

Season 5, Episode 3: Bridging Diversity and STEM in the Adirondacks

Host: ESF President Joanie Mahoney

Guest: Paul Hai, Associate Director of Education at ESF's Adirondack Ecological Center

Paul Hai: In terms of what we're trying to accomplish longer term, this is a commitment by ESF to look at our institutions, both academic institutions, professional institutions, state agencies, and to look at who is in those organizations and to think about how we continue to deliver on our commitment to create diversity. We set out to make sure that we introduce students to opportunities that they could pursue that were jobs they might not know existed or academic careers. Over those 12 days, the first session alone, they met 63 different professionals. The system doesn't support kids who are not classroom kids, and there is such an opportunity to spark people's interest and enthusiasm and passion for learning by teaching them in different ways.

Joanie Mahoney: Welcome to season five of Campus Conversations: The Podcast. I'm Joanie Mahoney and I have the honor of serving as SUNY ESF president. ESF is a small college with big ideas, and this season I'm speaking with faculty, students and staff who make ESF mighty. They are the people working to improve our world and sustain the environment. Today I'm excited to welcome ESF's Paul Hai. Paul is committed to education and outreach and making sure that diversity, equity, and inclusion are infused into both. He has spent two decades working to make STEM more accessible and will hear how and why he sees informal science education and experiential learning as cornerstones to making that happen. Thank you for joining me today, Paul.

Paul Hai: Absolutely. I appreciate being on this. This is great.

Joanie Mahoney: Isn't that a nice snippet of who you are here? It is true. And you were doing DEI work before it really was the buzzword that it is now.

Paul Hai: Well, I certainly have come to this on the shoulders of many people who came before me, and I'm incredibly appreciative of what the college has done because there's a huge commitment here at ESF and I'm happy to be part of that.

Joanie Mahoney: So let's start at the beginning. Besides living around the corner from where I lived for a little while, where are you from? Where did you grow up?

Paul Hai: So I grew up in Rochester, New York, and my father's family was from, he grew up in Albany and he spent summers in the Adirondacks, and that was my introduction to the Adirondacks, was in a tent on an island for two weeks every summer. And I loved it as far back as I can remember. And so that's always been a huge foundation of my life and I currently live now and have the very good fortune to work for the college in the Adirondacks.

Joanie Mahoney: It is interesting to live in the Adirondacks. I mean, people save their money all year to be able to go up there and spend a week and you get to live up there with your family, but it is kind remote and you didn't grow up like that. So that was probably a pretty good culture change.

Paul Hai: It's a really interesting question and it's a huge compromise that you make between the things that you want versus the things that you give up. And as a young man, that was an easy decision for me. It never occurred to me that I was really trading anything off. I went to school in Texas, in Houston, fourth biggest city of the United States, really busy, really vibrant, loved it. Left there and went to work in a mountain resort town in Colorado. So instantly went to very remote living and this beginning of these trade-offs of things that you have in a big city versus a small rural environment. But knew I wanted to get back to the Adirondacks and got back there. So it was everything that I expected. It changed very dramatically when I had a family. And that really underscored some of the trade-offs that you have living in a rural environment and the things that you give up to be there. And that was much harder than I had anticipated.

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah, I would imagine, because it's one thing to make a decision for yourself and for Stacy, your wife, who also works here with us at ESF, to make that kind of decision. But then when you're considering, now I'm deciding that my children are going to go to a very small school and their friends are going to live far away from each other. There's no running outside and down the street to the friend from school probably.

Paul Hai: Yeah, you're hitting on a bunch of things. When I grew up, I grew up just outside of Rochester, small community on the outside, and we rode our bikes everywhere and we walked everywhere and there were sidewalks everywhere. And where there wasn't sidewalks, it wasn't that big a deal. They're walking along 28N major east, west highway. It's 55 miles an hour if you're obeying the speed limit, it's officially 45 in town. That's a myth. And there's log trucks all up and down that road. So exactly walking down to the neighbors isn't quite the same thing as it was for us. And the interesting thing is I grew up wanting to be outside all the time, and this whole debate about nature versus just nurture, I figured out, well, of course my kids will grow up in nature and they'll love to be outside. Well, they both hate being outside.

They would rather read a book and hang out and do something inside rather than be outside, which is really just not at all what I expected. And so these trade-offs where you're making a decision for yourself or as a couple, Stacy and I made a conscious decision to be where we are and a conscious decision together to raise a family there. But I think the realities of what living there is for our daughters is very different than we had expected. And they're their own unique individuals, and I respect and appreciate that. But that was very hard. It's hard for us to watch some of those things as they grow through the challenges,

the small social environment and the lack of access to a lot of the things that shaped my childhood.

