

NASFAA's "Off The Cuff" – Episode 83 Transcript

Justin Draeger: Hey everyone, welcome to another edition of "Off The Cuff." I'm Justin Draeger.

Allie Bidwell: I'm Allie Bidwell, one of our Today's News reporters.

Stephen Payne: I'm Stephen Payne with NASFAA's policy team.

Megan Coval: I'm Megan Coval with NASFAA's policy team.

Justin Draeger: Allie and Megan, you guys held down the fort last week.

Allie Bidwell: We did.

Megan Coval: Yep.

Justin Draeger: How did it go?

Allie Bidwell: Best episode yet.

Megan Coval: Yup.

Justin Draeger: Do you have any confirmation of that or is that just your gut?

Allie Bidwell: We got no complaints.

Megan Coval: Too many to count. Oh, Allie, we've got to be on the same page here.

Justin Draeger: That's our new standard.

Megan Coval: I said too many to count, inboxes, overwhelmed.

Justin Draeger: Blowing up?

Allie Bidwell: Yeah.

Megan Coval: Yep.

Justin Draeger: All right. I was at a meeting two days ago and the Ad Council was there. You guys all know the Ad Council? They do quality work, not-for-profit-

Megan Coval: Yep.

Justin Draeger: They do public engagement, public betterment, societal betterment messages. They were talking about how they've changed their entire strategy. Do you guys

remember, this might've been before some of your time, but when I was a kid it was, "This is your brain, this is your brain on drugs." And they did the eggs fry-

Allie Bidwell: Eggs, yeah.

Megan Coval: Eggs, yeah.

Justin Draeger: Do you remember this?

Megan Coval: Yeah.

Justin Draeger: Okay, so this is some of the stuff they've done. They talked about how they've changed their entire, how they do things. It's not just television, which is what I think of when I think of the Ad Council. They do almost, not all, but a lot of social media stuff now. It's through social talent and influencer engagement. Okay? So they gave me a list of social media influencers and I want to see if you guys know any of these people. I knew zero.

Allie Bidwell: Okay.

Justin Draeger: Zero out of eight. Okay. Liza Koshy?

Allie Bidwell: Don't know her.

Megan Coval: No.

Justin Draeger: No? Markiplier Fischbach?

Allie Bidwell: No.

Megan Coval: No.

Stephen Payne: No.

Justin Draeger: Hannah Hart?

Allie Bidwell: No.

Megan Coval: No, but that's a nice name for... oh.

Justin Draeger: Yes.

Stephen Payne: Food related, is that right?

Justin Draeger: I don't know. She's got a social media reach of 5.4 million.

Stephen Payne: I think she was a guest judge on a food network talent show that I now consume very regularly.

Megan Coval: Oh Right. Christina likes the food network, right? Okay.

Justin Draeger: This has to do with your relationship.

Stephen Payne: Yes, but I do know who it is.

Justin Draeger: Meredith Foster?

Allie Bidwell: No.

Megan Coval: No.

Justin Draeger: Orion Carloto?

Allie Bidwell: No.

Megan Coval: No.

Justin Draeger: Tyler Oakley?

Allie Bidwell: I've heard that name, I think.

Justin Draeger: This is what Tyler Oakley looks like.

Allie Bidwell: I've heard the name.

Justin Draeger: Okay.

Megan Coval: I don't know any of these people.

Justin Draeger: We are not the demographic, clearly, because I looked at this list and I was like, "I don't know any of these people." Who are the social media people that you follow?

Allie Bidwell: My friends.

Justin Draeger: Do you follow social media people, like influencers?

Megan Coval: I follow celebrities or politicians, do you consider them influencers?

Allie Bidwell: Yeah, like fashion bloggers.

Justin Draeger: No. No politicians.

Megan Coval: Authors that I like.

Stephen Payne: Right. This whole new realm of people who just kind of do social media, right? That's what you're saying.

Justin Draeger: Right. They just YouTube.

Megan Coval: Oh, then I don't-

Allie Bidwell: Or it's just all the people who used to be on the Bachelor and the Bachelorette, now they just sell stuff on Instagram.

Megan Coval: Yes. I heard that from a friend.

Stephen Payne: Because you're at their influence.

Justin Draeger: I'm not talking about Michelle Obama or Joe Biden or Mitch McConnell.

Allie Bidwell: But who it's their job to make you want to get stuff from-

Justin Draeger: Their entire job is they broadcast on YouTube. Yes. You don't follow any of those people?

