

# BSC \_ Season 1 \_ Melvin Armstrong\_Final

Wed, 3/24 10:18PM 28:03

## SUMMARY KEYWORDS

students, theo, folks, mentorship, melvin, community based organizations, role, illinois, grew, question, college, success, phd, cal state la, dissertation, person, college professor, organization, private equity firm, black

## SPEAKERS

Dr. Melvin Armstrong, Jr., Dr. Thomas, Dr. Fowles

- D** Dr. Thomas 00:12  
Black Social Capital. Today we want to welcome Dr. Melvin Armstrong, Jr. Dr. Melvin grew up in housing projects in Bloomington, Illinois, he was able to navigate his way from being a ward of the state that dropped out of high school to later earning a GED and eventually earning a PhD from the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign. Welcome Dr. Melvin.
- D** Dr. Melvin Armstrong, Jr. 00:38  
Dr. Jaqui, what's up? thank y'all for having me.
- D** Dr. Fowles 00:42  
It's exciting to have you on on the show today. And we're just gonna hop right into our first section, which is always the Community Capital section, where we go to Black professionals journey, their best practices, right. And so, you know, just from from the the intro, we know that you went from, you know, being a ward of the state, you know, part of that foster care system, to earning your GED and a PhD. You know, I want to hear about all the things that happened in between there. And what you learned in that process, so we'll kick it off and start with that.

D

Dr. Melvin Armstrong, Jr. 01:20

I tell students often that what I'm about is for you being able to take social and cultural capital and make it actual capital. And so that I wasn't an actual drop out I like to put the fact is, I was a force out in so far as I got into a fight and it was like, You can't come back homeboy. But to me, what I think that my experience, really powerfully demonstrates the extent to which bodies like ours and let's put it clear with Black bodies are judged differentially than this. So like my experience, I went from one day, being the student body president of my high school as a freshman mind you. National Honor Society. On track, I think at the time in which I was kicked out of high school, I was the number two in terms of grade point average. So on track to be I think that's the salutatorian or whatever. And so get into a fight. And all of that went out the window. Right. So for me that's powerful, in so far as that that's how differently our bodies are judged, or our bodies are judged in the educational system. The other thing that is very interesting for me, is that though I was on track to be a salutatorian, though, I had been an honor roll every since the time I was in first grade all the way up through school. No one ever talked to us explicitly about college. There are sometimes I feel like I become the excuse by which folks used to critique other folks. So you know, I think I think a lot of times you know all three of us can attest to the fact that there are times where folks are like, Well, Dr. Theo did it. Dr. Jaqui did it. Dr. Mel did it. So then you- though your work and though you described struggle, or the extent to which you couldn't be you, absent this larger network of help, or whatever. You become the very reason why folks critique, our group, right? So folks will look at my story and say this dude- foster care, got a GED, went on to go to the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign got a PhD in philosophy. So what's your excuse? Right. And so, for me, sometimes, I like to push back on that narrative and to talk about the extent to which that we have to look at the systematic things that are barriers to entry, where access from jump- so that folks hear about my met- my story or whatever.

D

Dr. Fowles 04:30

So I think that's interesting, right? I think one of the biggest nuggets that I'm still chewing on right is the success as a barrier, right? To the success of others, right? It's almost an oxymoron that, that because you have found a pathway for yourself. It almost becomes a roadmap or a blueprint for others. While they still have to overcome their own challenges. Getting the getting the degrees that you did get right, how did you how did you want to use those degrees for the benefit of others? I think that, you know, a lot of times we are asking about people's research and things like that. But I mean, you know, you know, from the narrative that you just said, your focus has been, how can I use my experience and my story to more positively impact the system? How have you done those things, you know, either in your current profession or in the things that you've studied?

