

Beyond the Dais: Episode 29 – An Interview with Forge Evolution

Note: Transcripts are generated using a combination of speech recognition software and human transcribers and may contain errors. Please check the corresponding audio before quoting in print.

Scott Anderson: Thank you for tuning in to Beyond the Dais, a podcast about the stories taking place in and around El Paso County, Colorado. I'm your host, Scott Anderson, and my guest today is Morgan Mote, the CEO of Forge Evolution. How are you doing today, Morgan?

Morgan Mote: I'm doing great. Thank you.

Scott: Good. Thanks for having me today. I really appreciate it. So, today we'll be talking about some of the programs associated with Forge Evolution and how they are putting American Rescue Plant Act grant funds to good use in the community. But first, if you're interested in more stories about ARPA funding throughout El Paso County, or hearing from county leadership about local government priorities and how they operate, you can find additional episodes of this podcast on your podcast platform of choice. But let's go ahead and get into it. Morgan, I was wondering if you can start by sharing a bit of background about yourself and how you came to be here at Forge Evolution.

Morgan: Absolutely. So, I've actually been on staff since 2009, and I always say that before that, I was a student volunteer all through high school, and I spent five years as student volunteer, and I always say I went away, went to college, got married, had a baby and came back to my love, which was working with students and youth who were in need. And I've been here since 2009 and worked on the program side, and then I became the deputy director and I've been the CEO since 2016.

Scott: Wonderful. And can you share some of that background about Forge Evolution itself? How long have they been in El Paso County and what is the main mission of the organization?

Morgan: Yes, so Forge Evolution has been in Colorado Springs since 1994. We're actually known for being Colorado Springs Teen Court, and we rebranded in 2021 in an effort to expand our services for youth throughout El Paso County. And as a Teen Court mission, we work with youth throughout El Paso County, ages 10 to 19, who are in the juvenile justice system, who have made a mistake, who are youth who maybe shoplifted or have gotten in a fight or smoked marijuana, and they've been ticketed by the judicial system and are in a six-month deferred sentence. So, they've done something wrong, and they have that criminal record, and our job is to work with them to provide mentoring programs, to provide choice, behavior programming to provide opportunities to learn new skills and to ultimately get their record expunged and have this a part of

their past where they can move forward. In 2021, we had been working as a board and staff for two years as an answer to pleas from the community in families that had been asking us that they needed support and prevention support. What that looked like for our community is that a lot of our youth are struggling – in mental health support, in resiliency skills – because they are youth who maybe aren't in trouble yet, but they're going down paths where they really are struggling. They're needing adult – extra adult support, they're needing those skill-based services. And so, the community and families were reaching out to us asking for where are those services for youth that are in need but don't have identifiers like homelessness or LGBTQ. And there are youth in the community that need that extra little bit of support on the side, and so we came to that call and

we rebranded as Forge Evolution, allowing our youth in Colorado Springs specifically to forge forward and to begin to evolve into their ability to be their own people. This generation specifically loves to be individual, and they really want to be different and their own unique selves. And so, as Forge Evolution we have started a prevention-based program. So, we still do Teen Court as one of our pillar programs, but we also do our prevention drop-in program which is called Forge. And so that program is on Monday evenings from 5:00 to 7:00, and we offer resiliency based programming that's fun and dynamic and we always feed the youth. And so, we'll bring in the Space Foundation and we will play with robots and drones and then we're going to talk about failure. What does that look like for our youth? Where do they feel that? At school, at home, in their lives – we make them feel a little bit of failure in the night, playing with those crazy drones from the Space Foundation. And then we give them the skills and we work through those skill sets so that they can practice those at home on how to work through those feelings of failure. So, every night is a different, unique, dynamic and resiliency skill that we work on, and then we hope that we can continue to build those skills in those youth every single week.

Scott: Now, this mission certainly seems like a heavy one, preventative work for youth to hopefully not end up in an unfortunate situation. What sort of weight does that feel like for you and for your staff and how do you address that weight?

