

Matt sits down with Laura Sindoni from SummerCollab. They talk about Laura's career journey from being a practicing attorney to a pre-school teacher to her current position at Delaware's own SummerCollab and their efforts to make summer smarter for kids, as well as her career as an aspiring banjo player!

Matt: Welcome to Cooler than Me, a First Ascent Design Series, showcasing the people that are, without a doubt, cooler than we are. We are so lucky to work with and surround ourselves with amazing members of the local community that are each trying to make the world better in their own way. We hope to bring their stories to you. Let's jump in. [Music playing]

Matt: Hey everyone! My name is Matt with First Ascent Design and today we're interviewing someone who's definitely cooler than me and it's Laura Sindoni from SummerCollab. So, thanks so much for chatting with us today, Laura.

Laura: Thanks. Hopefully live up to that billing, I'm not sure.

Matt: Yeah, we'll see. So, uh, as the Director of Operations with SummerCollab, Laura focuses on internal organizational development and guiding SummerCollab expansion efforts. And prior to joining, Laura was an attorney practicing in Pennsylvania and New Jersey. And her desire to work with children definitely inspires some of her work. So, I hope that you know, this was right about you.

Laura: Yeah, there was a little in between where I taught preschool, so I went from lawyer to preschool teacher to a SummerCollab, so kind of a nonlinear career.

Matt: Got you. So, uh, I guess starting off kind of easy. What's one interesting thing, I guess outside of that stuff that people wouldn't know about you just by seeing you on the street, maybe.

Laura: Okay. That's actually probably the hardest question you're asking me. Oh, man. Um, that I am an aspiring Banjo player.

Matt: Really?

Laura: So I, well aspiring being the keyword there, uh, my dream to be a banjo player and I own a banjo, but, uh, it's, it's.

Matt: So you just started.

Laura: Yeah, we add in the very much in the novice stages in my career.

Matt: When did you start?

Laura: A couple of years ago and I was taking lessons and I'm going to have to downgrade to the Ukulele. I think my hands are too small.

Matt: Have you tried guitar?

Laura: I haven't. I wanted to be, you know, there's a lot of people out there that suck at the guitar, but I wanted to be unique and kind of be a bad banjo player. Yeah. You don't see a lot of bad banjo players out there.

Matt: That is true. It's either you're really good or you don't play.

Laura: That's, exactly.

Matt: Um, but you know, I started playing the guitar freshman year in high school, just like self-taught, like learning whatever I can. And that's just a hobby that like has been around for me ever since then. So it's a great release of stress and things I can do. Like at school, you can take it anywhere and yeah. So I love that. So, let's see. Uh, what's the favorite thing about SummerCollab that you do? Cause you've had a diverse career path.

Laura: Yeah.

Matt: Jumping around from different things. So what about SummerCollab is your favorite part?

Laura: I think we just work with, so, I mean, we're a collaborative, so by our very name, just so many people from the community and people in completely different places in their career from different, you know, sub-communities within Wilmington. So, really been seeing like all of these different people come together around this same cause and just connecting, you know, the local bank who might be a funder but really is passionate about what we're doing with the high school kid who this may or be, this may be his or her first job. So just the diversity of the people, but kind of the commonality of they're all so passionate about what we're doing. It's been really, really inspiring.

Matt: That's awesome. Are you finding connections that are kind of overlooked in the community?

Laura: I think so. Um, yeah, I think a lot of, a lot of um, the organizations we work with kind of work in silos and even though they shared some of the same problems, right? So we work primarily with community-based agencies who serve kids during afterschool and during the summer. But though they might not have known each other socially or kind of maybe work together in some limited capacity, I think our ability to kind of bring them together year round and have kind of really comprehensive relationships and troubleshoot together, um, has been a bit of a game changer here, here in the city.

Matt: That's awesome. So the most memorable part about being an attorney?

Laura: Haha. Oh, man. Um, I mean I have unfortunately like your typical attorney horror stories. When I gave something, I was an associate in a firm and I gave something I put together to a partner and she didn't like the way I stapled it straight across rather than on a diagonal and she just like flung the paper across the room.

Matt: Wow.

Laura: Um, that was pretty memorable. That kind of expedited my exit from, from the legal career.