D

Dr. Melvin Armstrong, Jr. 05:38

Well, I think that that's a really great question. And I think y'all can relate to what I'm about to say, because I think for me, the best compliment that I ever get from students or folks that I get is-- it's kind of a backhanded compliment. But it's actually one of those things that comes from a good place. And it relates to my view of mentorship. And what the compliment is that there are students who tell me, they'll say you know Dr. Armstrong if you got a PhD, I know I can get one, right. And so when folks used to tell me that like, what, what does that say about me? What does it-- but now as I've been able to step back and think about that, and I think to a certain extent, you have all gotten that as well. But what that means is that the person who was saying that is actually saying that they see enough of themselves in you that now it becomes a tangible possibility, in a way that it didn't exist before. And so, you know, the great Marian Wright Edelman always says that we can be anything that we can't see, you know, and you know, Reverend Jeremiah Wright often said that, but at the point in which you see something, it becomes a tangible possibility, in a way that it didn't before what I like to say that I'm also big, into the dichotomous nature of mentorship. Because what oftentimes `In so far as sometimes it's like, do I see enough of myself, or enough potential or enough ability in you to invest this time, right. And so I'm really big, on that aspect of it. Is to say that, for me, I think that's the best compliment that I ever get, is that, because of me being who I am, students now see the possibility of getting a PhD or going to grad school as a tangible thing, in a way that they didn't see it before.

D

Dr. Thomas 08:03

So you just talked about mentorship. So my experience with college counselors were, they all said, make sure that you go to a four year college. Doesn't matter which one. We just need all of y'all to go. And I was just like, okay, so I get into three colleges, right? Because I applied to three, I got into three. And I you know, I see this UC Berkeley acceptance letter, I'm like, that's cool. I'm going to Long Beach State, like, I didn't know the difference, right. And I mean, you know, Long Beach State, they would have been great. And so would have San Diego State, right, um, and Berkeley, it did end up being great, because at that moment, I ended up learning that there was a difference between four year universities. So I just wanted to get a little bit of your opinion on, you know, when you are talking to kids who, or talking to people who are going to be mentoring, you know, kids who are, you know, in K through 12, who like me, you know, I grew up in South Central and you know, it wasn't the most advantageous place in terms of, you know, prepping kids for college. So, like, what, what needs to be happening there, that isn't happening, because telling kids that they are not, you know, college material when they got into the college is trash, and then also just go to any four year because we just need y'all to have four year degrees better, but not necessarily. Probably missing the mark.

D

Dr. Melvin Armstrong, Jr. 09:41

Right. Well, that's a fantastic question. And I think that, you know, it's not an either or it's a both and, right. And so, what I'm not about I think, for me is like, I'm not about empowering the dream killers right. And I don't think you all or Dr. Theo is about empowering dream killers. I think for me what my story is indicative of is the extent to which so much of the ideas or the paths that can be presented to you are dependent largely on circumstances that are outside of your purview, right. So that if I think you're this type, I can present this type of information to you. So with even some of the high school students that I've worked today, many of our high school students that I work with today, is, are the folks who will say, Well, I just want to go to a four year college. Right? And I'm like, Well, why is it that you want to go to a four year college, and some of the things that I do is as a person who himself went through because of my educational circumstances, I went to a community college transferred to Illinois, I did my undergrad and then going on to my PhD from the University of Illinois, I know that there are multiple paths to what we call this thing is success. And I just want multiple things to be open for you. I think you in some way, got really good advice, whether that is from your guidance counselor, somebody said you know what Dr. Jaqui, of these three schools, this one, because it's Berkeley and because you know, Berkeley is perceived and in many ways is is the best public university in our nation, that that was right for them to tell you to go there. Right. But my thing, but I think that where I'm coming from the perspective is not necessarily even in that advice. But in the extent to which that if ever the advice is given, if it's given out as a way of wanting the kids to succeed. There are multiple paths to that.

D

Dr. Fowles 12:15

So I want to jump in here really quickly. And you've been dropping some nuggets, and I'm already taking notes.

D

Dr. Thomas 12:21

Yep.

D

Dr. Fowles 12:23

And I gotta make sure that the folks know who they're taking notes from, right? Well, you know, some of this is all about titles and names and all that kind of stuff. But if we backtrack just a little bit. Tell us tell us what you're doing now and what the role is

D

Dr. Melvin Armstrong, Jr. 12:41

I'm the Executive Director of the STEEAM Pre-College Initiative. And what we do now- it's an organization that me and a couple colleagues from Cal State LA founded. And the reason why we founded this organization is that what we found was that in some ways, if we waited to interact with students, when they got to us on the college campus, it was a situation that where we could help that one student, but we may not have been able to have the scalable impact that we wanted. And so in terms of the programming that we do right now, a large percentage of our programming is concerned with introducing Black and Brown kids to career areas that they wouldn't have known otherwise. So we've worked with a couple of private equity firms who have agreed to basically upon the completion of our program, they'll hire our kids, they'll hire our scholars. And so why is that important? Well, it's important because like, the most affluent African American man named Robert Smith is a private equity guy, right? You know, Vista Equity Partners, he started a private equity firm. And so what we have now is, you know, students who come from backgrounds that they would never hear of this who are now, possibly on their way to this type of stuff. So that's what I'm doing now. I'm still doing some consulting work. And I'm also kind of at a, I wouldn't say a crossroads, but in the form of transition, because next year, interestingly enough, as someone who's always been interested in film and other stuff, I got a couple of acceptances to film schools here in Southern California. So I'm doing film school next year.

