

Matt: Welcome to Cooler Than Me, a First Ascent Design series showcasing the people that are without a doubt cooler than we are. We're so lucky to work with and surround ourselves with amazing members of the local community that are trying to make the world better in their own way. We're open to bring their stories to you. So let's jump in. Hey everybody, I'm Matt from First Ascent and I'm excited to bring you our next guest, Linda Schirmesiter-Gess from Strive Leadership. Strive Leadership partners with young people and adults across the nation to develop leaders and help build conscious cultures within many underserved communities. I'm really excited to share this next episode. Linda has a great story and so much advice that we could learn from John was really lucky and got to sit down with her a few weeks back. So enjoy this next episode and I think you'll easily see why she's cool with the we are. So check out the Instagram Hashtag cooler than me to see more content from the series.

John: So hello guys, my name is John with First Ascent Design and today we are interviewing someone who is cooler than me. Window Schirmeister guests from Strive Leadership. Thanks so much for coming in and chatting today.

Linda: Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it. Awesome.

John: Linda has been the director of development at Strive since December, 2016 she attended a Strive Leadership academy in 2005 and came back to coach part time in 2010. After years of college soccer and then collegiate coaching, Linda was inspired to pursue her masters in recreation and sports sciences with a concentration in soccer coaching through Ohio University in 2016. She now lives here in Wilmington. So what I wanted to do we usually start with a funny, weird question to get started and we've gone through some, some kind of interesting ones in the past, but actually as we were looking up and trying to see, you know, learn a little bit about you before we brought you in. We saw that you volunteered in a ton of different countries.

Linda: Right

John: Uh, and I know you have an international background in the first place, so you're probably more well-traveled than most that ended up listening to this. So I see Haiti, Democratic Republic of Congo, El Salvador, Trinidad, Tobago, South Africa, etc. Uh, tell me a little bit about that. What was your kind of favorite experience in that you know, massive trip,

Linda: Favorite experience, favorite experience is tough. Every one of them was, was a very, very different. Um, I would say, uh, Haiti was probably the most important. Um, it was a trip I went on as a junior going into my senior year of college, and it was my first ever service-based trip. Um, and that, that's where I became really, really passionate about serving others. Uh, and that kind of, um, led me to participate in some of these other trips and actually lead a lot of these

other trips. And they, they all became service based learning trips with college students. So, um, that, that, that would be just at the most pivotal one in all of that. Yeah.

John: Excellent. So you had a bunch of them after.

Linda: Yeah. Yeah. So, yeah, Haiti, I went with, um, a bunch of other student athletes from slippery rock university where I was with, um, we, um, did some, uh, soccer clinics in, in Haiti, some equipment give back, that kind of thing. Um, and then I went on to become a college soccer coach at Emory and Henry College, I led, um, I co-led some trips to Guatemala with habitat for humanity, El Salvador with habitat for humanity, Trinidad and Tobago with habitat for humanity. So there were classes that I helped teach the students and then we went and then I actually took my entire soccer team, uh, to South Africa. Um, again, they play, you needed some tourist stuff. We played some games and community service based as well. So I led those ones. So, um, and then the Congo was, was a personal personal trip my senior year, um, for, for 12 weeks. Um, again, community service based, um, that I kind of did, did by myself for some personal contacts.

John: Fantastic. 12 weeks. That's a long time to be away.

Linda: Yeah. Yeah. My, uh, my spring, Spring, my senior year, I had all my credits done. And so I thought I'll go and gallivant around the world a bit.

John: Good, good. So tell me a little bit about Strive Leadership. Yeah. How does that work? What is the organization, what do you do in it? I know you guys are just a few doors down at the mill, but, uh, for those who might not run into you as often, what does Strive Leadership do?

Linda: Um, so we, we spread the power of character driven leadership. Um, which in a, you know, less fancy way is we believe that the same way you can learn these hard skills in life. So if that's how to read and write, if that's how to kick a soccer ball, play the violin, whatever it is, um, that's the same way you can learn some of these quote unquote soft skills, how you should learn, um, empathy, communication, grit, um, conflict resolution that, that if we are intentional about teaching it, uh, allowing for failure, reinforcing it, and we continue these learning patterns, um, that you will have more successful individuals and you will have, uh, more character driven leaders. And so, um, that's what we do. We implement that curriculum in workforces, in schools, in, in, in sports programs. Uh, so if, if you spend 10,000 hours learning how to do a free throw, um, then why aren't you doing that with empathy? Let us do it.

John: Fantastic. Fantastic. And I know from talking to Andrea and others in Strive that you're not the typical leadership quote unquote experience that might be, uh, put out there for a corporate getaway or for a small event. So tell me what, what is the 10,000 foot view of what being involved with Strive as an organization that wants to have their people learn those things? What does that look like?

