

Speaker 1 ([00:02](#)):

I have been a lifelong teacher since 1984 in the middle of the South Bronx during some of the most traumatic times in New York city's history. And I was amazed every single day by children who showed up to school, willing, able, and ready to learn against Herculean odds and around Herculean obstacles and whether it was homelessness, substance abuse, lack of food, lack of supervision. And to see children come to school with the belief that public education is the greatest single lever in the world inspired me then and continues to inspire me to this day. I'm known as the Dean of students and the children called me the big keys. When I started farming, I was eating food, you know, the clown, the King of the kernel, and that's what I was living on. And this was me, a 54 inch waist drinking soda. Eating kid was addicted to the 99 cent menu.

Speaker 1 ([00:54](#)):

You know, I swelled to over 300 pounds and it was right then and there that I realized I couldn't talk about it. I had to be about it. And lo and behold, six months later, I went on to lose 120 pounds. I was a champion of change and our students and I were invited to the white house. And then we got invited to cook with the white house chef. I'm so grateful that bill yassas followed us and partnered with us for years, cooking with our children in the Bronx, in public housing. And it goes to show you the Bronx can change attitudes. Now there is a Bronx in every city, every state and every nation in the world. But the Bronx is filled with hope that chilled with opportunity. It's filled with resilience. It's the borough that products it pop in barbershop. I'll share a story that literally happened a year ago today, just in this amazing heat.

Speaker 1 ([01:42](#)):

I was outside with the children. I opened up the school yard every day during the summer. And I was outside playing basketball. One child turned around to me and said, Oh, mr. It's so hot. Please buy me a soda. And before I could even turn around another young man, put his hand up and said, asking mr. Rich to buy you a soda is like asking your mama for a cigarette, ask him for a water as confirmed ice tea, but do not ask mr. Rich for soda. So I have this belief that children should not have to leave their neighborhood to live, learn and earn in a better one. And seeing hundreds of con thousands of students who have moved themselves into spheres of success, they have never imagined. And most importantly, avoided at cradle to prison pipeline. That is so typical in communities like ours continues to make me want to get up every morning and say, I am endlessly resilient.

Speaker 1 ([02:32](#)):

So let's get out there and make it happen. And that's what this is all about. My name is Steve Ritz. I am the founder of green Bronx machine and the chief eternal optimist of Bronx County. And my wife is simple because we are the ones we are waiting for. And if it's going to be, it's got to be on me. So I believe by the power of example, my goal is not to be my brother's keeper, but to be my brother's brother and into inspire, to live, learn, and create opportunities for themselves, right where they live. So they don't have to leave their neighborhoods.

Speaker 2 ([03:06](#)):

American heart association is proud to be a relentless force on a mission for longer healthier lives. In our pursuit of that mission. We're having some amazing conversations along the way. These are the voices of the relentless. Welcome to stories of the relentless. This is the relentless cities series capturing a community's relentless pursuit of health in the face of COVID-19 racial injustice systems, limitations, and

health inequities being met on buy in on yielding spirit of resilience. I'm your host, dr. Smith Taylor. We begin this three part series in New York city with a focus on change agents. You just heard from the heart and mind of Stephen Ritz, a change agent, indeed. He was in the trenches of making a difference in the wellness of the community, starting with its children. He is joined by his wife and partner, Lizette, Ritz, founder, and executive director of the green Bronx machine, Steven and Lizette. Thank you so much for joining us, excited to learn more about what exactly is the green Bronx machine and the work that you do.

Speaker 1 ([04:10](#)):

We are a nonprofit program that does not charge for our services. We are embedded into public school and we partner with school districts, private foundations, philanthropic foundations, and other organizations around the country to transform the lens of public education. So we are an all day academic program at schools. They are with us, literally for most of the day, our curriculum encompasses all subject area and our schools touch on the science, but it also touches math and literacy. And we do a lot of work with them in afterschool. They do have lunch with us. They are on a regular basis because they like the food that they grow and they cook on their own a lot better, no offense to the cafeteria, but we give a new meaning to local. It's literally they pick it up their tower and then they go to the kitchen. We come up with what they're going to eat for the day.