Joanie Mahoney: And I think a constant issue is lack of access to the internet.

Paul Hai: So on one hand they have too much access to the internet, on the other hand, the reliability factor of the internet is... Especially during COVID, when all four of us were home in the house with limited bandwidth and inevitably everybody's on school or in meetings or whatever. And so there's from some corner of the house like, ah, I can't carry a zoom call.

Joanie Mahoney: Yes, I can't imagine what families did who had kids in school like that. My youngest was a senior in high school, so very different than some of the younger grades where they had to be in front of a teacher and hats off to moms and dads that were able to pull that off. So let's back up a little bit. You went to college in Houston for not science, right?

Paul Hai: Well, science but not biological science. I have a bachelor's of science in hotel and restaurant management.

Joanie Mahoney: And you know what? It's not a surprise knowing you and working with you, you have that mindset. We've gone up and had things like board meetings up in the Adirondacks and that comes through, your expertise. And I know that when you've been short-staffed and it's tough to fill positions that you do everything including cooking right? Up at Newcomb.

Paul Hai: Yeah. There's definitely an all hands on deck nature to run in a field station. I mean, I absolutely love the college and one of the things that is so remarkable about the college is that we have these field stations and my heart is 100% into making these places run and to serve students and to serve staff and researchers. Yeah, so I've cooked.

Joanie Mahoney: If you want to know, I pay attention, and you also have a real entrepreneurial streak, in conversations that we've had, you have peppered me with ideas of different things that we could be doing to use the properties in a way that exposes more people. And I do want to talk about what that experience means and what it means to the college, what it means to the individuals who get that experience. But I've appreciated that. I love hearing people's ideas. Let's jump forward and then maybe we'll come back, but this program that you just launched with Medgar Evers College in CUNY, that was you. You went out and made that happen. You put that whole program together and that's paying dividends for the students, for our college, for Medgar Evers, for the state of New York. So start us at the beginning of that. How did you pull off Timbuctoo? And maybe start with what is Timbuctoo? Why is that name important?

Paul Hai:

Sure. Well, there's a whole bunch of great things wrapped up there. And one thing that's really important for me to share is that this wasn't wholly me, obviously as a whole host of us. And it starts with Matt Millea whose idea was we should be doing something really great at the high school level around climate. And I said to Matt, "I would love to do that. Can I make it about diversity?" So even from that starting point, it was a collection of ideas and energies that brought it together. So what is Timbuctoo? Timbuctoo is, it works on a couple of different levels. The most obvious level is that it is a summer program for high school students targeted between ages of 15 and 17. So sophomores, and juniors in high school. It runs for two weeks and it's a two week exploration of climate science through a lens of environmental and social justice. And we ran three sessions. So it's a six week summer program and it's been a blast.

On another level in terms of what we're trying to accomplish longer term, this is a commitment by ESF to look at our institutions, both academic institutions, professional institutions, state agencies, and to look at who is in those organizations and to think about how we continue to deliver on our commitment to create diversity. And the notion for me having been at ESF for a long time, having done this work for a long time, is that if we want to transform our institutions and we're looking to transform them at the point of employment that we're too late because the candidate pool that we want to draw from isn't there because they don't know the job exists.

And if we want to transform our student body, if we're looking to do that by who we recruit, we're already too late because the students that might want to come to us don't know that we exist, don't know our academic programs exist, or again, that the careers that they can prepare for at the end of it exist. So really the way this is designed to work is to hit students before they've decided what their post high school future looks like and to present opportunities, present access, present awareness to them that might be transformative in how they think about their futures and hopefully transformative to all of our organizations and institutions about who works with us and works for us.

Joanie Mahoney:

So I'll say STEM is not traditionally diverse and the Adirondacks not traditionally diverse. And you changed that in a big way with a six-week program partnering with a school in New York City. And I did have the opportunity to interact with one of those groups of students that I will say was here at the same time that your campus was being washed out by a storm. I can't even imagine having all of these young people and the roads are being washed out and we have to rescue people out of Newcomb because bridges are gone. And so what an experience for those students.

