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Julie Lythcott-Haims

Beyond the Menlo Loop: a Panel of Menlo Alumni

Attendee Notes for Menlo School Keynote Panel

Julie Lythcott-Haims is the former dean of freshmen and undergraduate advising at Stanford University and the recipient of Stanford's Lloyd W. Dinkelspiel Award for exceptional contributions to undergraduate education. She attended Stanford University and received a law degree from Harvard. She is presently pursuing an MFA in Writing (Poetry) at the California College of the Arts and writing a book on the impact of helicopter parenting. She lives in the San Francisco Bay Area with her husband, their two children, and her mother. Ms. Lythcott-Haims' TED talk, *Be Your Authentic Self*, can be found on YouTube.

Opening:

Lythcott-Haims, former Freshman Dean at Stanford University, has seen many kids over the years who seemed "under constructed as adults." Is our over-involvement as parents, though stemming from the most loving of origins, getting in the way of their development? In this community we as parents feel tremendous pressure to be successful at parenting. Lythcott-Haims shares this pressure, as the mother of a 12 and 14 year-old. What can we learn from Menlo alums about their experiences during their Menlo high school years that best prepared them for their journey post-Menlo? Menlo alums represented are ages 29-35, working in a variety of fields (see bios for more information).

Lythcott-Haims: Please share something your parents did well during your middle school or high school experience.

Shawna: Her parents helped her evaluate all the options in a particular situation.

Sanam: Throughout middle school and high school, her parents gave her the opportunity to figure out things for herself in new situations. For example, they let her take the lead at the airport to find the terminal or the family's baggage. If needed, at the end, they would always be there to back her up or help her find the resources.

John: His parents encouraged him to not only study but also take advantage of other Menlo activities. As a result, he feels very diverse in his strengths, with flexible skills that have been helpful in his career.

Kevin: His parents recognized his academic struggles. Since he was hesitant to accept direct help from his parents, they helped create a support system of other adults – teachers and tutors that helped him.

Courtney: Sending her to Menlo was the first thing her parents did well. Her parents offered her support and infrastructure, but within that a lot of independence and freedom to make her own choices, especially as the oldest of 7 children. There were certain rules, eg she was required to do a sport every quarter, and required to always have a job, but she could make her own choices.

Lythcott-Haims: What does success actually look like?

There was a time when success might have meant getting your child into Menlo. On the Challenge Success board, we are working on defining “success,” what it means to be successful as a human. We may have a fixed sense of what success looks like, a particular checklist. At a recent Stanford commencement, Steve Jobs talked about the value of connecting the dots; he made a lot of choices that seemed unconnected, but when he looked back at it all, everything related to the next thing.

Has your life been a straight line, a predetermined checklist, or has it been more of a connect-the-dots thing? And did your parents have a role?

John: His parents had a plan for him to be a doctor or lawyer. At Menlo he never thought he would become a medical devices engineer. Though his parents had preconceived ideas, they allowed him to try things, find a passion. Now he’s excited to go to work every morning.

Shawna: She describes her path as random and floundering, an unorganized journey. She was a classic 3.3 child at Menlo. Her high school experience included lots of stumbling, face-falling, telling herself she was working hard, but probably not working hard enough. She tried what she thought she should be doing, in college. In her career, she tried marketing, counseling, being on the Survivor tv show, and now has ended up in her true calling - nursing. A beautiful, organic journey, in retrospect. Her parents let her fall on her face, but were always understanding.

Lythcott-Haims: Parents don’t want their kids to have to experience the pain of failure. Why is falling on your face ok?

Shawna: If you don’t fail, you don’t learn independence. At Menlo, it’s hard to fail, since there are so many layers of support, but it’s important because it teaches you resiliency and grit. It was important for her to learn that “you’re enough as is” to get through anything. She tries to instill this now in her patients as a Nurse Practitioner who works exclusively with teens.

Kevin: “Failure was in my own expectations.” He had years of success in water polo, and went to Cal to play water polo where for the first time he did not get what he wanted. Playing time was difficult to get, talking to the coach was difficult. His confidence decreased and for a time it affected the rest of his life (he felt that failure at sports meant failure at life). It was a long recovery to get his confidence back. But through this “failure” he has learned it’s okay to put yourself out there and sometimes be wrong. His parents helped him with perspective.