Speaker 1 ([05:02](#)):

So they do, they eat with us. When we at school three out of five days, for the most part, we also have book clubs and all sorts of activities. The goal being that we are expanding their horizon. Our goal is to really raise that bar as high as we can daily so that they know there's nothing that they can't achieve. If they try. We are a before school, during school, lunch time, afterschool evening program, weekends and summer camp. So we like to say that we put the unity back into community and we are not saviors. We are people who live there. This is our life's work. These are our children. We love them as if they are our own. So we are an academic program. We started many years ago as an afterschool program for over age, under credited children that was really rooted in workforce development.

Speaker 1 ([05:51](#)):

And we realized that at a very young age, we could change the trajectory of students' health, students' academic and behavioral outcomes, like growing food in schools, aligning it to common core and next generation science standards. So we are a whole school program. We live, eat, breathe, work, the children live, eat, breathe with us. We get online with them despite the pandemic, and we are growing something greater with them daily and again, creating a sense of community. And that's the most important thing we can do. All the data points to one fact. And that fact is children who have access to one time, caring adult will succeed in life. And it's my goal. And my wife's goal to be that kind caring adult for as many children as possible. I like to say we grow vegetables or vegetables, grow students. Our students grow schools and our schools grow happy, healthy, resilient, forward thinking communities. Tell me more about your role and the why it's so important to you. I am Lizette Ritz.

Speaker 3 ([06:47](#)):

I am the executive director of green Bronx machine. I've been working with green Bronx machine in this capacity for about four years. And prior to that, I was in the corporate space. My why is I am a first generation American? So my parents are from the Caribbean. And I understood at a very early age, that education was the way out. And our children, the children we serve in these communities need to be

inspired that they can not necessarily leave their neighborhoods, but make their neighborhoods better and share that and pay it forward on a regular basis. And we hope that we are doing that every day.

Speaker 1 ([07:24](#)):

You know, I just want to echo my wife and say that, you know, education is the greatest lever in this country, particularly public education, but we must be mindful that children will never be well-read if they're not well fed and input equals output. So correlating the relationships, if you will, between nutrition and school, performance is absolutely critical. And I don't think they have to be mutually exclusive. They can be part of a very cohesive, comprehensive program. And that's what we do at green Bronx machine. So what's the driving force and model behind the green Bronx machine.

Speaker 3 ([07:57](#)):

Well, you know, the question would be well, how do you scale that when you just, when you're a Steven and Lizette? Well, we scale it as we expand with other schools, they have to go through a training and the goal is not to have it as many schools as possible. The goal is to have quality in those schools and the same kind of programming in those schools that we're doing here in the Bronx. So they have to fill out a form and we go through a vetting process. And then Steven does in person and online training with the teachers to ensure that quality control in what we are implementing. We're not looking to just become like just another franchise, if you would, in education. We really want children in our communities to learn and Excel in everything that they do

Speaker 1 ([08:41](#)):

Our goal is to create the infrastructure and possibilities for other schools to be the model that other schools can follow, not to be a huge expanse of organization, but to be hyper-local hyperconnected all around the world and remarkably our Bronx story from our little Bronx, greenhouse to the white house from hope to the Pope has now taken us from one school to 500 schools across the country, serving 50,000 students today in five nations and expanding. So presently we serve from K to 12 and beyond our primary focus right now is elementary school because we believe that is the single greatest lever that one can pull towards putting children on the trajectory of good health and high academic performance. And at a young age, children learn great habits. You know, the first thousand days of life are the most critical for a child. Then the ages of three to six are where most behaviors are formed. And we like working with children who are no longer learning to read, but are reading to learn and are excited to learn about how they can engage themselves in the world beyond them.

Speaker 3 ([09:39](#)):

You know, it's easier to teach habit than to undo bad habits. So the children that go through the program really, they ask for salad, they ask for salad, they ask for fruit, they get these foods every single day. And they, you know, even during our cooking program now, uh, virtually we literally take the food to them that the, the groceries and they're making all sorts of salads, you have different types of salads regularly and loving it. So our students really are learning how to eat healthy.