Morgan: I'll tell you, it can be really challenging. We actually had a staff meeting today. We had one of our youth commit suicide last week. And we took a moment today with donuts and flowers and fruit and just a little bit of coloring and just took some time to talk about how do we feel, about what we know, shared some stories about that youth and what we knew about him. And just talked about what does that mean for each of us? How have we experienced suicide as individuals or in the workplace, and really took the opportunity to just share because our youth go through so much. Being in middle school and high school of today is nothing like 20 years ago – between social media and bullying, cyberbullying, and the drugs that are so prevalent, it is nothing like anyone could ever imagine. And our youth are truly, truly struggling and we feel that on the staff

side. One of our goals is to ensure that our staff has the opportunities for self-care. But it's also one of our goals, and something that ARPA has helped us with, was bringing on a full-time therapist. That therapist is available for our staff, but also, they're available for our youth in an immediate need. So, our therapist is able to provide that therapy for our youth in any moment at any time and also available for individual therapy and then was able to lead that conversation today with our staff.

Scott: Now, how do you look at that tragic incident and not see that as a failure on your part? Right? Because I don't see that as a failure on your part. I see it as, you know, someone making a decision, but I think it's – I think it would be easy as someone on your staff to internalize that and say “I didn't do enough”, you know, maybe “I didn't reach that person when I thought I maybe I should have”. How do you and your staff go about, you know, understanding that? You know, you do what you can, and even in scenarios like this, while it's certainly tragic, it's something that you can see as an opportunity for growth within your own organization.

Morgan: I think that – I think the biggest thing to remember is that our youth have their whole lives ahead of them, and our job is to touch a very small sliver. And the more that we can do that, the more that we can be consistent for them, the more that we can show them love and compassion and empathy, the more impact that we can have on them on a daily basis. For that student, we were only able to see him four times, and that is why we started our prevention program. He was on our court side. We were unable to see him more. And so, our job is to ensure that we can do everything that we can for our youth to the best of our ability. Connect them with resources if we know that they're struggling. We don't always know that a youth is struggling. And so helping the staff recognize that, do everything that you can, ask the questions that you need to ask and that you can ask via support, and let those students know that you're available to hear them when they're ready is the best that we can do for each of our students. Knowing our students by name is something that's critical for us. Our program staff knows every single student that walks in the door, their name, what's going on in their lives. We like to talk about, you know, eyebrows or games that are happening on the weekend or whatever that is important for that student. And so, making that impact, one grain of rice at a time, is what really, really matters. And really what we have to focus on is how do we do that. Every single day that we show up.

Scott: Yeah. And so, you mentioned knowing every single name. I mean, how many individuals do you serve and in what communities do you serve? Is it limited here to El Paso County, or do you reach outside of that?

Morgan: So, we mostly serve in El Paso County. We do have a few youth that are outside El Paso County, probably less than 1%. And we serve approximately 700 to 800 youth every year. We see that balance between male and female, which is ironic because it's almost 50/50, which is wonderful because we get a good balance of our young youth between our males, females, nonbinary youth. And so, we're always excited to see who's going to come in the door.

Scott: And can you talk about how important it is for Forge Evolution to be looked at as an organization that people can come to and receive help from?

Morgan: I think it's critical that with our new name that people start identifying Forge Evolution as that place for youth who need support. Teen Court was always known as the place where the troubled kids go, and we are so much more than that. And I think it's important that the community, parents specifically, youth specifically, understand that we are so much more than that now. We have the resources to help with skill-based learning to help with mental health support, behavioral health support and to give that listening ear. One of the biggest things that I think is going to help with that is on December 1st of last year we launched our capital campaign. We are purchasing our own building come May of this year, which is super exciting, and we will be able to provide drop-in support and services for any teen in the community that needs it and that will be much more like our Forge program where we have fun activities, dinner for our youth, and activities. You know, therapeutic art programs or drop-in programs like our Space Foundation program, our Life Skills program, where they're learning, resumé writing, goal setting, those kinds of programs every single night of the week and in our own space, where we're not limited to being identified as a court program for troubled youth, but really identified as Forge Evolution, the program that works to empower youth in this community.