Sanam: When she was in high school, she thought there were really just 3 job options, and attending an Ivy League school would make success happen. She was graduating with her MS in Biology at Stanford, and had been putting off applying to medical school,

when Steve Jobs gave the speech about connecting the dots. She realized she didn't actually want to go to med school, so instead applied to law school. Looking back she has learned to see her pre-conceived ideas not as failures but as stepping stones to the next adventure. She feels her Menlo experiences empowered her to find the resources she needed, at each step. She wishes her parents had gotten off their checklist, and "helped me figure out ME!"

John: Becoming an engineer was not the first thing on his list. He had a 10 year plan and after college, had a few steps backward, and had to dig his way back out. His parents supported and encouraged him and said "it's okay to fail" and helped him see his other options.

Courtney: Her path was not straight. After Menlo she went east for college to play soccer, and it turned out not to be the right college fit. She felt like a failure after all the preparation and hard work, and it worried her. But then she transferred to UCSB and was happy there. Now she appreciates that she is a different person than she would have been had she just gone straight to UCSB as a freshman. Her parents questioned her about the transfer, but she had to "own" her own "failure." She's grateful for that failure, and that she found what was right for her. In college, she worked as a journalist, did a radio show for women's health. Her parents were nervous about how she was going to make a living. But one thing they were good about is that they required that she always have a job, and all the jobs that she has had through the years (even the little job working at a flower shop in downtown Palo Alto), have prepared her for her career in public relations (where she rose from the bottom to VP) and then in healthcare.

Kevin: He has had a dot-connecting life. It took him 6 months after graduating to get his first job, not for lack of trying. In the end he got a job working for the husband of his Menlo English teacher. This job helped him explore business/marketing, really start to figure things out, and eventually led to a job at Levi Strauss, which although not his dream job, helped him learn important skills. Now he works for GoPro, which had been on his radar for about 5 years, because of his past work and also because of his personal interest. Photography has always been a serious hobby for him, and now he has a job that is perfect for him, combining his interests in sports, photography and business. He credits the first two jobs with preparing him for this job.

Lythcott-Haims: Shared an anecdote about sitting in her dean's office talking with a student who claimed he wanted to be a biology major. When asked what he was really interested in, he said "photography, but how can I make a living doing that?" She was thrilled to say she had just been to see a documentary film that he had produced using time lapse photography. (*Chasing Ice*). **What does helpful parental involvement look like? What is too much? Not enough?**

Sanam: She had a friend in high school who was smart and ambitious and took APs and music lessons. Her mother would support her in all sorts of ways, including putting toothpaste on her toothbrush and going through her backpack and sharpening all her pencils. The girl did go to Stanford, but then her mom would study with her, in her car at 6am. This girl had a hard time working independently at Stanford. It worked out, but "to what end?" When *does* it end?

Shawna: Sometimes parents will get so excited about something a child is good at, that they'll get over involved, and then the child may continue to do it just to please the parent instead of out of their own enjoyment. This happened to her; when she got to college, she realized she didn't really like soccer that much. She suggests parents check in with

their kids to see if they are doing their activities for themselves or to please parents or society. When parents get *over* excited, it sucks the kids' own joy out of it. She appreciated that her parents encouraged her to seek adult role models, and secure *other* attachments. She found that at school - in the Lapollas, who offered her a different perspective.

John: Felt that in high school his parents asked him too often, daily it seemed, about his grades. This made him feel nervous, and dread the end of the day. Finally he was able to communicate to his parents that he was working as hard as he could, and that he wanted to manage his own daily work, and review his grades with them just once or twice a semester.

Kevin: Appreciates that his parents recognized when he was struggling academically and helped manage his environment to support him. His parents helped him get organized and set priorities. He points out that "doing school" takes an immense amount of maturity, and that it's really hard to connect your English class with a future career – it took him time and maturity. He suggests that encouraging your kids to pursue hobbies might be the best way to make a connection between academics and career/real life. He was glad his parents encouraged his non-academic interests, and that ultimately, that is how he has found success and happiness.

Lythcott-Haims: What would you say to parents who feel the need to constantly check in?

John: "Trust us, we came here to work hard, we care, we have goals."

Courtney: It's better not to micromanage. Her parents set ground rules and instilled good habits.

Lythcott-Haims: Courtney mentioned instilling habits that led to maturity. What does being an independent adult actually look like? What capacities, characteristics?

Sanam: She read somewhere about the 3C's: Confident, Capable, Common Sense. In her job, when she interviews candidates, she looks for the confidence that comes from having some experience under their belt, intelligence, and being able to think on their feet. I hire "normal" people - not "checklist" people who just have facts memorized. She thinks it is a sign of independence when someone really knows themselves.