Matt: Yeah, I was going to have to ask like, you know, what, what made you want to leave?

Laura: Um, I think just really feeling a sense of, that I could be doing something that I found more personally fulfilling. And not to sound kind of like an idealist, but I do think there is something to like working hard every day and knowing that somebody's life is going to be better or the community. And not to say that lawyers don't serve a great purpose. They do, um, tons of lawyers doing important things that help people, you know, throughout our community and world. Um, but for me, the situations I was in, were not kind of gratifying and I love kids. Um, very much value education. So going to TFA who was a little bit of a gamble, you know, being a preschool teacher with law still, law school loans, um, was a bit of a gamble but. Just the kind of the connection I feel towards kids and knowing how lucky I was to have the education I had and wanting to kind of be part of that.

Matt: So I assume that you went to school to be a lawyer.

Laura: Correct. Yup.

Matt: You went to law school, so where'd you go to law school?

Laura: Villanova.

Matt: Villanova. Awesome. I love it. I love the wildcat basketball team. Little, a little rough.

Laura: I do not. I grew up in Syracuse. I'm a Syracuse fan through and through, but yeah, I guess it's good.

Matt: I guess, they were struggling a little bit. I'm, I'm from the area, so I'm a Philly-based person. I'm from Glen Mills, Pennsylvania.

Laura: Okay, I live in Malvern now.

Matt: That's awesome. Yeah. So I mean, I, I've had a bunch of family members went to Villanova, so, um, I mean I'm not a huge college basketball fan, but like if that's, that's my team.

If I had to pick, I'm, I'm a major like Phillies, Eagles, Sixers like die hard all the time. But you know, no, no, sorry.

Laura: I mean they've had, I love Jay, right? They've had, he deserves a success. He's a good coach.

Matt: Correct. So, I have to keep asking you about the path that it's just, it's just kind of, it's, it boggles my mind. Like you went from lawyer to preschool teacher. So I guess let's go from the, from the second job, from preschool teacher to here.

Laura: Sure. So, I was teaching at the Latin American Community Center here in Wilmington and I was a Teach for America Corps member. So in that capacity I had got to know Cat Lindroth who was the founder of SummerCollab. So Cat, who's just like a phenomenal person to hopefully you guys tried to book her for this cause there's nobody. Yeah, good luck getting into her schedule. Um, no Cat's, just amazing. So she and I worked together through TFA and really got to know each other. And then while I was at LICC, I started doing some part time stuff, um, for SummerCollab. And then Cat and I talked about opportunities for coming onto the team and you know, the background, doing some legal work was, was helpful in my capacity now as like operations and kind of the boring stuff. I know how to read long documents.

Matt: Ah, that's cool. So you were working as a preschool teacher. So my dad is a, he's not preschool, but he's a, he's a K through, I think four or five. Okay. But I know the things that he says he has to bring to work everyday to work with those kids and not, you know, lose it.

Laura: Sure

Matt: So what do you think, uh, is, what do you think is your best internal, quality, in terms of like the way that you were able to work with kids? Like what were you able to bring the table to keep yourself sane in that environment?

Laura: Sure. So I think you have to have a sense of humor, especially in dealing with four year olds. Um, you really just have to go with the flow and just see that like, you know, it's the, an unpredictable is going to happen every day. And just to keep, you know, like I said, the humor about yourself. I mean, if I'm being candid, like it's, it's hard and it's like these little folks can bring you to your knees quickly. They're very honest, especially at four. There's no filter, but that's what makes it great. Um, so yeah, that would be, and I think the other thing with, with kids in general and especially little kids is talking to them kind of peer-to-peer more than more than top down. You know, I think some of the best moments I had was just like getting to know the kids and just having really meaningful conversations. Um, cause I think a lot of times as adults we either underestimate what kids are able to engage with or we just don't really care cause they're kids and we're adults. Um, so my favorite part was just like getting to know them. One kid was a big cowboys fan, so every Monday he and I had a discussion about about the, the day

before, um, and a little bit of a rivalry. So that was my, that was my favorite part. Just getting to be friends with them. Yeah.

Matt: Gotcha. From shift from Syracuse. So what's your allegiance in the NFL?