Paul Hai:

We were literally, it was Tuesday morning, July 11th, and we're at Medgar Evers and the Tuesday morning session is about climate related impacts. And I am, well, this is going on, getting text messages and emails about the bridge being

gone, about the ranger evacuation, about all of these things, about the stranded guests, the whole nine yards. And we actually were able to use that in subsequent sessions to talk about climate related events and that these things happen in real time and that they're actually going to move over the next several days into a site of severe storm damage as a result of climate change.

Joanie Mahoney: So where does the name Timbuctoo come from?

Paul Hai: The Timbuctoo name is something that we are very intentional about. And it's a reference to a number of things that have happened in New York state history. So oftentimes we don't realize the richness of New York state history, and especially here in Syracuse. We have incredible civil rights history in Syracuse, a lot of it pre-Civil war. And the Timbuctoo effort was actually an attempt by a gentleman by the name of Garrett Smith. In 1846, New York State doubled down on having a property requirement to vote, but only for freed black men. It'd been, I think it was created originally in 1821, and they were looking to repeal it in 1846, and they did not. And so Garrett Smith, who lived just over in Peterborough-

Paul Hai: Exactly, yeah. And he said he was one of the largest landowners in New York, wealthiest man in New York, and one of the wealthiest men in the United States at the time and tremendous landholdings decided, if you have to own land, I'm going to give land away to freed men of color in order to give them the vote. Most of the land was up in the Adirondacks and one aggregation of parcels of land that he gave away became known as Timbuctoo. So that's where the name comes from. The reason we were using the name is because Garrett Smith was trying to provide access to the vote and we're trying to provide access to careers. And so that's why we chose the name.

Joanie Mahoney: Excellent. I love that.

Paul Hai: And we also spend time at the Timbuctoo settlement, which is where John Brown, the famous abolitionist, he had a farm there. He came to help Garrett Smith and to help the settlers there. So we go into the farm, we visit it, we talk about civil rights, we talk about social justice on the site. So both for a geographic connection, a historic connection, and the idea of access to the future. That's why we chose that name.

Joanie Mahoney: And I think, you know that the woman who runs the friends group at the John Brown Farm in Syracuse?

Paul Hai: Yes.

Joanie Mahoney: Strathmore neighborhood where you lived for a little while. My own son was just saying recently that Garrett Smith should be somebody that has a statue

because we just came from Indigenous People's Day and the controversy around the Columbus statue downtown, and they were saying there are people that aren't household names that really should be honored.

Paul Hai: I think your son is dead on. Absolutely great.

Joanie Mahoney: I know, I agree. So you and Matt Millea have this idea that high school students should have more access to ESFs Adirondack property in a mutually beneficial way. How does that turn into a partnership with Medgar Evers College in the CUNY system, City University of New York?

Paul Hai: When Matt and I had this conversation, originally, we had just come from a tour of SUNY Cortland property at Pine Knot on Racket Lake, which actually interestingly was the Huntington family who created our campus in Newcomb. It was actually Archer Huntington gave his property to the ESF in 1932, and he gave his father's property to Cortland in 1948. So we were talking about these fantastic facilities and how can we better utilize them? That's where this idea came from. We built Timbuctoo initially as an opportunity to recruit students out of New York City relationships and have a cohort at ESF, have a cohort at Cortland, and then use both of our camps. And in sharing this idea with a regional partner, the Adirondack Council, they said, we love this idea. We think you should have a community partner in New York. And that was where the recommendation came from Medgar Evers.

And it's an interesting cross connection because when I was involved in starting with starting the Adirondack Diversity Initiative, and one of our very first symposiums, we had Wallace Ford from Medgar Evers came and he participated in that diversity institute. So he is the partner that we connected with, again through the Adirondack Council at Medgar Evers. And so it was a restoration of a connection from almost a decade before. And it was the creation of this just fantastic partnership with Medgar Evers and between SUNY and CUNY, upstate Downstate. It's really great.

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah, that is great. So that partnership that you rekindled, and I will say you have incredible contexts that you've built up over the time that you've been working here at ESF, but that partnership resulted in some significant funding from the state of New York to make this program possible.

Paul Hai: Absolutely.

Joanie Mahoney: And who are the champions that you were working with?