Speaker 1 ([10:11](#)):

What are you both hoping to accomplish? Our goal is not only to serve students, but our goal is to serve teachers because we want teachers to teach for America, not for a little while. And we believe that teachers are charged with so much that we don't want to be another brick on the pile. So for many years I was a champion teacher, champion teachers get clipped. And what I mean by that is sometimes they

get burned out. Sometimes they get their wings clipped because there are different agendas. You know, champion teachers are amazing people, but oftentimes their will can be broken or their needs and their desires can be co-opted by the larger interest of a school. So our goal in creating this program was not just a forest feed, healthy living down children's throats, but to create systemic pedagogy that principals and superintendents would love and would want and would give to teachers to help develop strong pedagogy.

Speaker 1 ([11:02](#)):

I'm still proud to say that the state university of New York is using our curriculum to train teachers in scope and sequence, fully scaffolded instruction. It is an exemplar of what whole school instruction can look like. And that's the kind of infrastructure that schools want and have enabled us to really scale very effectively, very efficaciously, and very quickly while maintaining quality control, because our primary focus is quality of teaching and quality of learning, aligned to what children are eating. And we know that there is a multiplier effect there, you know, I'm proud that we're a top 10 program, a health and wellness program in the nation, according to the Harkin Institute. And we were named a platinum wellness award winner in New York city. Most importantly, as proud as I am. And I love hearing my wife talk about the children. We have vegans, we have salad, loving children in the middle of the South Bronx. I'm proud that our school, which was once one of the poorest performing schools in the district and in all of New York city outperforms, both the city and the state and every single performance indicator, that's creating opportunity for a lifetime. That's creating opportunities for teachers and realize a rising tide lifts all boats. We don't want to raise the roof. We want to create a whole new foundation one, which is rooted in health wellness, mindfulness, and the fact that we are the ones we are waiting for,

Speaker 2 ([12:16](#)):

The health story of the Bronx, both good and bad in terms of solutions, help us to better understand what that looks like. And also what needs to change.

Speaker 1 ([12:25](#)):

I think now five years in a row, according to the Robert Wood Johnson foundation of the 62 counties that comprise New York state Bronx County is the least healthy County in all of New York state. It also has some of the most chronic social determinants of health, childhood obesity, homelessness, substance abuse, unemployment underemployment. And similarly, at the same time, there are nonprofit organizations that are really thriving based on this dysfunction. And that to me is wholly unacceptable. We want to redefine what is possible in public schools because listen, all nonprofits are doing amazing work, but the most important thing we can do is elevate the playing ground in public schools so that there is less nonprofit work, but realize the Bronx is seeing exponential growth in the fast food outlets. What you see in the Bronx and the Bronx is no longer burning. So let's be very clear about that.

Speaker 1 ([13:18](#)):

You know, the changes that I've seen in the spiral in my lifetime have been Herculean, and I want to absolutely address salute and acknowledge them. But at the same time outside economic interests come in and really want to play on that. And, you know, the Brahms was once one of the most diverse borrows in all of New York city, all of that has changed. Um, you know, it has the highest unemployment rate in all of New York city. We'd like to see that change. It has some of the largest stretches of public

housing and isolated public housing. I might add in all of New York city. So you have these pervasive pockets of poverty. And with these pervasive pockets of poverty come all sorts of perpetual social determinant of health problems aligned. And what people really don't understand is how difficult it is to be poor in New York city, being poor in New York city and particular in the South Bronx is a full time job.

Speaker 1 ([14:06](#)):

And we're trying to alleviate some of that burden for parents, for teachers, for schools, and most importantly, for children right now, drawing COVID everything that Steven just said, you can multiply that. So for example, our children have nowhere to go. They're at home eating more. They're very sedentary. We could go into the community and the lack of food access. We work with community centers, better feeding people, one person that we're working with. It's 2,500 meals that she is literally serving from a wheelchair, and she's out there and doing this. And these stories are not getting covered, that we're not hearing about the lack of access, the lack of food, anything that is going on in our communities. And we're afraid of what is going to bring.