Stephen Payne: No.

Megan Coval: But what are they talking about? They want you to buy things?

Justin Draeger: My kids follow video game people.

Megan Coval: Okay.

Justin Draeger: I don't get it, but that's what they do.

Megan Coval: Okay.

Justin Draeger: So anyway, I just felt-

Megan Coval: We're not being influenced.

Justin Draeger: I felt very out of touch. Now I don't feel quite as out of touch, because none of you know these people either.

Allie Bidwell: Nope.

Justin Draeger: All right. Well, collectively, they have a social media reach of 100 million. How many Twitter followers do we have?

Allie Bidwell: Not 100 million.

Justin Draeger: So we're closing in or we're a ways away?

Allie Bidwell: We're a ways away.

Stephen Payne: We're probably heading in the right direction, right?

Megan Coval: That's right.

Justin Draeger: We're not losing Twitter followers?

Allie Bidwell: Yeah, we're not losing Twitter followers.

Justin Draeger: Okay. Well that's, you know what-

Stephen Payne: I always hear with a positive spin.

Justin Draeger: I like your optimism.

Megan Coval: Glass half full over here.

Allie Bidwell: Yeah, just like we got no complaints. We're not losing Twitter followers.

Megan Coval: Right.

Justin Draeger: This next week, can we reach out to Markiplier Fischbach and just see if he can talk about FASFA or something?

Allie Bidwell: You want me to send him a DM?

Justin Draeger: Would you? Could you? Let me know how it goes.

Justin Draeger: Megan, you were traveling this last week. NCAN conference in, not quite your hometown, but really close.

Megan Coval: Yes, NCAN conference, National College Access Network, and they were in Pittsburgh this year.

Stephen Payne: Nice.

Justin Draeger: Is this why you jumped on this opportunity. Not just because you love NCAN but-

Megan Coval: I did jump on this opportunity. I do love NCAN. They are, as I said in my presentation, they are very good partners of ours. I feel at least once or twice a

week there's something we're talking to NCAN about. They were in a really nice location too. Downtown or downtown as western people say.

Justin Draeger: What were you presenting on?

Megan Coval: I was presenting on prior-prior year and early FASFA. Sort of, status update, how's it going, but then also talking about how those two things laid the groundwork for further simplification. I had a financial aid administrator with me in the presentation.

Justin Draeger: Who was it?

Megan Coval: George Santucci. He's the director of financial aid at Point Park University. Which is a private, not-for-profit in Pittsburgh. Just around the corner. He actually walked over to present with me. It was really great. We shared some of the data we have on feedback from prior-prior year and early FASFA, but he was able to provide the campus perspective as well. It's gone really well for them. Then I was going to end with talking about our FASFA simplification proposal, and I ended up only having five minutes to do it, because the crowd went wild for George Santucci.

Justin Draeger: Really?

Megan Coval: These are access providers across the country-

Justin Draeger: Why? What was-

Megan Coval: I think-

Justin Draeger: Was it the presentation or the content or what was happening?

Megan Coval: He didn't even really have a set presentation. It became clear to me, these folks are all working with the students, sort of on the other side of the desk, and they just had so many questions for a sitting financial aid administrator. Well, "I've run into this problem," or "What does this mean," or "How often to schools process ICERs?" I just kind of let them go, because it was clear they really wanted that. I'm thinking-

Stephen Payne: A lot of value in that?

Megan Coval: Next year we should just have a panel or something like that. I did get to, I stood up at 3:25 and said, "If I could just have five minutes to talk through"-

Stephen Payne: My entire [inaudible 00:06:29]

Justin Draeger: She justify-

Megan Coval: It was nice. I moderated a little, wrote a few things down. It was really an active presentation. It was awesome.

Justin Draeger: We love our NCAN colleagues. And very excited membership and well attended-

Megan Coval: Yeah, very passionate.

Justin Draeger: Good.

Megan Coval: They were great.

Justin Draeger: We're glad to have you back. There's a lot of things happening. It feels very busy, NASFAA wise, and on the hill. In one of the most positive things we've been talking about for a lot of weeks now, budget. Looks like we're gonna have one? Stephen?

Stephen Payne: Yeah, it looks like we're on track to do something that we haven't seen in the education funding world since 1996. Which is pretty significant. That's on time funding for the education programs. That's because last night The House passed an agreement, that the Senate passed last week, that Megan and Allie broke down, that would provide funding for fiscal year 2019, that's award year, 2019-20.