Scott: So, after submitting your grant request to El Paso County, Forge Evolution was awarded \$200,000 of ARPA funding. You mentioned a little bit before, but I'm wondering if maybe you can go into a little bit more detail on what that money has gone to fund.

Morgan: The ARPA funding for our organization has really changed the trajectory of where we get to go in Colorado Springs and El Paso County for the youth that we get to serve. ARPA funding has provided us three years of funding for our behavioral health services and our case management. We were able to bring on a full-time therapist to provide free behavioral health services for our youth that we serve. That means that there's no more waiting three months, six months for mental health services for the teens that we serve. A perfect example of that would be last night we had a youth in our program who's really struggling with his mental health. And he, you know, admitted a couple of suicide attempts and that he was needing someone to talk to. And the person that he had been working with before, you know, he does phone call therapies and, not even Zoom, just talks to them on the phone for a couple of minutes every month, and he refuses to speak. And he was able to get engaged with our therapist and was starting a little bit of a good rapport with them and agreed to new therapy services with our program. There's no cost to that. We're able to provide that. And because that therapist was coming, is coming on board now, she will start, she's starting to do clinical supervision. So, we'll be able to expand our therapy services. And so, this ARPA funding has allowed us to be able to help those youth who, in other situations, may be waiting those three to six months. I really believe that if we had had these services just a little bit before, we may have been able to stop a suicide from before. So, this ARPA funding

for us is lifelong changing for our organization and we'll be able to provide services to youth that they wouldn't have otherwise in the community.

Scott: And speaking of the community, and I think you have alluded to this a little bit before already in working with the Space Foundation on these other programs, how has working with other nonprofit organizations in the area benefited the other programs that you're working on?

Morgan: We love partnership. We have a small staff; we have a staff of seven, and we serve 700 youth and case management every year. So, for us partnership is valuable. It makes such a huge difference. We partner with over 30 agencies, maybe not just nonprofits, but agencies on almost a daily basis. And our partnerships are day-to-day, you know, that constant movement of how do we help these youth? How do we get them connected? How do we give them the resources that they need? And even if we're not partnering directly with a local agency or nonprofit, then when our families are in need, we're able to pass off warm handoffs to other nonprofits that may not be partners but are community-involved and our families are needing their services. So, for us, that community network of nonprofits, businesses, everyone in El Paso County, I think there's a true love for the youth of El Paso County. And for us that means so much. Because of course for me either my passion and my love. And so, it's really important for me to see everyone come around and just surround those youth and their families in their time of need.

Scott: And when you're engaging with these other organizations and forming these partnerships, what learnings are you able to gain from that because, you know, certainly a staff of seven, right, you can only do so much. And when you're able to, say, partner with another organization who may have materials or experience in doing something that your team is wanting to do or that you're doing and maybe you know here's another way of doing it, or you know, other ways to look at things, how valuable is that for you as an organization of seven, to be able to use those learnings from those partnerships?

Morgan: I'll give you a perfect example. I would probably be considered a young CEO of an organization and I'm starting my first capital campaign, and I will tell you that the nonprofit EDs and CEOs of this community have surrounded me with knowledge and sharing and love and said these are our best practices, these are the great ideas, these are the things that were terrible and don't work, and I have been so grateful and honored to be in the room with them as they are willing to share. Take time with me, you know, take a whole hour to talk to me and give me all of their advice and materials and ideas just to share. You know it's not the cutthroat "go after the money and not share ideas" that you might think. It's collaboration and it's really about how do we better in the community. And I could not be more impressed and honored by those that I have worked with over the last couple of months as I've been able to grow in this learning experience.