Speaker 2 ([14:53](#)):

We certainly know that COVID-19 has literally changed everyone's life across the world. How has it specifically impacted you?

Speaker 1 ([15:01](#)):

You know, the coconut crisis is real. It is no joke. And it hits communities like ours at the Apple's absolute epicenter of every intersectionality of our community. But the coven crisis, this virus is really symptomatic of three larger viruses. The virus of racism, the virus of greed and the virus of corruption. And this pen endemic has really given the United States and quite frankly, the world, an absolute black and white x-ray into what our priorities are and aren't as a nation. So let me give kudos right to my wife because, you know, God bless her when COVID hit, he got on the phone and made sure that every single child in our program and every single child in our community that reached out, got access to a device. And then she got on the phone with parents in English, Spanish sign language, and even got interpreters to make sure that every parent and every child in every classroom and was connected to the internet because it's one thing to have a device it's a whole nother thing to not know how to use it.

Speaker 1 ([16:01](#)):

And he was working 18 to 20 hour days, day in and day out Friday, Saturday, Sunday, we didn't take a holiday cause hunger knows no holidays, but let me tell you this, you can't eat a laptop. So in this age of digitalized and distant learning, it makes no difference if children don't have access to healthy, fresh food. So the first thing we needed to do is make sure that our communities and most importantly, our seniors, our cancer patients, because we're responsible for 26 cancer patients who are both food insecure and recovering from cancer, who live in public housing, get healthy, fresh food. Part of our program in school is that the children were growing it for them. But when schools got shut down that did not shut down their need. So again, my wife and I got into this we're resourceful. We figured out how to get groceries and deliver them door to door, to our most vulnerable seniors.

Speaker 1 ([16:49](#)):

And then our 55 most vulnerable families, and then started distributing food through local community centers in public housing to make sure other people could take charge. We then got killed online with food because it's one thing to have a zoom cooking class and you shut up, you know, and watch

celebrity chefs cook while you're sitting there eating chips or pop tarts or sometimes, and sadly nothing. So we made sure that every week we got out there and delivered the food to the children, got it to a central location. Uh, when elevators were down, my wife went up or the children came down and I fought off the parking tickets and made sure the car kept moving. And literally, you know, we get online once a week with children and now their grandparents, their siblings, their entire community, because it's equal. We have removed the barriers for success by making sure that everyone has the ingredients. You know, the supermarkets in the South Bronx, a bulk of them have closed a bulk of them because there's social distancing, can't be profitable due to social distancing. So they're closed. The lines are insane. We emphasize

Speaker 3 ([17:50](#)):

Enough that the COVID crisis is very different, depending on the zip code you live in, in public housing, you don't have a backyard. You can barbecue in your home. And you're basically stuck. Our most vulnerable seniors can't even step out of their homes and that even debris fresh here, because we're not going to say that the air is fresh down there, but just to at least come out, they are scared to come out and they're stuck indoors. There's no end in sight

Speaker 1 ([18:17](#)):

Of the pandemic. We were helping families claim bodies, believe it or not imagine that we also have some families are not coli documented. So people didn't know who is knocking on the door, if it was ice. And imagine all these, all the terrible conflicts that are going on, I'm going to be exacerbated of course, by the tragic deaths of Jordan, Floyd, Briana Taylor, and Amada, Aubrey. So to understand what is going on in communities like ours in communities across the country who are screaming with outrage, you know, it's time for education and not as fixation, but I believe as a school based program, that compassion be the new curriculum COVID has taught us is it's not enough to say I am not a racist because I believe there are a lot of people who are not racist. What's the most important thing to say is how are we actively anti-racist in all that we do? How are we not talking about equality, but really promoting equity and more importantly, promoting and facilitating justice, removing the barriers that exist, the systemic barriers that exist, that predicted and kind of prevent success in communities like ours. You know, we've got to really look at a new kind of advocacy because that's what our work and our mission and our life mindset is all about.