Linda: Yeah so I, I think, I think it's, it's always interesting when someone says traditional and non traditional, um, I think we, we do leadership the way that we truly believe everyone should and that we need to move away from this idea that there's one way to lead and that leaders are born. Um, uh, we don't believe that if we believe leaders are made, and we should be making them. Um, and so somebody who interacts with us, um, needs to be ready for, you know, energy, um, needs to be ready for having an open mind, um, to maybe get pushed back on some of these stereotypical views they have of leadership. Um, and um, they need to want to learn, um, and, and be very interactive. You don't get to sit down with them with a pen and notepad too often.

John: No one in the back on their laptop

Linda: No. No. And if they are, they usually get called into a fun activity.

John: Good, good. So what is a, how does soccer and everything that you've done over there mesh into what you do with Strive? And I think this might tie in to this, uh, stereotypical, what's a favorite part of what you do?

Linda: Yeah, so, so Strive grew out of the summer leadership academy that I attended, which is called sports challenge, which is our living laboratory, which we still run every single summer for 10 days. It's an immersive experience where, uh, teens from across the country come together and practice their sport, either basketball or soccer and the same intensity that they practice their sport with is the same intensity that they get leadership training. Um, so that's where sport lives. And then from there we grew out and started working. Um, taking those lessons, taking those, those rituals and taking those, um, practices into sports teams. Um, and then realizing that like sport was just the anchor sport is just the, the, the hook and that there are many other hooks and anchors be that the arts be that music, be that community service. And so we now work kind of across the gamut, um, be sport and non-sports. So, so every summer, you know, the, the soccer still exists, the soccer is still there. Um, it just, it's not in everything we do.

John: Yeah. Excellent. Yeah. So I've heard that concept of it being a hook to get people involved. When we're talking about the warehouse, for example, uh, with the, at that idea that you might get the kids involved at first because you're offering something around sports, which is something they understand, it's easy to be excited about, but then you kinda hoodwink them into getting these excellence character building experiences too. So how does that, how does that transition work? You know, when they say they study leadership intensively, the same way I might be trying to perfect a free throw. How does, how does one study leadership?

Linda: Great question. Um, so, so I think it's, people don't know what they don't know. So, uh, you know, they, they know they enjoy basketball. So you can seek out opportunities for basketball if you don't know that you could and should be learning these leadership skills. You're not gonna go out and seek it. Maybe, maybe you've been told you're not a leader and you might be motivated to go find that. Um, and at the same time, hardly ever do we go out and be like,

you are now going to sit through intensive leadership training right that kind of puts people off. Um, so, so especially with the warehouse for example, um, the teams see it as just something they're doing to make them better at that project. And then at the end they're like, oh, wait, what? I'm a better leader. Yeah. You know, they come in say, you know, and this is with a lot of our workshops, like, I just want to run how to motivate my workers or I want to learn how to, how to motivate my team. And it's like, okay, and actually after three hours or 10 months, whatever their program is, they realize they've learned all these other competencies. Oh my gosh, I'm a better leader or I'm more character driven leader. So, so it's, it's, it's more of a let's meet where you're at, let's meet what you want, and then like, let's walk along this path and have these realizations that actually there's a lot more you want

John: Fantastic. Good. Uh, is there one, or maybe even several people that it seems you're very passionate around this idea of leadership. So is there one or several people that you can attribute that passion to, that maybe you've looked up to or you had experiences with where they were great leaders and you can see that that is a potential to reach towards.

Linda: So, so I wasn't really, I just, I wasn't aware of leadership in this sense until I went to sports challenge. Um, and, um, at sports challenge was just blown away by the coaches and the people there and this, this desire to want to be like them. And so, you know, one of those people was, was Jeremy Edward, who is our co founder who still worked for us. Um, and just the leader that he is and was, um, so, so that was, that was first and foremost. And then when I got into college, I, I was so lucky to have a coach who just embodied, um, these leadership traits where there was never just one way to lead. And this is what I've now learned in sports challenge them through strive, which was, you know, you're not born a leader, there's not one way to lead. And she was able to, to really model that for me. Um, and, and it's why I went into coaching, um, straight after college is I one I wanted to, to live up to kind of the example she had set and how that had affected me. So those, those are, uh, and continue to, to, to be the two people I really, I really look up to as leaders.

John: Thank you. And when, so with coaching, for those of us, you know, when in my childhood, for example, I was a rock climber, so I started, uh, took those classes as a kid and then taught them later, but it was much more of a smaller, a one on one experience, not a team coach sort of way of thinking about it. So you've seem to have great, have had great coaching experiences and you want and hopefully, uh, you feel that you've done get done that as a coach as well. So for those of us that maybe don't know what that feels like or what that looks like, what's a great coaching experience or coach, coach and coachee relationship?

