody that is on our city council now. I know a lot of the folks in our general assembly now and so we're now trying to not just me but other people have been involved leverage those relationships, those connections and see how we can move forward on a lot of issues that we have. For example, when it comes to affordable housing, a lot of it is looking at okay, what's this next budget gonna look like? What policies is the mayor gonna rollout and what can we do to influence impacts them and if I see something going on where I think we can better address it. Now I know who to reach out to who they call for that conversation with. And I think that's kind of one of the most important things is when you run for office, even if you lose, you have a certain amount of power that comes just from the coalition that you built together, you almost owe it to those folks who gave you money, who who knocked doors for you the reasons that you ran in the first place to continue to leverage relationships, you build, the power, you acquired the candy, the push that as as far as you possibly can. And I was just on a call last night, we put together a little group called the southeast Atlanta political V, and we meet monthly and we bring in different political leaders in order to have those conversations about South East random, I think we're able to leverage the fact that we're known entities through the electoral experience in order to actually get those people to show up and answer the hard questions that we put before them. I mean, we have a couple of big developments in our community, we're trying to figure out how to work with the city and developers to increase the amount of affordable housing that's on site to increase how connects to our existing public transit network, figure out how to bring improvements to the quality of our watershed is all those nuances and all the things that we impacted by everything that happens within the city and then joining the board of beltline rail now, which I did after losing the election, because that gave me a platform in order to continue to push for public transit improvements that our city needs.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 16:18

I am just so awestruck by the fact do you mentally were able to say okay, I'm running for office, this is what I'm going to do. And I'm just really interested in how sort of you were processing the world around you during that time?

**Nathan Clubb** 16:34

Well, probably not surprisingly, my major at Grinnell was political science.

**Meredith Benjamin** 16:38

Me too

**Nathan Clubb** 16:39

Professor Wayne Moyer used to always step back from just looking at international relations and politics that he spent a lot of his time focusing on to make us all talk about Iowa, politics at the beginning of every class period, the Grinnell degree prepares you I feel like to be successful in almost anything you want to pursue afterwards because you need those critical thinking skills. You need to be able to have wonderful writing skills. I felt so much better prepared for my grad graduate school experience coming from Grinnell than I think a lot of other people did come from where they came from. One of the wonderful things about going to DC after Grinnell was just a huge built in network of alums who were there, there was always some sort of activity that was going on the older alums would organize things like book talks, it was just like this great space to be in to this feel like there is an actual real community there that moved on beyond Grinnell is a wonderful experience. One thing that I did when I was at Grinnell was I was on the golf team. And we're actually putting together a Grinnell College golf team weekend here in Atlanta. So that's another way in which we're still trying to maintain and build those connections that we have.

**Meredith Benjamin** 17:43

Oh, that's so fun.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 17:44

I love to hear that.

**Meredith Benjamin** 17:45

I do love to hear that. And it's really funny that you mentioned Professor Wayne Moyer because I I'm taking his politics of International Relations course right now. And I do. There's a lot going on in the international sphere right now. So we do talk a little bit more about Russia these days, more than Iowa, I would say. But I mean, it's just really fun for us to always hear about alums, and how despite whatever gap in time there's been since the alum was on campus, there always seems to be this underlying relatability. To their stories and to their experiences.

**Nathan Clubb** 18:18

I like to say I am a little bitter at COVID for taking away our 10 year class reunion looking forward to that

**Meredith Benjamin** 18:25

COVID did a number on quite a few, quite a few plans that people had.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 18:30

Yeah. So to wrap up our last last couple of questions, what would you say to a student considering running for some kind of public office?