Speaker 3 ([19:31](#)):

When we did remote learning, remote learning was very different in our community. If you had a tablet, did you have wifi? You know, a lot of parents don't don't have, they were doing some of our students were doing their homework through their phones, you know, because that was the only source. So of any kind of internet connectivity that doesn't happen in all zip codes, it did happen in hours. We tried our best to get computer access, wifi access to our students so that it wouldn't be a loss leader. The, whenever we totally went remote

Speaker 1 ([20:01](#)):

Long zip code and skin color has determined outcomes in life and five short miles and six long degrees of separation from the South Bronx to most, any other neighborhood in parts of Manhattan or in hip Brooklyn. The things that we and our community deal with on a day to day basis would never happen elsewhere. The fact that elevators are not working in public housing, there were 45 buildings in the elevators are out. The electricity is out often on holiday weekend and the people who are in 20 and 30

story buildings, can't get downstairs much less leave. Their apartment is absolutely unacceptable. But again, our goal and our work is to change. That is not to be beholden to other people, but to create opportunities for ourselves that are community driven, community owned, and most importantly affect lives on a day to day basis, right in the neighborhood, something's got to change, we're going to lose a generation.

Speaker 1 ([20:54](#)):

Unfortunately, they're going to look like me. They're going to be, you know, black or Brown. We need to bring light to it and we need to change. And that's part of what keeps us growing to continue to help the students have that sparkle in their eye. Have that sense of wonder that curiosity that we grew up with and everything that America was supposed to afford us, that they have access to. You know, my wife talks about the light and the whole premise of what green Bronx machine is, is we are the light inside the tunnel rather than working to be the light at the end of the tunnel, our humble little grassroots program, you know, from our greenhouse to the white house. And from hope to the Pope is absolute Testament of what is possible. And what is possible is the fact that the greatest resource in the world is the untapped potential in marginalized and underserved communities.

Speaker 1 ([21:44](#)):

And every day, my wife and I look at the next Barack Obama, the next song is stuck to my, or the next Bretta Thornburg. The next Mo Allah. We look at them, we have them every day and we want to nurture them, just like we nurture our little seeds. They can express their genetic potential in the most magnificent way possible. Not only benefiting them, but benefiting all of society. That's what this is all about. It's about growing something greater. It's about planting seeds. It's about harvesting hope, cultivating minds. I know you received a grant from the American heart association. Talk to me about that and what it's meant to you. Our work with the American heart association has been game changing and it's been game changing because from the very onset, we sat down at the table and said, how can we big word? We grow something greater that would create an impact.

Speaker 1 ([22:31](#)):

We use that grant and gave it right back to the city of New York and created 10 more sites, just like ours, drain 10 more teachers created the infrastructure, the curriculum and the programming so that 10 schools could own this forever. So we created the fresh fruit and vegetable program, which in turn enabled our students to get three servings of fresh fruits and vegetables per day, as delivered in class snacks, and then get to take them home to their families. And along the way, we supplemented that with education. And we got a community member involved that wound up becoming staff at this school specifically to create layers of accountability within the school community, but also transferred into the home community. With that. We created a tremendous appetite. If you will, for the eat, grow and learn program that we have at school in term, we were able to do this so successfully with the department of ed and generated enough data and enough metrics that the department of ed expanded this program through New York city. And it was at that point, we decided to replicate our program for 10 more schools, thanks to the American heart association. So there are 10 schools now doing the same exact thing. We are amplifying the work, amplifying the impact and not paid staff of green Bronx machine, but people who are residing in their own communities, in their own schools and doing the same thing we are. So I like to say sometimes one plus one equals two, but we always look at the opportunity to add value as one plus one makes 11

Speaker 2 ([23:59](#)):

Do so much. Can you talk a little bit more about the health programs that you have in place that can be duplicated by teachers, schools, communities

Speaker 1 ([24:07](#)):