Stephen Payne: The hope is that the President will sign it into law before October 1. Then we'll have on time funding, which is really important. We've talked about this for a number of weeks. Especially in light of early FASFA, prior-prior year, having final numbers really early in the process, hopefully will be really beneficial for schools but also for students and families so they can plan.

Justin Draeger: The President sort of flirted with the idea of not signing. This is for sure going to happen now?

Stephen Payne: Well, yesterday he signaled that he would be. He didn't want to shut the government down. What's interesting, and not to dive too deep into this, but not every bucket, and we talk about this every once in a while, there's 12 different buckets of funding. Ours is with labor and health funding. Not every bucket will be wrapped up. There's a continuing resolution, which we're so used to dealing with, for all of the other programs. So if you don't pass this entire package then you'll shut the government down.

Stephen Payne: There's a really, really big motivator that Congress put in here for the President to sign it. Obviously, the reason why is boarder wall funding. Which is his big priority he really wants to pass through, but there wasn't the support in Congress, particularly in the Senate, to do that at this point. That would be his rational to veto the bill. But at this point it doesn't look like he'll do that. Also there's a lot going on in D.C. I don't know if you'd want to do a government shut down on top of everything. Maybe you would for -

Justin Draeger: It's hard to imagine-

Allie Bidwell: For one reason or another.

Justin Draeger: It being more chaotic, but I suppose it could be. Just this last week, remember, it seems forever ago now, but for a while we thought that Rosenstein was residing or being fired. Then he wasn't being fired.

Allie Bidwell: That was an intentional rumor, right?

Justin Draeger: I have no idea. I mean the conspiracy theories-

Megan Coval: Who knows.

Justin Draeger: Are endless. There is a fog that I cannot penetrate, and we're two blocks from the White House. I know that was one of the theories, like it was a distraction. Right before we started, I was telling Allie what the Supreme Court nomination. Then just two miles up the road here, at the Capital, we have the hearing of all hearings going on. Which, I don't know if you've listened to, but just, I don't know, the whole thing is very, it makes me cringe the whole thing. Then on top of that, I was telling Allie, I was looked at my news feed just today, trying to catch up this morning, and I don't think I have a single article that wasn't about what's going on with the Supreme Court right now. It's just all consuming. It's interesting. This should be a big victory for Congress-

Stephen Payne: Yeah, and Politico wrote an article about that. The Republicans have this huge success in funding, and with Democrats, obviously, there was a lot of Democratic priorities that are in these bills, but in getting this funding on time... and defense, and defense is a big one. We were grouped with defense.

Stephen Payne: The Pentagon complains all the time. They can't properly plan an order, all the parts for all the machinery, contracts, all of this, with these weird delays. Our members have been dealing with this and so have folks all across the federal government, and those folks that interact with those agencies. It's being certainly drowned out. I don't know if this would ever be the top story anyway like, "Congress did its' job."

Justin Draeger: I mean, you feel like it would be after 22 years.

Megan Coval: You should think.

Justin Draeger: It's crazy. Totally overshadowed. The other good news for our members is, presumably, the department, while they're not required to do Pell schedules until February 1-

Allie Bidwell: Yeah, they could get it done before.

Justin Draeger: There's no reason they couldn't do them much, much earlier this year.

Stephen Payne: Yeah, and I would hope to use the precedent that they set two or three years ago when they put out Pell charts pretty early. That was when there was that automatic inflation adjustments. So things are a little bit different now, but they tried to get them out pretty early. That was in the first year of PPY. So hopefully they would do the same thing.

Justin Draeger: Yeah, I think we're hoping for an October release and we'll have to wait from the Department of Education to find out what exactly they're going to do. So-

Megan Coval: One more thing I'll just say is lots of people are saying, this morning, that this is one of those moments where your grandchildren will ask you where you were during this hearing. We were taping "Off The Cuff."

Justin Draeger: Well, yeah. This is a marathon hearing too.

Megan Coval: I know, but I'm going to remember we were taping "Off The Cuff." That's going to be my story.

Justin Draeger: That's your story?

Megan Coval: Mm-hmm

Justin Draeger: Well you were in-

Allie Bidwell: "Off The Cuff," which just turned two on Wednesday.

Megan Coval: Awe, happy birthday OTC.