**Nathan Clubb** 18:38

I think a lot of what you're trying to achieve, make sure that you're running for office to achieve those things, that is the best way in which you can achieve them kind of going back to our earlier conversation about using the electoral process versus other means. Recognize it's going to be a ton of work, that's gonna be uncomfortable calling and asking people for money, it's gonna require you to not see friends and family for weeks, for months, because you're gonna be spending every bit of your moment door knocking, fundraising, going to the community meet and greets, going to candidate forums, it's going to be 8 to 12 months of your life that just disappear. So you have to be really truly committed before you go into it. But also, it's an amazing experience. I met so many wonderful people through the process. I feel like I have a lot more friends, a lot more people that I would reach out to on a regular basis. I got to see and meet people from walks of life that I haven't lived. It's a ton of work, but it's also incredibly rewarding. And I think if we had more Grinnellians in elected office, our country would be a better place. I just encourage everyone to take advantage of every opportunity that Grinnell has to offer. There's one thing I look back and reflect on it's just I don't think I truly recognized what an incredible experience Grinnell was. I think it's important to live freely in your time at Grinnell, not to be prescriptive, but also this to be intentional about your time there because it's four magical years.

**Meredith Benjamin** 18:42

That is great advice.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 20:04

It's really a beautiful way to end.

**Meredith Benjamin** 20:06

And so I guess the last thing that we're wondering is, what is the future hold for you, Nathan?

**Nathan Clubb** 20:13

I have a few kinds of projects going on. I mean, I put together a coalition that's worked on on a corridor in Atlanta, not too far from me, that's a very dangerous corridor, people get hit in deadly car accidents. There's some interesting development projects going along there. And we've actually been meeting with our state's Department of transportation, because it's state corridor, monthly for about the last few years now. And we're about to finally see some progress as we start getting sidewalk street done. As we start work with some developers to do some really interesting projects that will bring affordable housing to the corridor. Just little things like that, it's going to make it a much more livable, wonderful space, it flows on Down to some lower income, predominantly black communities in the southern part of Atlanta, who has been facing though, like a lot of environmental racism that goes along with having a four lane highway that's bringing in industry and freight traffic, which is bad for the community, continuing to make progress on that, continuing to make progress on transit for the Beltline rail, and just engaging with a lot of very exciting political races that we have coming up here and in Georgia in 2022 Senator Rachael Warnock lives just down the street from me. And so getting him reelected is gonna be really important. And it's looking like Stacey Abrams is going to have a campaign headquartered either in my neighborhood or in neighborhoods next to me, so actively engaging in both of those spaces, dealing with affordable housing challenges, because that's not going to go away anytime soon. And it's kind of the most basic thing that folks need to strive and and survive. Housing Stability is so critical and so important. So that so I'm going to be staying busy between that and a 15 month old and my job working for the state.

**Meredith Benjamin** 21:51

Sounds like you're pretty busy. You got a lot on your plate. So

**Nicholas Lampietti** 21:54

Your work is cut out for you.

**Meredith Benjamin** 21:55

with that, you know, we're even more appreciative that you took this time to speak with us. You just had such wonderful things to say

**Nicholas Lampietti** 22:03

I definitely learned a lot

**Meredith Benjamin** 22:04

Yeah. And so you know, best of luck with all of this work. It's really exciting. And

**Nicholas Lampietti** 22:09

we can't wait to see what happens in the future. I know.

**Meredith Benjamin** 22:12

Yeah,

**Nicholas Lampietti** 22:12

we've all we've all got our eyes on you.

**Meredith Benjamin** 22:14

Yeah.

**Nathan Clubb** 22:14

Thank you, Nicholas. Thank you, Meredith. I think this is a really cool series you're all doing. I think of people learn a lot from the conversations you have with a lot of alums.

**Meredith Benjamin** 22:22

That's the hope. Well, thank you so much. This podcast is brought to you by the Center for careers, life and service at Grinnell College. This episode was produced by Meredith Benjamin, our executive producer is Katie Kriegel. Find us online at goingforthgrinnell.com. Follow us on Instagram at going forth podcast and on Twitter at going forth pod. Listen to more episodes wherever you get your podcasts. Go forth Grinnellian. See you next time on Going Forth.