We grow in school, we grow aeroponically, which is air, water, and nutrients. And basically how the system works is the waters in the base. There's a pump. It pumps it to the top plants. All we need water. We grow all different types of vegetables. We grow Bazell lettuces. So what we want to do is inspire children to grow food, to understand where food comes from, what food is, you know, 10 years ago, I couldn't tell you 10 kinds of edible plants. Now I grow 37 kinds of edible plants in school with children and everything else is innovation. But our technology of choices, aeroponic indoor growing because it's space efficient size of fishing. You go from a box to a garden in 45 minutes. The whole idea is to make it easy, to make it simple, to make it scalable, to make it replicable, and then to connect children and teachers, to communities of likeminded, people who are doing this in their own neighborhood, in their own city, in their own state and all around the world. While we focus on the essential function of school pedagogy, professional development, community, and assessment,

Speaker 2 ([25:10](#)):

What makes the Bronx and its residents relentless? And what is it that the Bronx can teach the rest of the city, the country, or the world?

Speaker 1 ([25:18](#)):

You know, it's always been said that New York city is a place where the strong survive. I like to say the South Bronx and our classroom is a place where everyone can thrive. And even through our work with the American heart association, I'm proud to say that we've created the first wheelchair accessible commercial farm and commercial kitchen in the United States. It inspired us to go on and build the first foster care farm in America. So we are doing things that really go from impossible to I'm possible. And at the very core of it, it goes to show you that, you know, we are not celebrities. We are ordinary people living extra ordinary lives, rooted in service. It's not about giving back. It's about paying it forward and growing something greater and engaging as many people in a positive way as possible. And I'm proud to say that our little organization, green Bronx machine is partnered towards 2200 living wage jobs and in a community like ours and in communities across America, that's game changing.

Speaker 1 ([26:13](#)):

Many of our students come from the foster care system or the adjudication systems. So there were models around the country that while we were doing our work in the South Bronx, we're watching what we were doing and reached out to us and remarkably in the heart of Appalachia, there are foster care institutions where similarly have some of the lowest graduation rates in the nation, some of the highest healthcare issues in the nation, and literally at age 21, these poor children who are without parents are taken from the system, dropped off at the homeless shelter with a Medicaid card and said, good luck and get a life in a place where there is no economy at all. And we came together with some corporate partners and some private partners, and really came up with a model that built a commercial greenhouse in the heart of Appalachia in the heart of coal country and is being managed and run by foster care students who are not only eating their way to good health, but earning, living wage jobs in the process while helping to feed their community.

Speaker 1 ([27:08](#)):

So these paradigms that grow concentric circles of success within marginalized communities are at the absolute epicenter of the work that green Bronx machine does. We are a model of what is possible. And you know, my advice to everyone is you gotta start somewhere, where do you start ground zero, where you live, because if you can make an impact in your life, someone else will see it. So for us, the biggest game changer was when really we, as a family came together and decided to support the work that we wanted to do. And for me to lose my weight and model healthy living, the greatest heroes we see are the untold people who are working relentlessly, the essential workers, our parents, our grandparents, our aunties, and our uncles, people who are living in public housing and working to get through this, not only for their families, but for the families of the wealthy and affluent, who these minimum wage jobs support, you're going to see us becoming far more advocational in our work. So while we are at this very painful inflection point in American history, I'm hoping that we go from a moment to a movement that all this tragic loss in all this tragic pain will not be in vain, but will not get us back to normal, but will ultimately bring us all to better. And that's the work that we will do day in and day out because we are relentless

Speaker 2 ([28:22](#)):

Steven and Lizette. Thank you so much for joining us. You are indeed an inspiration of what can be done when you just decided to do it. And to our listeners stay tuned for part two of relentless that New York city, we will focus on COVID-19 and meet two resilient doctors who are on the front lines and the height of the coronavirus, including one doctor who continued to treat his patients while personally being affected, share this show with someone who needs it, and remember last your hands often keep your distance from other people and stay home as much as possible to learn more about healthy eating and healthy food access, visit heart.org. The thoughts and opinions expressed on this podcast do not necessarily reflect the positions of the American heart association. Thanks for joining us and keep listening. Your next episode is on the way. Stay tuned for more stories.