Paul Hai: When we were talking about this idea with the Adirondack Council, they had just invited New York State's, black, Puerto Rican, Hispanic, and Asian caucus to Lake Placid for the very first time that they'd had their caucus retreat in the

Adirondacks, which had been really powerful. And Aaron Mayer, who's just a force to be reckoned with, he's fantastic, he had taken them to Timbuctoo to see the John Brown Farm. And to let them see that there is a legacy of people of color in the Adirondacks going back to the 1840s. So we had a meeting with them and they loved this idea. And so they were really the power behind this. And they also obviously helped elevate this idea as a DSF, elevate this idea to the governor's office. The governor responded in partnership with the caucus and the caucus has been our lead supporter, but it was when we talk about opportunities to do things, they created a funding opportunity that was transformative to make this come to life.

Joanie Mahoney: And it's really significant funding that covers the expense for all of these students over the six week period in transportation and housing and food.

Paul Hai: The power of this funding, actually even beyond that, which we're creating an all expenses paid opportunity for the students, as you mentioned, includes everything, but also provides a stipend for them because we recognize that many students might have a summer job that's important to their family stability or important to their future planning for their own academic future. So we want to make sure that we're not asking them to participate in something that is taking them away from an opportunity to earn some level of financial stability for themselves. So we're making sure that we're paying them a stipend. But even beyond that, also we have money in the budget to create opportunities for college students, for staffing, create college opportunity for college students to do research around is this program creating the change we want to see?

So what is the learning outcome pre and post just from the participation in a particular session? And then we're looking at the opportunity to invest long-term and looking at what does each cohort each year, what are the changes in the choices they make about their academic preparation, about where they go to school, about what careers they choose. So we're excited. We've got two years of funding. We're going after a third year, and we're putting in place the pieces to be able to do this long-term evaluative research.

Joanie Mahoney: How about short-term evaluative research? Have you gotten surveys or just maybe informal feedback from the students?

Paul Hai: Both. So the pre and post evaluations we already implemented this summer and there's a graduate student, Alex Walls, who's amazing also our program coordinator. So she's been wholeheartedly involved and she's doing the research to look at whether this has been what the evaluations look like for pre and post understanding. And we did this around what is your knowledge of environmental justice? What is your knowledge of social justice? What is your knowledge of climate science, pre and post? And then also a whole bunch of other questions about students, how they're engaged in these issues, again pre

and post. So that's already underway for short term. And then the feedback question has really been pretty neat. Each day we had a reflection period about what they enjoyed the most about the day, or even things that they didn't necessarily enjoy. We heard some of that too, but we made sure we created a space where they could tell us like, oh yeah, this needs to be fixed.

But at the very end, the last day we had everybody, we had a reflection on the two weeks and people shared things. One of the most powerful things to hear was, I didn't know this existed and I want to do it. So that was really neat to see that, okay, we definitely did put things in front of people that changed the landscape of what they see as the potential future. And then in that moment, we also asked everyone to think about the thing that they didn't want to forget six months from now. And we gave everybody a Timbuctoo postcard. They addressed it to themselves and they wrote down something that they wanted to make sure they didn't forget, and we're going to be mailing those to everybody in December. And reading those postcards is awesome.

Joanie Mahoney: That is such a good idea. That's such a good idea. So this was not lecture style opportunity for students to be exposed to environmental science, climate science. This was experiential.

Paul Hai: It was a mix. So we started out, the program runs two days in Brooklyn where we do introduction to all of these core concepts, and that's a mix of we would have a lecture and an activity for every subject, every unit. And then we moved to Kingston, New York for a day. That was a transition day between leaving Brooklyn in the morning and sleeping in Syracuse at night. We had a transition day in Kingston, and that was all field-based experiential. And then we're in Syracuse for two days, Thursday and Friday. And those were a mix of kind of lecture, but engaged lecture in the mornings and activities in the afternoon. Awesome stuff. Went to Skä•noñh Center, just really did a lot of neat things here. Again, this blend of instruction and action. And then in the Adirondacks was all field-based. It's really fun.

Joanie Mahoney: So was it similar to what you do on a regular basis? I mean, you have been welcoming students to the Newcomb campus for years, and the focus has really been on experiential learning experiential. Was it similar to that?

Paul Hai: Structurally, yes. It was very much the model of we greet people, we share content, we get them hands-on, and then we show how hands-on science leads to societal change. So that kind of thing was really fun. What was different though is that the intentionality in this was because it was so focused around environmental and social justice issues and climate justice issues, and because I want to come back to this keyword in the title careers, it's the Timbuctoo Climate Science and Careers Institute. Because careers was such an important part of this, the distinct difference structure was similar, but the framing and the synthesis was very different. And when we talk about outcomes and what

we achieved, we set out to make sure that we introduced students to opportunities that they could pursue that were jobs they might not know existed or academic careers.