Courtney: An independent adult is a whole person. An adult can operate in the real world, navigate a bad day, a breakup, an aggressive reporter, etc. In her varied career, no one has ever asked her for her GPA. "Grades are not everything."

Lythcott-Haims: How do we get to the 3 C's?

Shawna: Try to get past the canned response from your kids, to their authentic response. Challenge kids to have opinions. In trying to explain their world they learn and grow.

Lythcott-Haims: How did you come to know that you are doing what you *want* to be doing?

John: He's genuinely excited to go to work every day.

Courtney: She realized that journalism was not the end all, and she was worried she would not find her passion. As soon as she started her job in public relations, where she could do a variety of things – videos, press releases, litigation support - all her interests and passions were under one roof. All her previous experiences – even the flower shop

job – helped her. She had found her “tribe.” She says that “it fed me,” and that it was like having a crush on someone, she was so excited about her work.

Shawna: She talked about a sense of “flow” – when the world slows down and you are in the groove. When she works with teens, she tries to identify it for them, point out to them when they are shining, glowing.

Lythcott-Haims: Flow is when we are challenged, but have the capacity. Motivated but not overwhelmed. See work by Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi.

Lythcott-Haims: Have you made any job choices your parents were not supportive of? How do you navigate hard conversations with your parents?

Sanam: Negotiate. She knows her parents want her to be successful, and want the best for her. When she decided she wanted to become a lawyer (and not a doctor), she went through a whole dialog to explain why, and they understood. Now she loves her job, and feels empowered. Every day is different, and she knows she can find a way to get the job done. Her parents asked her “Why?” – not to question her, but to get *her* to question and find answers. She advises parents to “just listen,” and then ask the “why” questions.

John: He appreciates that his parents let him talk and asked questions to guide his thinking process, versus just telling him what to do.

Kevin: Suggests that the best conversation starter is “You have this incredible opportunity to do”

Lythcott-Haims: What overall advice do you have for parents (and for some of you, who are expectant parents, or step-parents now)?

Shawna: They’re observing you all the time. Trust that you are instilling your value system in them.

Sanam (mother of twin 11 month olds): Allow them to be well rounded. She took drama at Menlo, and her mother wanted to see if she could switch that for an academic class. But now that she’s a litigator, she often hears Mr. Perez’s voice in her head. You never know when those fine arts classes will be useful.

John: Remembers when he bombed a history test, and his parents helped him examine why. Now as an engineer, he seeks to identify failure before it even happens. He suggests parents encourage kids to talk about failure, and not be afraid of it, and if it happens, to talk about how to avoid it next time and how to minimize its effects.

Kevin: Talked about home as a “safe house” and eventually having a friendship, relationship of equals with his parents.

Courtney (step-mother of 10, 12 year olds, baby on way): She talks about having structure every night, with freedom within the structure. Really listening when she has them one on one. Conscientious communication. No one right answer, every child is different and an individual.

Lythcott-Haims: In 2005, when her 3 year old daughter was at Bing (Stanford’s nursery school), she loved to paint. Lythcott-Haims admitted she thought to herself, often – “What’s she going to do with *that!*” Now Lythcott-Haims herself is a poet, and she loves that her daughter is an artist. “It’s terrible to walk a path of someone else’s making.”

Questions from Audience:

Q: If a student is not working to his/her academic potential, is there anything a parent could say that would help motivate them?

Shawna: Calls herself the “captain of excuses.” She suggests talking them through the process, asking questions, helping them streamline.

John: Require students to meet with their teacher and ask what they can do better.

Courtney: Sometimes a tutor is helpful, particularly if there’s one area of pressure where they need support. Though you don’t want your kids to end up completely dependent on other people to get their answers.

Sanam: She had a hard time with math. Her father loved math and from when she was a child he would do math with her for an hour a day – “Math Time with Dad.” She hated it, and felt like it was an hour of “disappointing my Dad.” She wasn’t fast enough. Then one day in 10th grade, he said he couldn’t help her, that he didn’t know the answer. “I was shocked!” So she had to go to her teacher for help, and then she came home to show her dad how to do it. She started to like math, was more confident, and not afraid of it. In the end she realized her dad had been pretending he didn’t know the answers – it was a great thing he did!

Q: What do you attribute your confidence to?

Shawna: Menlo. Menlo helped teach her that the world is bigger than just herself, and that she is “enough as is.”

Sanam: 100% from her parents. They were always there to cheer her when she succeeded and pick her up when she failed. She could always talk to them about both her failures and successes. They were a sounding board, not a crutch.