Scott: That's wonderful. And you've mentioned a couple personal stories already as we've been talking, but I'm wondering if there are any other personal stories that you can share that can help demonstrate what exactly Forge Evolution brings to the youth of El Paso County.

Morgan: Yeah, I'll give you an example of one of our community youth. It's interesting to be on the side of a community youth. I've been part of the teen court program for so long. As we started our community program, I'm like, what does it mean to serve community youth? And I love our community youth because they get to grow in a different way, right, than our Teen Court youth. So, one of my favorite stories is our young person who had been coming. They are, she is one of the most consistent joiners of our Forge program, and she came the very first week and she is younger, so we serve 10 to 19. So, she's on the younger scale, and the first couple of weeks there was a lot of tears and I think it was her age and, you know, being away from family and being in a place that she wasn't used to and a little bit of chaos of, you know, fun activities and all the crazy and maybe too much candy and a little bit of lack of maturity, right? So, as she started coming into the program, she would be throwing fits and she would really struggle with that self-control and lacking of social skills, and she passed her 25th class a couple of weeks ago and she has blossomed. She is self-confident. She walks around to some of the other students that are new, and she asks them, like, "Oh, do you want to be my friend" or "do you want me to show you how this works?" And I've not seen her cry. I've not seen her throw fits. And my favorite thing about her is that she came to me the other day and she said, "Miss Morgan, do you need help with anything? Because, you know, I think at this point I'm, I'm more of a mentor here." And, you know, she's this young lady and there are 18-year-olds there and there are kids talking about, you know, a kid mentioned some drugs the other day and she is really, she'll say things like, "oh, I don't think that's an appropriate conversation" at 12. And, you know, she'll wait till the end to eat the other day and I said, "why are you waiting to eat?" And she goes, "I want to make sure everyone has enough to eat." And it took 25 weeks of hard, hard, hard work at some points, but she really grew in that leadership role in some of those social skills that we were really working hard on. Really that failure piece of just thinking that she was not good enough. You know, she had self-esteem issues and now she comes in with big hugs and big smiles and she believes in herself. And that was so important. She joined the cheerleading team at her middle school. And for us to see her grow in those ways, and in our world, in the nonprofit world, those are not like, that's not, those aren't tangible results, right? You can't, you can't put that in a number and prove that amazingness. But that is life changing for her future.

Scott: Yeah, that's incredible. Thank you for sharing that. So, are there any other programs at Forge Evolution that you offer that maybe we haven't touched on yet that you think would be important for listeners to know about?

Morgan: Forge Evolution has a lot of programs we focus on, like I mentioned, our life skills program, and we have our Teen Court program that is huge, but I think what I

would really like to mention is just our ability to add all of those programs to surround a youth. And so, the best way to learn about those things would be to talk about the Teen Court program briefly, because a lot of those things fall under the Teen Court program. Perfect example would be, in the Teen Court program, a youth receives a ticket and, let's say, that they were smoking marijuana at school. And so that youth will come before their peers. So, we actually take high school students from every single high school in Colorado Springs. So, if you have a student that's interested in volunteering, then they would be welcome to come join us. And so, they would sit on a panel, and they would be able to listen to the story of that youth and their parents. And find out, like, what's going on in that student's life. We're really about the whole, the whole youth. So, we start at, we talk about their whole life. So that would be their school life, their family life, their crime, their personal life, and then their friend's life. And so, we want to look at that whole, the whole youth model. We talk about all of those aspects, and then the youth are going to decide what kind of sentence is going to happen for that youth for the next six months. And that could be mentoring programs, community service, crime-based programs, skill-based programs, whatever that looks like in that Teen Court program. Those teen volunteers are really looking at how do we benefit that youth and work through whatever's going on in their life to help them be successful moving forward. It's not about how do we punish them or, you know, slam them or anything like that. We really want to figure out what do they need to be successful to move forward. And so, some of those programs are that life skills program where we work on resumé writing and goal setting for those high school students. Or, another example, would be a shoplifting class where they're going to meet with loss prevention officers from around businesses here in town and they're going to hear about how shoplifting impacts the community. Or a straight talk program that talks about the impact of your choices if you continue down that road and what prison looks like or the police talking about what does it look like to be arrested. And then our drug and alcohol class would be mandatory, for example, this student that had a drug charge and they're going to talk to the police about what does it look like to have a drug charge on your record? Why is it illegal to smoke marijuana at school when marijuana is legal in the state of Colorado? And then the second part of that would be, what does it look like from a youth perspective? We have filmed a former Teen Court youth in their use, and they ended up getting trafficked, because they were using with friends, who then invited friends, who then invited friends, who then invited friends to a party, and it became unsafe. And so, we always have programming that meets the needs of the youth at that time. If those are the programs that we have in our office and then we outsource to other nonprofits and companies that provide, you know, like a bike lab or an art program or a self-esteem program. And so, all kinds of different programs because we want to find what will help that youth specifically, you know, we need to help something and find something for them that will excite them and help them learn and not have that be just the whole punishment piece of the Teen Court program. And so that really is what the bulk of that program is in order to help those youth to be able to grow and move forward.