Over those 12 days, the first session alone, they met 63 different professionals. So 12 days we're putting people in front of them in all kinds of different positions. And so that is distinctly different from what I've done in the past. Usually when you're with me in the field, either I'm given instruction or someone else from the Newcomb campus staff is given instruction. This time around it was people from all over in all kinds of different positions. And we worked really hard also to make sure that they were people of color so that they could see role models in careers in pathways that they could follow.

Joanie Mahoney: I have heard so many times from young people who say they didn't know that this work was being done, especially here in Syracuse, we entertained a couple hundred seventh graders from the city of Syracuse School district and the Gateway building. And I think that's a giant step toward exposing students to these careers and also helping ESF in our constant quest to diversify our student body. I would like to be doing more of that. So what advice would you have for the administration here, knowing now what you do, having seen this Timbuctoo experience, what kinds of things would you recommend if you're trying to diversify our student body here?

Paul Hai: Well, I mean, that's a huge question, and obviously that's a societal question too, it's not just ESF. Seeing the space is huge, but seeing what we do I think is really the foundation of getting kids hooked. And so I think that the seventh graders, that's fantastic. And I think that is the kind of thing that we want to do more of. Obviously it's the perennial challenge of what is our capacity and how do we do it? And I really want to recognize how hard that is because it's easy to sit somewhere and say, oh, well, this is what you should do to fix that. And it's really hard to actually make that happen because of so many capacity challenges. But I think that working with students earlier is huge. I also think, and I would be excited to see what this looks like, is to try and create, we have this beautiful Timbuctoo model that we... I think it's beautiful for other society.

Joanie Mahoney: I do too. I do too. I thought it was phenomenal.

Paul Hai: So we have this great model and we want to look at how we expand it. So what does growth look like? And so I would love to see this replicated in cities across New York state. And so what would a Syracuse model look like? And I met with DEC in Buffalo to talk about Timbuctoo and potential growth models. And the Adirondacks is a very important landscape to me personally and professionally. And we want to get people to the Adirondacks, but that doesn't mean that this program has to be tied to the Adirondacks. We could create Timbuctoo models where we're partnering an institution of higher education with a community that's been systemically oppressed or systemically marginalized, and introduce

them to opportunities they didn't know about. And that can be community based, it can be Syracuse on the hill to Syracuse in the valley, it can be anywhere. And so I think my only, I don't know that I'm appropriately in a position to give advice, but my only observation would be to say that I think we can pursue really creative approaches that can be high impact and can be right out our back door.

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah, I love that idea of a Timbuctoo model right here in Syracuse, and as you said, partnering with young people. I don't want to smooth past your connection to the Adirondacks. So I'm curious, did you grow up with brothers and sisters?

Paul Hai: So I have an older sister.

Joanie Mahoney: And she was spending two weeks every summer in a tent in the Adirondacks?

Paul Hai: So that was the family part. So we take our family vacation was tent on an island in Lake George. And when that was over, my parents, I loved it so much. My parents sent me to an additional four weeks or six weeks in the Adirondacks. So I spent my whole summer. My sister did not do that, but I did.

Joanie Mahoney: I would love to be able to bring some of the local students, if we can replicate that model, bring them up for a little bit of an experience there.

Paul Hai: So the opportunity to bring students to places that they're not familiar with, I think is actually really helpful. One, it challenges us to think about how others live. And I think when we were talking earlier about me going to Houston, so I grew up upstate New York, that's my frame of reference. And I went to Houston and it was like another nation that shared the same language, but not really. Anyway, but it really introduced me to so many different ways of understanding how communities function. And that's been really helpful to me. And I think the same thing is true even again in our own backyard. So having a connection with students who are growing up in the major Syracuse area and bringing them up to the Adirondacks, we can have very different conversations but that they can bring home. And that's actually a big part of Timbuctoo.

When we're spending those first two days in Brooklyn, we wanted to make sure that they're meeting community partners so that when they go on to Kingston, go on to Syracuse, go on to the Adirondacks, the message isn't that environmental justice, social justice, climate justice, climate science only happens at ESF or only happens in the Adirondacks. It's that it happens in your neighborhood and you can be engaged in your neighborhood and you can find a career in your neighborhood. So the first day in Brooklyn, second day in Brooklyn, we have a ranger. The individual ranger, forest ranger Scott, John Scott came and he's a man of color. He's a New York State Forest ranger, and

he's based in the Queen's, Brooklyn area. So to see that this person works in your backyard, lives in your backyard and has a career-

Joanie Mahoney: It's huge for these students to see, huge.