Linda: That's, that's a great question. Um, so the same way is as Strive kind of, um, is very, very intentional about leadership that is not like by accident. Right. I believe that the best coaches in the same with teachers, they're intentional about everything we do. If that's how they set up their practice, if that's how they communicate with others, if that's how they teach, if that's how they interact with individuals. And ultimately it's about relationships, period. Um, it's not that you treat everyone the same as you treat everyone equally and the coaches, um, I'm, I'm one of those

ones trying to find out very few people that have just had excellent coaches from, from a youth level all the way through which, which I just thought it was norm, you know, um, I, you know, didn't realize the impact of having a female college coach had on me to want to go coach and be able to envision that until I realized everyone didn't have that. But when I look about the common themes within coaching, it's not the moment of like, I learned this skill. It's not the moment of, Oh, I got, you know, I can get better at this. It was completely about the relationships and the people who were able to do that the most were the ones who were completely intentional about creating a culture and an environment where people would thrive, where people could fail safely, where people could be themselves. Um, and so that, that's the common theme. And I would say that with any coach in any sport, be that with teams, be that with individuals. It's, it's what culture are you creating that emphasizes relationships that emphasizes failure and safety in failure. Um, and that that emphasizes everything else above the sport essentially.

John: I love that, uh, that phrase that, and I'm not treating everyone the same, but treating everyone equally, giving everyone equal attention and needs and that, that's fantastic. Yeah. Yeah. You mentioned, uh, the idea of having, uh, a female coach helped you see that the opportunities are out there. We did one of these sit downs with, um, one of the Mary Ann's List founders with Lauren. Then we talked a little bit about, uh, male, female dynamic. There's a couple engineering companies that we'll be talking about where, uh, we're very excited to be talking to the female partner in an engineering company. I come from an engineering background and I know how rare that can be, sadly, still out there in the, in the industry. Do you see a male female split in coaching or leadership or what your experience is here?

Linda: Um, so, so coaching, um, especially at the collegiate level continues to be a male dominated profession.

John: Even for female sports?

Linda: Even for female sports. In fact, even more so. So, um, title nine, what happened when title nine was implemented, um, was a, it started, um, allowing for equal equality of resources to be dedicated to sports. Um, which meant that, um, it became an attractive profession for men to, to not just coach men's sport, but to coach women's sports before there was no motivation to do so. There was no money in it. Um, and so men, coach men, um, so you didn't have any women coaches. So when the equality of resources started, um, now you had men coming into, into the, into coaching female role. Um, when I was a college soccer coach, I was in a conference with 13 different colleges. I was one of only two female head coaches. Um, I am very used to being in a room with, with only male coaches, um, coaching females and that's head coaches, assistant coaches. Um, there's also many other lifestyle reasons, um, around that. How, however it is, it is a big issue that a lot of organizations are trying to address. Um, and it would, I do, would, I do think we have a good laugh about this quite often as you know, Strivewas, was founded by three guys, three baseball and basketball coaches. Um, we are now a staff of all females, uh, and our co founder who is a man, um, so we are, you know, there's

been that strong transition. We are very counter cultural in that. Um, and, and it's the same as with leadership is allowing people to understand that leadership can be learned. It's, it's the same that, you know, there are gender dynamics, there are gender differences. Um, however those don't, those should not influence what you go and do and why and what you aspire to. Um, and again, I, I, I do attribute a large part point of that to, to my college soccer coach. I attribute a large portion of that to my mother. And growing up with two brothers were just like, you know, gender was not a barrier. And as I've got older, I've definitely seen it be a barrier and there'd be trends, especially in the field that we're in if we're dealing with sport. And then leadership where you look across traditional leadership roles. Um, and the traditional view of leadership is male dominated, you know, um, you are extroverted, you are loud. Um, you are, you know, you make decisions. If a female does that, more likely than not, they're labeled as something very different than a man. Um, and so as we do our work and across the gamut make people understand that there's different ways to lead both male and female, that there's different ways to be interpreted both male and female, um, that, that I hope we continue to empower females to be like, okay, I can enforce. And a male to say I can just be an encourager and have those dynamics.

John: Good. Thank you Looking back, uh, part of the, your map was one of the ones that reached out to arrange this with you when he started with us as a winter intern. He's currently in UD and I keep, uh, uh, poking him to get the student's perspective. Cause I know a decent chunk of the people who will be listening to this are either from our class or from horn or et cetera that are students. And you went into what seems like a, a passion, you know, went into sports for your degree. Uh, did you expect to be here today? And did you have a career path laid out? I think that's a trick question, but what were you thinking, uh, did you think your career would be, and are you happy with how it ended up or where, where you're going, you know, what's, what was the path like?