Laura: So it's Eagles because of McNabb. Um, yeah. So in Syracuse we don't have any pro teams, although the Sixers used to be the Syracuse Nationals. So, but we're in kind of a weird area where there's no pro teams, so we kind of would always cheer for the bills. Although in the 90s that was,

Matt: Yeah, I didn't, I just associate like, like town, like town that isn't New York City in New York. Like it's gotta be a bills fan. But like I was pretty ignorant.

Laura: Yeah. I mean we, we were with my family, never had like, we're big time Yankey fans, big time Syracuse fans. But like, so then when McNabb went to the Eagles, um, and then I moved down here for Villanova that just kind of solidified it. Yeah. So big, big Eagles fan.

Matt: Nice. Nice. Yeah, I struggled through the season. I mean I had, I had what I needed and last year, you know, with the win, but, um, so we went from lawyer to preschool teacher to, to current, um, you know, employee at summer colab. And then, so I want to ask what's next, what's next for you? I mean like, like it can be later today. You can be,

Laura: President. I have, yeah. I have officially announced my candidacy. You heard it here first? Yeah, sure. Um, no, I mean I think some collab is only three years old. Like we were talking about three and a half years old. So for me it's just really being part of a leadership team that gets us on our next phase. You know, we've very much been programmatically here in Wilmington only in the summer. So thinking about how do we expand our impact, what does it look like to go maybe year round or maybe geographically somewhere else. So just thinking about like how do we get our organization just a: delivering the best possible program we can and then b: expanding our, our reach

Matt: So Summer Colab, um, you know, they're partnering with local community centers to increase I guess to, to stop the learning loss right in between summers. So where do you most often partner with in the Wilmington area?

Laura: There are a few right here in the city. Um, we partner with a number of boys and girls clubs here in Wilmington as well as down in Sussex County. So we're in New Castle County and Sussex but not in Kent. Um, and then other community based agencies, Hilltop, which is thinking the hilltop neighborhood is what it's called. Um, west end neighborhood house, Kingswood, Hicks. So, but they're all within the city limits except I think Rose Hill might be technically in Newcastle, so within two miles from here.

Matt: That's awesome. Yeah. I mean I always, I felt that, you know, like when I was reading the mission statement and what you guys did. I mean it was never the same for me cause I know you're trying to help low income kids and how like there's a, there's an achievement gap. Um, but I think everyone can relate to that summer break kind of feeling and you come back on the first day, you're just like, ah, like what is this? And I, I guess I kind of still feel that like when I come back to college. So like that's a number one. Like how, what, what are some things you guys are employing to combat that?

Laura: I mean, one of our biggest focuses is literacy. Um, you know, literacy is just a huge indicator of academic and therefore kind of long term outcomes. So we do, we have a really great literacy program where we target the kids farthest behind grade level and give them one on one support throughout the summer. Um, that's a big piece of it. Also, we have a, a critical thinking curriculum that is more project based and stem based. Um, both aspects. We really design not to feel like school. School is great, but nobody, even people who love school, want to be in school during the summer. Um, so the, you know, we want fun, we don't want anything we're doing to, to feel like pulling teeth. Um, so that's always been kind of the fun challenge is really delivering this important academic content. Um, but also not having it be pencil and paper.

Matt: So what are your thoughts on the, um, the year round school districts that do that class year round?

Laura: You know, I think they're trying to meet a need. I can't speak specifically to, is this really the best way to, to, to form an equal playing field? I don't, I just don't know enough about it. Um, but I do think that we need to make space for revolutionary ideas because this system as it currently exists is an isn't delivering equal product to everybody. So, you know, I don't know enough about will it yield results, but I do know we have to be open to two different things.

Matt: I see. I guess I must be that their logic is that they're trying to solve the same problem, you know, and to gain combat that learning loss, I guess they're just going about it in a different way.

Laura: Yeah. And I think, you know, I think it's great. I also think summer is important for other things, for exploration and for, you know, running around outside and playing sports. Exactly. So I would hate to see like some or disappear in that sense and make it all about school because there are so many other things that happen that are critically important that aren't related to reading.

Matt: Right. Yeah. So let's, let's, could you share your favorite, uh, memory so far from summer collab? You, yeah. Anything that sticks out?