Justin Draeger: Is that true?

Allie Bidwell: Mm-hmm (affirmative)

Justin Draeger: Oh, I had no idea.

Allie Bidwell: I forgot because we were busy, but I had a reminder on my calendar.

Justin Draeger: It's all growing up.

Megan Coval: Cupcakes. Happy b-day, OTC.

Allie Bidwell: We're toddlers.

Megan Coval: Terrible twos.

Justin Draeger: Alright. Another issue, it was raised in the press, the Washington Post, just in the last couple of weeks, something that I think a lot of people miss, but has to do with senior executives within the federal government. These are the career staff. These are not political people. These are the people that you look at having a lot of talent and a lot of knowledge. They're people that have been around for a long time so they have a lot of institutional knowledge. They remember why certain processes are set up the way they are.

Justin Draeger: We're coming up on two years of the Trump Administration, and they've been doing some analysis to look at the number of senior executives within the federal government that have left under the Trump Administration compared to previous administrations. I don't think this will be any surprise, but with the Trump Administration they found that, at the same time compared to President Obama, the number of SESs leaving the federal government was 26% higher after that first year of the new administration then it was under President Obama. Remember, President Obama was also changing from Republican to Democratic. So it was a large shift in philosophy. Then, obviously, another large shift from the Obama Administration to Trump Administration.

Justin Draeger: Bill Valdez, who is the president of the Senior Executives Association, these the people like NASFAA, these are the people that represent senior executives, he gave a couple different reasons. One of them was just the retirement tsunami everybody talks about with baby boomers who are-

Megan Coval: Yeah, that's a bigger trend.

Justin Draeger: So you have this inverted pyramid where you have a lot of people in the workforce who will be retiring over the next decade. Then he went into, what he said was "the intensity of the transition with the Trump Administration". He said, "Really I think it took a toll." And while I wouldn't even venture to offer conjecture on why the people we work with may or may not be leaving, it's pretty clear the department, particularly on the policy side. We saw, Jeff Baker leave, who was with FSA, but in the policy division. Some folks at OPE that our community knows really well, like Gail McClarnon and Carney McAuliffe. These folks are retiring.

Justin Draeger: And I have no insider information about whether it's just time for retirement versus "the intensity of the transition" as Mr. Valdez says. The fact that they're not being replaced as quickly, I think it should give a lot of people a lot of pause, particularly, when we're so intensely going into negotiated role making. We just finished two big packages and we're supposed to be starting up another one. I don't know.

Megan Coval: And did the article address that they're trying to fill all these? Because I'm guessing from what we heard before too, they've just decided or the administration has decided to not replace some of these people too, right? So it's probably-

Justin Draeger: Well, think about working for the federal government. I think there's a couple of things. One is, think about working for the federal government and the administration coming in constantly bashes you as either being deep state, as if you're not loyal to the country, or using the rhetoric "drain the swamp". The swamp being lobbyist, advocates, but also people working for the federal government. And then it seems like there are changes being made. Remember it was announced, I think it might have been over the summer, the Department of Education changed its telework policy?

Allie Bidwell: But that's just now going into effect. The change.

Justin Draeger: Right, right now. Like October 1 with the new fiscal year.

Allie Bidwell: I do have insider information on that.

Justin Draeger: Go for it. Let's hear it.

Allie Bidwell: I was told by someone I know who works at the department that people made, because it used to be you could work up to three days a week remotely, people made big life decisions based on that. And bought houses out in like Fredericksburg and would just take the train in two times a week. Now they're like yeah-

Megan Coval: We heard that too.

Allie Bidwell: Kind of hung out to dry.

Justin Draeger: In Politico, just this week, about the department specifically, someone said a lot of people have quit or retired because they've changed their lives so much, in such an extent and now they're being recalled. They can only telework possibly one day a week. I know for people that might not be in the D.C. area you might be less sympathetic to this idea that people telework. DC is often cited as like one of the top three worst congested areas, because not only are our highways limited but for a long time public transportation has been a complete cluster too.

Allie Bidwell: I think that there's other reasons for that too. Why more people telework in DC. Just because, you know, almost half the day you're waiting for the rest of the country to wake up. Then when you would normally be going home sometimes you have to wait around because-

Justin Draeger: Breaking news.

Allie Bidwell: People on the west coast are still, you know, they're just getting started.

Justin Draeger: Right. It's-

Allie Bidwell: It's weird hours.