Paul Hai: Yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: And as I said, it's that initial exposure. I mean, the difference between never doing it and doing it once is huge. And then as Danushi Fernando said on a recent podcast conversation, then you do it 10 times and then it's really life-changing and you're steering people toward careers. Basil Seggos, the DEC commissioner was here. I was very surprised at the number, and I don't have it committed to memory, but it's over 650 current DEC employees are ESF grads. Are you stunned?

Paul Hai: No kidding.

Joanie Mahoney: I was stunned. He tweeted that out and you can find it on Basil Seggos' Twitter feed or X feed or whatever it's called. And then I had a conversation with a man who is the central New York director for state parks, and he said they're in the same ballpark in terms of hiring ESF students. We talk about workforce development. We're the workforce development in large part for the people who go into public service and work in these state agencies, ag and markets parks, and then the US Forest Service, the national parks, that career group has been off limits to people. And it's outrageous that it still is.

And this program at Timbuctoo, you will change that because there are students who came over the course of those six weeks that are going to aim for studying in this arena that will then start to feed those. And you'll have more ranger Scots that you can put in front of the next group of kids. But it's that first dipping your toe in exposure. And for you to take the time to take the idea and flesh it out and then go sell it, find partners, develop the curricula, and then you show up at the Syracuse campus with this whole group of young students that had really great questions for us. So I'm thrilled with it. And I love the idea of using a similar model here close to campus.

Paul Hai: I'd love to see that happen.

Joanie Mahoney: So let me ask you this. When you went to Colorado, were you in the hotel tourism management business? What kind of work were you doing out there and where were you? You said it was more remote? I'm trying to picture.

Paul Hai: So at the time-

Joanie Mahoney: Leadville?

- Paul Hai:** Oh, Leadville is awesome. No, I was in Vail.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Oh, Jeepers. That is not that remote, Paul.
- Paul Hai:** Well, it's somewhat remote.
- Joanie Mahoney:** You weren't roughing it.
- Paul Hai:** Well, okay, actually, if we want to tie this to a variety of things, housing, which is an ongoing problem in the Adirondacks. But I came home in 1993 and I knew what that housing problem was because I just lived through it for four years in Colorado. So what started out as a community-based problem that I experienced in Colorado is what the Adirondacks is facing now as a region. These issues of housing,
- Joanie Mahoney:** Very serious issue because you need all these people to be working there. I mean, you and Stacy feel it when you try to search for people to come and work on the campus. To be living close enough to work there, you have to have resources that you're priced out of.
- Paul Hai:** Oh, 100%. So absolutely, a significant, and I won't say existential, but a pretty close challenge for how we fill jobs, as you noted, and also how we fill our schools and fill our community services, volunteer fire departments, all of the Adirondack communities, 103 communities. For the vast majority of those communities, it's volunteer. So as your population ages as you have less youth, as you have less people who are able to come to your community to live and work and raise families, you wind up thinning the ranks of people who are able to fill jobs but also fill emergency services. It's a big deal. So teasing about Vail, it's kind of remote in that it's over the continental divide and it's a long way down-
- Joanie Mahoney:** The water goes the other way. Okay.
- Paul Hai:** Right, exactly. I mean, it's not remote in the sense that yeah, there's several thousand people that live there, but in terms of what is there, there are some real serious economic stratification. But there is some very high level stuff, absolutely, in terms of the stores and the clientele that comes. But I was on the very, having just graduated from college, I was on the bottom rung of all of that. And it was again, a very educational experience to see.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I'll bet living that, you will never forget. And when you interact with these students, you will have the empathy, you'll understand what it feels like.
- Paul Hai:** And there was a whole part of the service community too, and we can come back to that as a separate conversation, but there was a lot of people in

Colorado who spoke Spanish as a primary language or their first language, either or both. And there was a whole stratification even within the hospitality industry around this as well. And this has been a driver for me also. So you asked what I was doing. I graduated from college and I got a job as a manager of trainee with Marriott. I worked for Marriott for two years at their resort in Vail. And then I transitioned to another resort where I was the director of guest services.