Linda: Um, I'm ecstatic. I'm here. Um, I thought I would, I thought it would be a college soccer coach for the rest of my life. Um, I realize that I pursue passion and pursue mission over everything and straight out of college, I believe the only thing I was passionate about was soccer. And I believe that the only, the only real mission thing was, was to, to help others through soccer. That was, that was my lens. Um, and, and by interacting with Strive every summer and as a, as I do now is I realized that I am passionate about soccer. Uh, but what I'm passionate about is developing people, is helping people. Um, and I, I'm passionate about learning and growth. And so that is true on the soccer field. That is true in a classroom. Um, that, that is true. You know, I, I, I came in as a development director at strive. I now do a lot of the running of the programs and people often will ask like, what was different, you know, development start, get to ask for money. I never saw it as that. I saw it as advocating for our, cause I saw it as being passionate about a mission, helping people learn and grow. Um, and so I, I'm absolutely ecstatic where I'm at. I could never have, I don't think I thought this is where I'd end up. It is the path I took. Um, and I don't know where it'll go. I do know that it will remain wherever I go, It will be something I'm passionate about and something that is completely mission driven.

John: And that authenticity is fantastic, especially in a role like a development or even in, you know, and administering the programs as well to be truly authentically excited about what you do will drive everything, all the results around it. I firmly believe that. So what's next for you? What is the next, you know, two to five years look like if we dare to plan out that far,

Linda: I'm scared for you to ask what I'm doing next, next week. Um, I, I mean I, I, I, I'm at Strive, you know, I'm at Strive and we are, you know, our mission is spreading the power of character driven leadership and it's, and it's spreading to the person, to the right and to the left of us. It's spreading to the, the city to the right into the left of us. It's spreading from like, it's wherever we go. Um, and wherever we can be really, really good. Um, the magic of being at a small nonprofit, um, and, and having, having such a core of leadership and a curriculum is that is also so flexible. You know, uh, six months ago we, we were a lot more sport dominant, um, a lot more workshop dominant and just the evolving need of Wilmington as a city, as reach Riverside. And the warehouse has seen as been like, okay with team oriented right now that we are education oriented right now. Um, cause that's the biggest gap and that's the biggest need. Um, so as it grows, I, I do think in the next two to five years we will become, um, a lot more co-curricular. So we will be more in schools. Schools are starting to see, we need math, we need English, we need science, we need social emotional learning skills. Yeah, we will. And I think we'll fit in there. Um, we will continue to be, you know, working alongside and as part of this great network within the warehouse. Um, and, and, and will continue to be, you know, here in Wilmington, truly making a difference. Um, so I see myself as a, as long as, um, as long as I don't get fired, as, as, as being, as being a large part of that. Yeah.

John: Good. So last thing I want to ask you with that one of the premises behind, you know, getting you to sit down and chat about what you do and what you're excited about is because we get to work with so many awesome people like yourself that are excited about what they do. And in so many different varied places that you might never meet each other. Uh, so our personal hope is that someone listening to this can say, oh, this is a great connection. I'd love to reach out to them. So the question for you is, what do you need? What are you looking for? If someone was to reach out, you know, what do you wish they would say? What, what offers could help move you forward?

Linda: Yeah. So I'm going to start by being really cliché, but like collaboration. So, so for us, like I said, we, we do what we do. Um, and then we go do it with other people who are really good at some things. So, um, like your company can be really, really good at making windows. Well, let us come in and like make sure that your culture is aligned to help you give the skills to like go sell those windows to retain your, your, um, your, your workers. Um, we also love coming up with creative programs with other, you know, with others. Like how can we partner? We're currently partnering with Jewel School. Um, and, and you know, they are incredible at design thinking and implementing great programming. They needed some social emotional learning components within that. We've come together, we've created a great program. Um, we're also looking at people who, who, you know, generically want to join our board and want to be a part of this, you know, um, we're looking for people who have kids who want to attend our programs.

Um, so, so those, that'd be my big call to action is like, if, if, if you're like, wow, Strive sounds interesting. I have no idea where, where I fit, emailm call. And like, we find a way, we find a way, um, because everyone should and needs to lead. Good. And then what's the best way to reach out to you? Uh, Linda@striveleadership.org so it doesn't have my last name in it. It's helpful.

John: We'll put that down. It'd be a, in the show notes at the end, but thank you so much for coming out and chatting with us, uh, especially coming through, braving the rain to get set up today. And, uh, thank you for sharing your story.

Linda: Absolutely. Thank you so much for having me. I appreciate it.