Justin Draeger: It seems like a move that was purposefully designed to perhaps-

Megan Coval: Push people out.

Allie Bidwell: Push people out.

Justin Draeger: Push people out. Yeah. Because it's hard to point to what exactly the problem would be. With today's technologies, folks are all teleconferencing in by video, people are in communication. I don't know.

Megan Coval: People probably end up working more when their telecommuting. I would argue.

Justin Draeger: No question, because your personal life and professional life end up bleeding together.

Megan Coval: Yeah, and the time you're commuting. You just sit down at eight instead of nine maybe?

Allie Bidwell: I'm definitely more productive when I work from home.

Megan Coval: Me too.

Justin Draeger: I'm more productive on some things. Less productive on others. When I was a full-time teleworker, my work life balance was way out of whack. It was because there was never leaving the office behind. Office was where I was.

Megan Coval: Yeah.

Justin Draeger: Anyways. Something we'll have to keep an eye on but-

Allie Bidwell: If you want to hear more about this listen to the most recent episode of Director Download.

Justin Draeger: Yeah, if you're interested in teleworking we have a whole episode-

Allie Bidwell: Work life balance.

Justin Draeger: Of work life balance. We have an upcoming one on teleworking specifically. More on that there. Other big news, this last week, Allie, cohort default rates released publicly?

Allie Bidwell: Mm-hmm (affirmative)-

Allie Bidwell: Yeah. So these were sent out to institutions on Monday. They came out on Wednesday. This is just the annual three year cohort default rate that the department puts out. So this was for borrowers whose loans went into repayment in 2015. Then those borrowers who subsequently defaulted by September 30th, 2017.

Allie Bidwell: So the national three year cohort default rate actually dropped. For the previous cohort, it was 11.5% and for this cohort it's 10.8%. So almost 11% of the borrowers who had their loans going into repayment in 2015 defaulted by the end of the fiscal year 2017. That works out to more than 4.9 million borrowers who enter into repayment. Of those 4.9 million, 531,653 defaulted on their loans. When you break it down by sector it's a little bit different. The public sector decreased 1% point, 11.3% to 10.3%. Private non-profit went down, 7.4% to 7.1%. For-profit institutions actually increased slightly from 15.5% to 15.6%.

Allie Bidwell: There were also 12 institutions, one public, two private non-profit, and nine for-profit, who had default rates that made them subject to sanctions. Such as, possibly losing their eligibility to receive federal financial aid. Two of those institutions though maybe saved. Southeast Kentucky Community and Technical College, and United Tribes Technical College due to some provisions that were written into the 2018 Spending Bill.

Justin Draeger: Yeah, that was the McConnell Provision.

Allie Bidwell: Yeah. So the Secretary of Education would be able to exempt institutions that have poor default rates if they are in high poverty areas.

Justin Draeger: Which is fine. But it did seem like accountability for all unless you-

Allie Bidwell: Except-

Megan Coval: Unless you have a high ranking.

Justin Draeger: Unless you have a real connection to poverty.

Stephen Payne: Your institution is in the state of the Senate majority league.

Justin Draeger: Hey I guess it has its' privileges.

Stephen Payne: But those are fair, obviously. It's not-

Justin Draeger: If you were service a certain population-

Megan Coval: Well that's the same argument that gets made for community colleges. Were they have very few people who are actually borrowing. Were as you see in for-profit institution, a large population of its students are borrowing.

Justin Draeger: But it's one of the metrics we often talk about. If you're going to do more accountability, you have to account for the populations school serve. I think the problem is that it's so specific with some of those spending bill provisions. I sort of feel like CDR's... first of all, there's so much better data than what we had even 10 or 15 years ago. The people sort of have a good beat on what's going on with defaults. So I feel this lands now every year and it's not like the biggest news.

Megan Coval: Yeah.

Justin Draeger: No.

Megan Coval: We're also not at the height of the recession. So it does continue to level off and decrease just by a little bit.

Allie Bidwell: Yeah. This was a fairly big decrease. Usually it's a fraction of a percentage point.

Justin Draeger: And I also feel like most people understand now this is almost squarely used as a proxy for an institutional quality. It's not really a metric of how healthy the student loan portfolio is. We are much more focused on lifetime default rates, and five and seven year outs, and repayment rates, and principle reductions. Those give a much better picture of the health of loan portfolio.

Allie Bidwell: And new defaults, right? Because that usually gets measured in the quarterly data reports that they put out.