Laura: I do. It's, I'm going to steal somebody else's memory. Well, alright. But as director of operations, most of my job is sitting behind a computer so I don't get to, I don't get to get out in the field a lot. Okay. But we have, uh, like I said, a pretty amazing literacy program and we had one of our Americorps members, those are the, the young folks who deliver the, the reading

instruction. So they work one on one with the kids in the camp. And uh, a child read from cover to cover the first book he'd ever read on his own and he like put it down and he said, "I can read!" And he like ran around the building, literally opening doors, telling people, screaming that he just read his first book. Um, so while I wasn't there, I kind of like stole that memory from one of the corps members. Yeah.

Matt: That must like, that opens literally an infinite amount of doors and possibilities like just on like the, like the most simple level. Like you obviously need to be able to read, right. It's just like, it builds that confidence. The, the, the feeling of achieving something feel like that just goes way far beyond just be the, just like the, the actual technical thing like I read, but a feeling of accomplishment. Do you think that that's, do you think that that's just equally as important as actually teaching the skills is like building that type of part of their personality?

Laura: 100%. You know, I think it's building belief in yourself, resilience in yourself, and you know, if you're not good at something, which the kids that we're working with aren't good at reading, you're not gonna like it and you're not to want to do it. So that little bit of confidence then build a belief that like, "Alright, if I practice and I, and I work hard at this, I am going to be able to do it" and it, it should translate into other things. Um, so yeah, no, 100%. Um, just feeling good about themselves and having confidence in themselves, like you said, is just as important as finishing a book.

Matt: Because for me, I guess, and I guess kids that grew up in the same kind of environment that I grew up in, which is just like, it wasn't, it wasn't low income. Um, you don't really have something to point at and say like, that's where I built my skills of, of someone who, you know, has this part of my personality, I guess for them. Like they are needing someone to step in and bridge that gap, which is like such an incredible purpose that you guys are serving.

Laura: Well, you know, we have a lot of support from our agencies on the ground. We couldn't do it without them. Those are the ones that are in there, you know, that have built these amazing centers. So we're, we're lucky to have our partners working there with us.

Matt: So we're going to ask this question that we've asked a few of our interviewees that has stumped a couple of them so get ready for it. And you might've, you might've been asked it before, but we needed an explanation. So is a hotdog a sandwich? We've, we asked, um, one of your coworkers. So we'll have to, we'll have to compare your answers.

Laura: That is really funny. Um, yeah. I would say yes, a hotdog is a sandwich.

Matt: Is it ? I would have to argue and say no. Like we had, we had an answer. It was, it was, it was Noah, Noah Friedman. And he said if you put a hotdog on a piece of bread, that, that's a hot dog sandwich.

Laura: Of course. Noah would give some weird, profound answer.

Matt: Because I guess if you were to break it down and say like whatever else you put on a sandwich, it becomes a blank sandwich, like a ham sandwich or a Turkey sandwich that you put a hot dog in the sandwich bread. It's a hotdog sandwich. And that kind of blew my mind.

Laura: But what's the difference between a hot dog in a bun and a hot dog who says that a sandwich has to be two pieces of bread?

Matt: Well, what would you call something in a, in a roll like that? Do you ever refer to something else in a roll, that's one continuous piece as a sandwich?

Laura: Um, I would

Matt: Or is it like a specific subset? Like it's like a sub or a hoagie.

Laura: Yeah, I mean is is the Hoagie or the sub kind of the species and sandwiches, kind of the genus. So yeah, I would say it is a piece of something in between either, I guess not two pieces of bread but one folded. Okay. But you don't need two pieces of bread because you can have open face sandwiches. Wow. So I'll take this up with Noah next time I see him.

Matt: That changes things... open face sandwich was not brought up before. That kind of ruins the, uh, the theory I guess. Oh, I think we have to. Um, so I'll go back and this is a question that I'm really interested to hear your answer to because of how diverse your, your path has been. But, um, if you were to give advice to someone in my shoes, so like I'm a college student about halfway done. Yeah. Um, you know, what, what would you say like the number one thing for, for career advice?