D

Dr. Thomas 14:48

You just told us what you do, right? You're the Executive Director of a Pre-College Initiative. Correct? Right. How'd you get there because you know, people hearing you like, oh, Dr. Melvin, right, he does these things. How did you? How did that happen? Right? We always want our listeners to be able to envision, you know, what our path was, before we got these, you know, awesome titles,

D

Dr. Melvin Armstrong, Jr. 15:16

Yea you know, for sure. And I think that that's why to your path and even why me and collaborator, we actually have a literary agent and shopping our book project now in our book is called "Hidden Scripts: Demystifying the barriers to success." And so that's a book that's co written between me. And progressive white brogher name is Paul Ryan. And we grew up as diametrically opposed in terms of growing up as you can be. He's a dude who did his MBA at Wharton School went to Princeton undergrad. And as we, you know, we were cigar buddies, and as we were smoking cigars, drinking that drink, and started talking about these thangs, one of the things that became clear to me is, is that how coming from his background, he had this path where he almost had a script that he could

read from. And, you know, I know y'all will appreciate kind of the heuristic device. And so we basically tried to do in that book is to bring forth those hidden scripts, or those narratives or those things that lead to success. So for me, I think that the biggest thing that I have prided myself on or, what I've gotten advice to do, is like when students ask me really what I want to help them do, what I pride myself on being, is I pride myself on being the person who helps people be in position to be in position. Right? And so people will say, Well, what do you mean by that, that Dr. Mel be in position to be in position. And I- one of the things I really love about the project that you folks do Dr. Jaqui and Dr. Theo is wanting to get us to see that we come from a proud tradition of what I like to say about Black folks, I like to say we get this tradition of what I say like to call the ghetto geniusness or ingenuity. And so when you come from a community, like we come from in history like we come from, have basically being given lemons and turning them into Lemonade- Of being giving you know the scraps, and being able to turn it into that-- coming from that tradition, is something that's always been powerful for me. And so the steps that I've always taken, and what I often tell students is to say, is I'm really a big follower of folks who have done what I want to do, right. One of the things that we talked about in one of the games that I've often given to students is when I was at Cal State LA, so many of our students will work that 20 to 40 hours a week. And they would often say, you know, Dr. Armstrong, well, my boss invited me to a party, they are having it at the crib on Saturday, should I go? And I was like yeah you need to go. And they was like, Well, why do I need to go, I don't really mess with them like that. But the reason why they need to go is even though you don't mess with them like that, conversation that you want to have with them about that position that's about to open up aint gon never happen in the office. But that will happen at that party. So that's what we call it - and this goes back to what I'm saying, being in a position to be in a position, right? Because that we know being in the position is being at that party. But being in the position to be at that party, you got to first know, you got to be at that party. Right. Right. One of the things that I would always tell students, and I think that all of us here who have those letters behind their name appreciate if you ain't got a doctorate, you can't tell me about getting a doctorate, right. Because you don't know. Right. But if you want it- what I tell students if you want to get one, because I know you now know, right? And so that's really where I think that I've been able to find mentorship is that I am really zealous. I'm a zealous secret.

D

Dr. Fowles 19:54

So I think that that- That actually me aligns with one of the questions that I was thinking about is, you know, what, what is the what is the role of a community based organization or even individuals within the community? You know, as it relates to mentorship and, and seeing scraps as resources. Right. And, and resources as resources as it relates to, you know, mentorship, student support, those type of things. What's your perspective on that?