Justin Draeger: Yep. We are closing in some NASFAA business here. We're closing in on a deadline for our diversity leadership program. Allie, can you just give us a last minute plug for this?

Allie Bidwell: Sure. The applications are due on Sunday the 30th. The goal of this program is, it sort of aligns with NASFAA's commitment to diversity and inclusion. Its purpose is to advance the careers of the participants and provide them with some extra professional development, help NASFAA in the six regional associations, develop a larger pool of talented motivated leaders from different backgrounds, and give people from under-represented groups in the association more support, access, and opportunities.

Allie Bidwell: If you are selected for the program, you would get a complimentary registration to the national conference and a stipend to use while you're there, complimentary registration for the leadership conference, a voucher for one NASFAA U course, plus the associated credential test, a mentor who has previously served on the NASFAA board, and a place on one task force for each participate within the next year.

Justin Draeger: This is a very intentional effort by our board to put the association's resources "money where your mouth" sort of is. In exchange for all of this we're hoping

these people will then be able to step forward and provide leadership to the association for committees or task forces that are on our board of directors. This is very intentional to get at one of the core aspects of our mission. Which is, we want a very diverse and inclusive government structure and volunteer structure. That deadline is this Sunday and then our diversity taskforce, under the direction of our diversity officer, Craig Slaughter, will be meeting to review all the applications and select a great group.

Justin Draeger: Alright. I have one final thing I want to bring up. We just got back from our all staff strategy retreat. I think, and I always put strategy in there, because when people hear retreat I sort of feel like-

Allie Bidwell: They think we're camping?

Megan Coval: Boondoggle.

Justin Draeger: Well, I don't think camping. I think people are thinking like-

Allie Bidwell: Or like a yoga retreat.

Justin Draeger: Yeah, like island, beautiful sunsets. Don't you think that when you think of retreat?

Megan Coval: Drinks with umbrellas.

Justin Draeger: Not really?

Allie Bidwell: No, just because I've experienced company retreats.

Justin Draeger: I've also experienced company retreats. The companies, when I was not in the not-for-profit sector, they had some nice retreats. We also had a nice retreat. Although, it was five miles from here. So, we basically went to a hotel. Which I thought was fine, but you guys stayed there. I didn't stay. I actually went home.

Megan Coval: Nice to be somewhere else. You know, get you thinking a little bit differently.

Stephen Payne: Though I've never been to that part of Alexandria. So, it was kind of exotic in some ways.

Allie Bidwell: Yeah, me either.

Megan Coval: Same. I hadn't either. It felt away.

Justin Draeger: Yeah, okay. Great. I did see one of our staff actually had some mold issues in there.

Allie Bidwell: Yeah, I heard about this.

Megan Coval: I stay-

Stephen Payne: I have not heard about this.

Megan Coval: I stayed in the hotel. I didn't smell any mold. But we had someone else who said they smelled mold and called to check on it. Then the next morning, she showed, yesterday, Justin and me pictures of mushrooms growing out of the carpet in the hallway.

Justin Draeger: No, no, no. That's gross. I've never-

Megan Coval: You know, it seemed like a very nice hotel, I got to say. We won't say the name of it. I didn't, nothing about the hotel-

Allie Bidwell: That had to be like a fluke or something. Like a leak or... I don't know.

Megan Coval: I don't know.

Justin Draeger: I mean it has rained a lot here. It's been very rainy.

Megan Coval: Right. It has rained a lot.

Allie Bidwell: But mushrooms?

Justin Draeger: We had a good time at the strategic retreat. The idea was for the staff to connect, go over strategic priorities from our board of directors. What did you guys think?

Allie Bidwell: It's good.

Justin Draeger: What did you think about day two, specifically? Day two, we brought in someone from DC Improv who did what I think most people dread about retreats.

Allie Bidwell: Were you there the night before, when I was telling this story? I know Erin was standing right next to me. I don't know how it came up but we ended up talking about improv-

Justin Draeger: Yes. I was not there.

Allie Bidwell: And I said how I had taken an improv class in middle school and it made me cry.

Megan Coval: Oh, no!

Allie Bidwell: And Erin kept going, "Oh, that's not good. That's not good." And I was like, "Calm down. It was like 12 years ago." Then the next day I walked in-

Justin Draeger: And so, Allie, you were rushing because you had just finished Today's News. We were all there together and you had come in-

Allie Bidwell: And I literally sat down and I was like, "Oh, you've got to be kidding me."