It was a lot of fun and I loved it, absolutely loved being in the west and being in Colorado. But I really did miss the Adirondacks and part of it was family. The continental divide is a geographic thing, but for a distance it's a big barrier for family participation and I miss that. So I came home partly for family, but I came home because water is very different out west as anybody who's been out there knows. And where I live in Newcomb now, between where my home is and where my work is, it's a seven mile drive and there's four places that I can pull over and jump in a lake and swim on my way home.

Joanie Mahoney: Very different.

Paul Hai: Yeah, that's how I grew up. Water's very different and I miss the Adirondack landscape.

Joanie Mahoney: So I'm interested, and I think a lot of people will be, because I think people maybe don't envision themselves doing this, but then you completely changed careers, but it took another degree in the middle. So you left the working world where you full-time here at ESF when you came back?

Paul Hai: So, yes. And the transition point is a, I think is interesting, so I'll share it. So I came back east and I was managing a small country inn. Within the hospitality industry, I'd been very involved in beverages, food and beverage. I came back east and I got a job in my career field in hotel and restaurant management. I was working at a large resort, the Sagamore Resort on Lake George. And through that was introduced to a small country inn and got recruited to work there and got very involved in food and beverage and in particular running their beverage program. The owner's husband was very involved in wine. I had done some work in wine previously. And so he introduced me even more deeply into wine. And so really had a lot of fun there. A place called the Friends Lake Inn in Chestertown.

And through Greg's connection, I was offered an opportunity to teach at a local community college in their hospitality program. So I was teaching fine dining service and I was teaching introduction to food and beverage. So that was my exposure to teaching. And I realized that I was also doing all the staff training at the restaurant too. So I had a real educational role that I had never thought of myself as an educator. What I realized was that as passionate as I was about the

hospitality industry, all of the people who were working in the restaurant were these local high school students or people who lived locally. And they were all trying to make it through or get out of the Adirondacks, especially the high school students. And this is at the community college as well. So all these kids that just wanted to get a degree and get out of the Adirondacks, get out of the region.

And I realized that that's fine, but they were leaving the region without having been exposed to anything that was here. And I had just moved home from Colorado specifically to be in this landscape because I loved it so much. And these kids were all like, I want to get out of here. And they didn't know where any of the swimming holes were. They couldn't tell you a difference between a maple and a pine tree. And I just thought it was a shame not to know your own landscape, even if you want to leave. And that's fine. I mean, I want my daughters to go and explore the world, but I want them to have an appreciation and understanding of the world in which they come from. So that prompted me to, in the one part to realize that I actually enjoyed education and was good at it.

Joanie Mahoney: That's a hard job. Teaching is a very difficult job. For you to try it and really like it and change your whole career as a result, that's not common. It's a hard job.

Paul Hai: Well, I appreciate that. I've been fortunate in having a lot of fun because I get to teach outside, so much of my work gets to be outside. So I started looking at programs where I could become trained to be a biology teacher because I wanted to be the biology teacher that taught outside every single day. And I was going to get a master's degree in biology and come back to the Adirondacks and get a job as a biology teacher. And I found ESF and I came here and I realized that maybe classroom isn't exactly how my temperament is well suited. So that whole classroom management thing, thankfully I figured out early that that would not be a good fit for me.

So I met Andy Saunders, a former professor here, and he introduced me to informal science education. And that was an opportunity for me to be outside every single day with school groups the same as I intended to be a biology teacher taking my class outside. Now I got to be a teacher taking everybody else's class outside. And it was just a fantastic fit. And I've always been incredibly grateful to ESF for offering me the opportunity to stay at the school and to work here.

Joanie Mahoney: Informal science education. That is something that you do really well. Why is it important?

Paul Hai: I love that question. I was never a classroom kid. The irony of me teaching actually is that if anybody in high school who had me as a student knew that I

was teaching at a college, they'd be like if they could have written references that have been like, do not hire this man. But the reality is that I was not a classroom kid, and I don't mean to indict teachers, but the system doesn't support kids who are not classroom kids. And there is such an opportunity to spark people's interest and enthusiasm and passion for learning by teaching them in different ways.

Sitting in a row of desks with a chalkboard, I guess no one has chalkboards anymore, but with whatever virtual chalkboard and lecturing kids is not a way to reach every single kid. And so the beauty of informal science education for me, or informal education is that you give students an opportunity to learn about the content by getting their hands on it or provoking their interests or stimulating their interests by creating questions and experiences that make them ask their own questions and make them engage further by actually embracing the activity. And that's why I love it so much.

Joanie Mahoney: You can hear it in your voice. And I love it too. I have had my own kids that I wish had the opportunity for more of that informal, especially in science.