Kevin: He left Menlo with 2 conflicting thoughts: 1) Everything in the world is possible, and 2) I have to make a lot of money. He describes it as a combination of optimism/opportunity and pressure. It has taken a long time to find the balance.

Q: When is it ok to use guilt to motivate our children to succeed?

John: He would sometimes feel underappreciated for the work he did, and he remembers it holding him back to a certain extent. He still remembers the guilt his parents put on him, but he understands that his parents were immigrants who worked hard and wanted more for him than they had.

Sanam: She also had immigrant parents from Iran, where students need a perfect score to go to college. When she received an A- her freshman year, her mother burst into tears. She felt that the guilt both helped and hurt. It hurt her in that she was terrified of future report cards but it also helped her realize that education is important, and the one thing that can never be taken away from her.

Q: 60% of you are married or engaged to an alum. What can you tell us about the social life at Menlo, and how can parents instill values that help students avoid drug and alcohol abuse?

Shawna: Her parents did not use guilt, and there was not a lot of judgment. They had open communication about her social life. They were forgiving.

Sanam: Her parents made sure that all her friends were always welcome at her house. There was always lots of food, and if someone had been drinking, they could always sleep there. Her parents became a sounding board for her friends, and they would spend

time at her house even when she wasn't there. Her parents were always present, but in the *background*.

John: His parents did not just say that drugs and alcohol were bad, but talked about *why* and gave examples. He appreciated that his parents always knew what he was doing – they would drop him off at friends and talk to the parents.

Kevin: He had a very active social life; “social studies” were important. Yet he says those times were very important, the social lessons have never left him, and his friendships are still important to him. There is room for a healthy, safe social life at Menlo. He started dating his future wife his sophomore year, and that actually helped him academically. He was a 2.8 student before he met her, and a 3.8 student after.

Courtney: Her class at Menlo was extremely social. Her parents had rules that could not be broken. If she or her siblings were caught driving with someone who had been drinking, they knew that they would be punished in the same way as if they had been the drinking driver. The understanding was that they could call their parents at any time if they needed a safe ride home. There were consequences, eg having to wash the cars the next day, but her parents wanted her to be open and honest. Having a sport was also helpful to avoid partying, since players make a commitment to the team and have to wake up early and be ready for practice.

Courtney Lodato ('96)

Courtney attended college at UC Santa Barbara where she received a BA in English. She is the Senior Manager of Public Relations for the Stanford University Medical Center Renewal Project, a facilities and improvement project for Stanford Hospital and Lucile Packard Children's Hospital. At Menlo, Courtney played soccer, water polo, and was on the swim team. English was her favorite subject and writing was her primary interest.

Kevin Platshon ('03)

Kevin attended UC Berkeley where he majored in Communications. He played water polo, winning the NCAA championship in 2006. Kevin runs digital & social marketing at GoPro. He also is the founder of Waddlebird, a non-profit organization helping to protect endangered species and their habitats. At Menlo, he swam and played water polo. He is married to a Menlo classmate and alum.

John Rivera ('02)

John attended Santa Clara University where he received a BS and MS in Mechanical Engineering and Machine Design. He works as a Staff R&D Engineer for Cardica, Inc in Redwood City leading the design and development for new innovative medical devices. While at Menlo, he played football, soccer and was a member of the track team. He played in the Jazz band and was a member of Latinos Unidos multicultural club. He is engaged to a Menlo alum.

Sanam Saaber ('00)

Sanam attended UCLA where she received a BS in Biology. She also received a MS in Biological Sciences from Stanford and a JD from UC Davis School of Law. She is a Senior Commercial Counsel at Box. She is married to a Menlo alum. Sanam attended Menlo for middle school and high school. Sanam played lacrosse and volleyball. She was a member of the mixed chorus, wrote for the newspaper and journal and studied two languages.

Shawna Mitchell Sisler ('97)

Shawna attended The College of William & Mary where she received a BBA in Marketing. She received an MS in Nursing at University of California, San Francisco (UCSF) and two additional Masters degrees from University of Pennsylvania and Santa Clara University in psychology specialties. Shawna is a board-certified Pediatric Nurse Practitioner at Sutcliffe Developmental & Behavioral Pediatrics in Los Altos. She also works at Children's Hospital Oakland as the NP in their Rett Syndrome clinic. She attended Menlo with her twin sister. Shawna played basketball, soccer and was active in student council. She is an avid ultramarathoner and also survived being a contestant on the show "Survivor."