Justin Draeger: Now that you have realized-

Allie Bidwell: And I was like all the way across the room from Erin and I locked eyes with her and she just mouthed to me, "I'm so sorry."

Justin Draeger: So what were your reactions, Megan and Stephen, when I was like... because we didn't tell anybody we were doing this. We were just like, "This is Liz, and she's from DC Improv." And you thought-

Stephen Payne: I don't know. I didn't know how it was going to end up playing out. I feel like in retrospect, I feel like the activities weren't like super intense. I was-

Allie Bidwell: It wasn't that bad.

Stephen Payne: I was imagining scenes and characters and five minute skits. No one really had to say more than a sentence. If they didn't-

Allie Bidwell: It wasn't like putting people on the spot so much. You were up there with another group of people. It wasn't like, "Megan, get up and act out this scene."

Justin Draeger: Right. I tried to imagine what it would be like, I think I would have been, I was sort of, not dreading it, but I was not in my comfort zone leading up to this, for the reasons you said, Stephen. What I thought was really good about it was everything we did was team focused and it was building on each other. It was all grounded in the "Yes, and..." approach.

Allie Bidwell: And a lot of the stuff forced you to get to know people more that you hadn't worked with. Like the one exercise were we had to assign opposite personalities to people. You had to think about how each person is normally.

Justin Draeger: Although, a disproportion amount of the opposite personalities were aggressive and mean?

Allie Bidwell: Shy.

Justin Draeger: I don't know. That's a good thing. Most people here are very nice and respectful and -

Allie Bidwell: Outgoing.

Justin Draeger: Yeah.

Megan Coval: I think people, I was talking to a few people at lunch, and I think like everyone seemed to really like it. I thought it was really fun.

Justin Draeger: I love playing, I really do love playing games. I do love playing games. And as much as almost all of it was just playing games, I had a great time.

Megan Coval: It was fun.

Justin Draeger: Plus, I do love awkward moments. And there weren't that many, but-

Megan Coval: No.

Justin Draeger: The only part I felt uncomfortable with was the part where you had to lock eyes with someone sitting next to you.

Allie Bidwell: That's not what I thought you were going to say.

Justin Draeger: Did you think it was going to be the train?

Allie Bidwell: The train. Yeah.

Megan Coval: I thought the train was fine.

Allie Bidwell: We had to form a choo-choo train. Like a conga line, which involves touching people.

Justin Draeger: Yes, you didn't find that awkward?

Allie Bidwell: No, because it was just shoulders.

Justin Draeger: Just shoulders.

Megan Coval: I forgot though that she gave clear rules for where to touch and tag people at workplace events.

Justin Draeger: Between elbow and shoulder-

Megan Coval: And the train was shoulders.

Stephen Payne: And then, "Gentle touch on the knee." Because you were sitting down.

Allie Bidwell: Sorry, I'm going to boop you on the knee.

Megan Coval: Yeah, but I grabbed Megan Walter's waist in the train to begin with and then I was like, "Whoops!"

Justin Draeger: And you're her boss.

Megan Coval: Foul. I am her, ding ding ding. Whoops.

Justin Draeger: I don't know, that locking eyes thing can be-

Allie Bidwell: That's always uncomfortable.

Justin Draeger: Especially when you're literally a foot from that person.

Allie Bidwell: I feel like we've talked about that before, too. You know those questions that the New York Times or someone published that it's supposed to be like, "If you answer these questions then you'll fall in love, guaranteed." And it ends with four minutes straight, or something crazy, of just sitting there in silence, staring at each other.

Justin Draeger: So if you ever notice somebody staring right into your eyes you know they are trying to get you-

Allie Bidwell: They're trying to get you to fall in love.

Justin Draeger: Yeah, that's why you never look at people in the eyes.

Stephen Payne: Oh, weird. As I look down.

Justin Draeger: That's why I always wear sunglasses-

Stephen Payne: Permanently.

Justin Draeger: All the time. Well I think it was a good time and it was educational and an open forum. People I hope connected and got a lot out of it. If happiness is, I always heard the formula is, happiness is expectations compared to reality. In this case, what we did was way better than what I thought. I had high expectations. This was even better.

Justin Draeger: Thanks for joining us for another edition of "Off The Cuff." Send us your comments. Remember to subscribe. Tell a friend. Until next time.