Scott: So, for those who are seeking services, Teen Court program or otherwise, how can they go about obtaining those services from you guys?

Morgan: Yeah, so if they want to join our drop-in program, they can just go to our website, there's a form online and they can just fill it out. They'll start getting emails about what that activity on Monday looks like. And then they can just drop in and show up on Monday from 5:00 to 7:00 and they get free dinner, and they get a hangout. We don't need your parents with you, we just need you as a teenager, 10 to 19. You can also go to our website to learn more. So that would be forgeevolution.org, or call our office if you just have questions about what our services look like or what or how we can support you and your family. Our phone number is 719-475-7815. If your student is struggling with poor behavior, criminal behavior, and you're worried about that more on the Teen Court side, we're happy to help. That would be more probably a phone call to us to figure out how we can provide those supports. If you're interested in volunteering, we have teen volunteer positions from 13 to 18, as well as adult volunteer positions in lots of different capacities, and so we would love to have an e-mail or a phone call. And you can e-mail us at info@forgeevolution.org.

Scott: Wonderful. And we've covered quite a bit of ground today, but I wanted to give you an opportunity if there's anything else you'd like to add before we close.

Morgan: I think the biggest thing that I would love to add is just a reminder at what the youth of this community means to El Paso County, and that it's crazy to think of, but the teens will be the next business owners and the next politicians and the next people that you work with. And so, for me, it's always a good reminder that if we don't invest our time, energy, and money into this generation, we're going to pay for it moving forward, whether that's the next working population not showing up for work or, you know, the next 20 years of our lives are miserable. Whatever that looks like, it will cost us down the road. And so, that's our job as Forge Evolution, is to figure out how we can help these young people be successful as adults 10 to 18. That only gives us about one to ten years to work on skills moving forward. And so, if you're a family that has a young person in your household, let us help support you. The teen years, man. I got teenagers and they are rough ones. Nine times out of ten they will listen to anyone else but you, so we're happy to help you with that. If you are someone in the community that just loves to support nonprofits, we would love your support as we continue into our capital campaign and build this building and open this building for our young people to have access to have a space, safe space. We don't want our teens just smoking pot at the skate park or damaging your businesses or stealing from your businesses. We want them to go to a safe teen center and hang out there and make good choices there and learn new skills there. And if you would like to volunteer your time because you want to give back to the community, we love volunteers. We can use them all day long and so we would love your support there as well.

Scott: Great. Well, thank you, Morgan. I appreciate you taking the time today and for the work that is done here at Forge Evolution. So, thank you.

Morgan: Thank you.

Scott: If you're interested in listening to additional episodes of Beyond the Dais, you can search for us on Spotify, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, and Amazon Music. Thanks for listening, and we'll see you next time.