Laura: I would say keep this might be too late to keep your student loans like as low as you go, wherever they're going to give you money to go. Um, if you're thinking about Grad school, try and keep it, get any scholarship you can cause those, will those all tamper you um, significantly. And then for me, like, so I was, after I graduated college, I didn't really know what I was wanting to do and "I'll just go be a lawyer" cause that's what people do and I've been told that I would be good at it. But I always, always was like, well I love working with kids, but I, I kind of ignored what I love doing to be this like, well this is what I should do. So I, this is totally cliché, um, but do what you think you love. You never going to know when you get in there with as little debt as possible because if you don't have debt, you can always take a turn. I took the turn with the debt, but it makes it a lot easier.

Matt: And I feel like clichés get a bad rap, but they also, you know, exist because they're kind of true. I was just, you know, in the other conversation I was just having, we're talking about trying to turn your passion and something that you can do and we, we ended up talking about, um, you know, even if you don't absolutely love what you're doing to be able to try to continue to like build that passion on the side. So, you know, you were, when you were a lawyer, where you, were you doing anything, um, on the side with kids...like, like to keep that passion going

Laura: Yeah. You know, not like formally, um, which I, I, I guess I could have, but no, I think that's right. Like I always had, I have nieces and nephews, so I had like kids in my life that there was kind of like a fun outlet for that. But no, I agree. Um, finding where I was mostly just crying, I was like, just kidding. Lawyers are great. Um, uh, yeah, no, I think, I think that's right. And I really do think like, like you said, cliches are there for...

Matt: Yeah. I mean they kind of serve a decent purpose.... But you know, like do what you love. Like it's easier said than done. And then another, another like question then we need to know about, about you is does this pineapple go on pizza?

Laura: Uh, no. Um, I would say no, but the caveat being I've never tried it. And I like some interesting flavor combinations, so I would say no. But with an asterisk.

Matt: What's your, what's your interesting flavor combination?

Laura: Like, um, my brother is like a chef and he's always throwing on weird food. But like olive oil and salt on ice cream... Like good vanilla ice cream and olive oil and salt. Amazing.

Matt: I'll have to try that

Laura: So I shouldn't knock the pineapple cause I've never tried it cause I don't like to take chances on my pizza when it's pizza night, I'm not really looking to [inaudible] you're just saying no.

Matt: But you do like them separately.

Laura: Yeah. Pineapple and pizza. Yeah. Oh yeah, very much.

Matt: Very interesting. Um, so is there, is there a funniest thing that has happened in the office? Um, since joining?

Laura: Oh God. Um, so we have, um, we have uh, uh, a young man who comes and works with us. His name is Michael, He's part of the best buddies program and he's just very fun and brings a lot of levity and just kind of lightens up the mood. And, um, I guess I don't realize how, uh, um, when I get a frustrating email I have a physical reaction to it. So I have Michael kind of always checking in on me, telling me I gotta kind of just relax and stop stomping my feet. So Michael Michael is just a kind of a constant source of fun and enjoyment. Um, I don't know that I can name one thing, one thing, but he just, he just cuts the tension. Um, and he calls me out when I'm overreacting. Like a crazy person. Yeah.

Matt: Oh, all right. So then kind of kind of winding down a little, um, what goals do you have in or outside of summer colab or just in your, in your life, what's next?

Laura: Sure. Um, I would like to like personally get more involved in mentorship or like, you know, our organization supports kids in need. Um, I think I would really like to start either through big brothers, big sisters or other mentor and kind of getting more of a personal relationship with some of the kids in our city. Um, well that's what I do professionally. Like I said, I don't get as much interaction, so I would love to, to do that. Um, and for summer Colab, you know, summer is, it's weird. It's not even march but it feels like summer, like right here cause that's what we build for. Yeah. Um, so just generally and just have like another really amazing summer. I just want to see us get better on every front. I think our programming is really good, but we can always get better. So I think this summer is just gonna be really amazing. I'm really excited for it.

Matt: Yeah. I mean, I'm sure these kids are low or they are looking forward to it. Yeah. Yeah. Awesome. All right guys. Well that was Laura Sindoni from Summer Colab, hope you guys enjoy the episode and check out the Hashtag cooler than me to see more of this content. See you next time.