Paul Hai: Oh, yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: So what's next for you? You said you're hoping to continue the Timbuctoo funding, so another round of legislative meetings. If that continues, will it be six weeks or are you hoping to expand it? Six weeks is probably about as long as you can go in the Adirondacks. Yeah, you go between black flies and cold.

Paul Hai: That's funny. So interestingly, six weeks is about as long as we can go, but for a different reason. The challenge that we have in the model that we've created is because we're working with high school students, high school students are really only available from 4th of July until broadly Labor Day. And because I'm committed to making sure that this opportunity and this program works at all levels as quickly as possible, we wanted to get opportunities for college students right away. So that's why we hired college students staff because we want them to be involved in this program and we want it to be a stepping stone for them to see in a potential career too. So when the high school students are available over when the college students are available, they're only available until midgut. So the six weeks is kind of the timeline that we have.

Joanie Mahoney: That you have both.

Paul Hai: Right. So the time constraint is one. In terms of growing the next question is, how many students can we have in each cohort before the conversation is too big to be rich and to include everybody and to include everybody? And we still think 16 is about the sweet spot for that. So then the next constraint is housing capacity. So how many beds do we have? And just on a casual callback

conversation, all my hospitality industry friends are like, ah, you left the hospitality industry. And I'm like, no, I manage 100 bed science resort. So we do have a 72 seat dining center and 100 beds at Newcomb, but we have a lot of other activities that are going on and the breakdown of what groups are here and how many beds we have available for Timbuctoo. This is all part of the mix.

Joanie Mahoney: Right because there's other things going on up at Newcomb.

Paul Hai: Sure. Yeah. It's the summer season. We have all of our field research going on and all kinds of other things that are happening. So those three constraints really inform what is the growth model for Timbuctoo look like. And when we talk about trying to have a Syracuse model, I consider that like a franchise. How do we then train other organizations or other entities to model the relationships?

Joanie Mahoney: You're going to train the trainers? Yeah, I love that. I really would like to pursue that with a Timbuctoo model here. I think that the provost will too. Sam Mukasa has talked about more summer programming and the fact that you could practically throw a stone on a city school from campus here. So yeah, I'm in on that. And I will say, I did try to get ahold of you a couple of times when you were doing things like dishes.

Paul Hai: Oh my God.

Joanie Mahoney: And cooking. And so thank you because every time you had a staff issue, it fell to you. And I know that you were doing everything. And then the road washed out and we had to rescue people. And then to continue with that Timbuctoo program, which I got a lot of great feedback. I want to tell you that I was with the SUNY Chancellor the day after he was with you.

Paul Hai: Oh, really?

Joanie Mahoney: Yes. And his staff told me how much they love that program. So it's great for ESF in a lot of different ways. It's great for ESF, but I hope life changing for the students that you're interacting with.

Paul Hai: I hope so too. And I'm happy to hear about the chancellor's response. We weren't sure the chancellor was going to come. So the fact that Chancellor showed up, that blew us all away. But I want to come back to the fact that I'm sitting here talking to you about this program, but this program exists because ESF created a space for it. So one of the things that I love about ESF, and you talked about the entrepreneurs, there's spirit is that ESF allows that to happen. So when people come to leadership and say, "Hey, what about this?" And leadership says, "Yeah, let's try and make that happen." I can't do this in a vacuum. I could not have created Timbuctoo-

- Joanie Mahoney:** Matt Millea is a good partner in something like that because he has got a good vision. He's also willing to roll his sleeves up and do the hard work. He also like you has a lot of connections to get in front of the right people to make projects like this happen. And then he's somebody who... I was with all of those seventh graders because Matt said, "Hey, I've invited a couple hundred seventh graders from the Syracuse City School District to have their lunch in Gateway because they were over at the dome for a robotics demonstration or advanced manufacturing or something." And that's the kind of person he is. He's not just trying to get through the day, he's trying to make things better all the time. And I love working with people like you and with people like Matt that make things like that happen. So thank you for all you do for ESF. It's been a pleasure talking to you and letting your colleagues here at ESF know a little bit more about you.
- Paul Hai:** Yeah. Well, thanks. I really appreciate the opportunity to be here. And I just want to end by saying I have really enjoyed working with Matt, but it's a reciprocal thing. Joanie, it's your leadership. That's what makes us work.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Thank you. That's so nice of you to say. I will see you again soon.
- Paul Hai:** Awesome.