D

Dr. Melvin Armstrong, Jr. 20:24

Well, I think that it is- it's not an either or it's a both and. I think, for me, you know, like, all of us, I think you got to just be champions in our own role. And so my role now as someone who runs a nonprofit is different than it was when I was a college professor. But both of those are roles are still alive to who I am, what makes me me and ultimately being concerned about giving the game that I've never got-- and I think that we can do that, no matter where we are. You know, that doesn't matter if you're a student-facing college professor. That doesn't matter if you're in the Career Center. If you're working with faculty, what I do think, though, and maybe this is underlying, think of your question Dr. Theo that I really love-- is I do think that there is a way by which all of us who care about our kids' success, need to stop being in our silos, and need to work with each other in a way. And so how I see this now is, you know, I've tried to be a person who, everywhere where our students go, There are like four universities that our students primarily go to. I can call someone there. And basically, kind of hand them off, or let them know that this is who got you here. And so, hopefully, that answers your questions. I think that where I see the role of community based organizations is to be bridges and connectors to resources. Sometimes in our communities, I think we have to get away from the perspective of a lot of times in our communities, we think that we need to have a million dollars to solve particular problems. But we don't necessarily need to have a million dollars, what we need to have is access to a million dollars. Right. So So that basically, Dr. Theo I think that I see my role now is being a connector of resources.

D

Dr. Fowles 22:51

And as we wrap up, you lead into one of the questions that we always ask, but we always ask about, we asked about that that network, right. So, you know, are there any professional organizations or community based organizations that that you find yourself participating in in order to get some of these initiatives and these ideas across?

D

Dr. Melvin Armstrong, Jr. 23:18

Well, I think, for me, two of the most influential organizations that really helped me do this, there was an organization that we had on a campus of UIUC that we called-- it was a group of about 20 of us graduate students. And we called it Team PhD. Right. And what they group was, it was basically, you know, Dr. Cornel West, said one time is that the most serious thing or the most wonderful gift that we can give to any individual person as humans, is to take their ideas seriously. And so our group of folks Team PhD is about 20 of us and we are all still in contact today. I'm proud to say that all twenty members of that group, we've all gotten our PhDs too. So we created that organization. And it was just nothing that the professors came up with, it was just a bunch of us getting around is to

say, What we really need is to be able to, you know, study together. We all put together mock dissertations, like even in, in fact of my own dissertation, that is, you know, I actually did four defenses. Before I actually did my real defense because we would set that up like we would set up mock defenses. You know, so that group was powerful. The members of Team PhD was very powerful. And I think for me also in terms of another organization has really, you know, been powerful. For, for me is growing up and even as I moved from Illinois to California has been my church. And because those are folks who, you know, really pushed me on, who I mean, I'm a person that anytime I submit a grant, you know, I got prayer warriors praying for a grant to enact. So those have been, you know, you get prayer cards talking about let the private equity firm, you know, fund Dr. Armstrong's program for another 20 years, for another two years. So those two have been the biggest ones. As far as far as that goes.

D

Dr. Fowles 25:56

And it's so it's so interesting to see how many similarities there are as everybody goes through their academic journey that you get to a point where you sitting at the table by yourself, you're like, Look, I can't do this by myself, let me find somebody else that's struggling, and we can just struggle at the same table.

D

Dr. Thomas 26:16

That's super true as I definitely wrote almost all of my dissertation, on Theo's kitchen table

D

Dr. Melvin Armstrong, Jr. 26:23

There you go, there you go right. There you go. In how powerful it is to have that support, you know, and to do that stuff

D

Dr. Fowles 26:32

But we definitely want to thank you for being on the show today. You know, I'm really excited to make sure that people take to heart, you know, being in position to be in position for your success. I think that that's something that, you know, no matter what, what role, or what part of your career or personal personal life that you're in that you can take with you

D

Dr. Melvin Armstrong, Jr. 26:55

Our stuff may not look like other folks stuff but that's because folks didn't come through



the same circumstances that we came through. But it's like, you know, Tupac Shakur was like, you know, who uses the heuristic about the rose grew from concrete, he said, you know, oftentimes we judge that rose based on other roses, but we don't judge it on the fact that you know what, you grew out of concrete! So what I tell my students is, I was like, if you're in the game, and you end up on second base, but you started outside of the stadium. That's amazing!

D

Dr. Fowles 27:35

We hope you enjoyed today's show. Remember, the way we build social capital is to build self and build others. I'm sure you got some notes on your tablet, computer or even using a pen and paper. Give us a review, continue the conversation on social media @BlackSocialCap, and share the show with someone you know. Until the next episode, stay motivated and rise together.

D

Dr. Thomas 27:59

This is Black Social Capital