

Cassi Elton (Full Text)



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Claire: What are you most passionate about?

Cassi: I think I'm most passionate about community and community-building. This is something that I've just recently discovered about myself, but I find that it takes up a lot of my time and a lot of what I think about when I'm not doing other things.

Claire: What do you mean by recently?

Cassi: I was working at an elementary school on the southeast side of Iowa City, which is generally the poorer part of the city. There's lots of immigrant families and working families, lots of transient families will come there for a little bit and move away. I was working in the after-school program, and I was talking to the kids and asked "Hey, do you go to the library?"—as a library student, fixated on libraries—"Do you go downtown to the library?" And a lot of the kids had maybe only been once or twice, and a lot were new to the neighborhood and didn't even know that we had a library. I just thought "How sad! I loved libraries as a kid," and I wanted these kids to have the opportunity to go to the library and be excited about learning. So I talked to a bunch of people and decided "Hey, we should put a library on the south side of Iowa City, so that these kids can walk there, because downtown is just too far away." So I decided I was going to start a library.

At first it was going to be a physical location, and then it ended up being a mobile bookmobile, which is way better than I ever could have imagined. But the whole process of doing this has really connected me to the community in a way that I have never been connected before. We became a part of a parent non-profit organization which connected us to other non-profits in the area. We applied for a grant from the city, which meant I had to present at a city council meeting, which I had never done before. And there was this whole community and organization that I wasn't even aware of before. I got to meet all these amazing people who care so passionately about their community and about the people that they know and about what they're trying to share. It was just really....cool, for lack of a better word.

Claire: Why did you love the library so much as a kid?

Cassi: I remember being really little, in at least first or second grade, and I remember going to the public library with my mom. We had these canvas tote bags that she would bring—one was like a PBS one you'd get for donating—and various other bags and we got to go and we got to pick whatever books we wanted. There were no rules like "It has to be about airplanes!" or "It can't be about princesses!" It was just "Whatever you want to read, it's fine with me." And the library had a limit of 10 books or whatever the limit was. It was so fun to go and look at the shelves, and pull out things and think "This looks interesting, I want to read this book." I'd have this huge stack of books, and then I got to go home and I got to read and be a part of all of these worlds and learn all of these things. And I got to choose what it was. It wasn't something that was assigned in school, and it wasn't something someone else had decided I'd like—it was something that I got to decide.

I feel like that empowerment of myself as a child, and also of other children who go to the library, is really important, because it gives you the power. You're the one who's deciding what you're going to do, instead of someone else telling you "This is good for you, you should do this."

Claire: Because when you're a kid, that's all you hear.

Cassi: Yeah! You're in elementary school, you can't drive anywhere, you can't even walk anywhere by yourself, you can't make food, you can't feed yourself. Everything you're doing other people are dictating. But when you get to go to the library and you get to pick the books, how cool is that?

Claire: How did you decide you were the one who needed to get the library to the kids?

Cassi: I'm still in library school, and I'll be graduating in the spring, but at the time I was feeling really disillusioned with school. And I felt like we were talking about all of these things but there was no practical application. People would always talk about how great the downtown library was, which, okay. But as I met with the people at the library and I talked to other people who weren't affiliated with the library, I realized there was this huge disconnect. The library had done this research and said "No, we're serving the entire population we're supposed to serve," even though, statistically, people on the southeast side come to use the computers and access the internet, and they're not actually checking out books. But—"We are still serving these people." And I thought, "No, you're not!" Sure, internet and computers are an important service that libraries provide; access to information in that way is very important; lots of these people don't have access to computers and internet in their homes. That's great that the public library provides that, but there are more library services than that! And it should be a red flag if people aren't utilizing those library services.

So the more people that I talked to about it, the more people were excited about it. I remember talking to my supervisor at my after-school job and she said "Absolutely! We definitely need that. These kids would benefit from that so much."

Like any idea, it sort of starts out as "I think people need this thing." But then as I continued to talk to people, it was reinforced by other people that I talked to. And I think that that's an important thing. You should talk about, when you're doing a project—especially a service project—"Well, you have what you think people need, but what do they actually need?" And you want to make sure that those two things go together, because otherwise you're providing a service that nobody cares about [laughs]. So it transformed from this idea I had, and then—as I talked to more people who had done things where they had started their own non-profits—I started to learn what was involved in doing it, and it sort of became really intimidating and sort of terrifying to do. But I learned how to do it and I gained confidence by thinking "Someone else did that project, and this project is just as valid as that project." And it just built on itself.

Claire: Have you found that the service you wanted to provide is actually what people needed?

Cassi: Yeah, I've had lots of people say to us "We are so glad that the Bookmobile comes to our park or our neighborhood because it's so easy to go to the library now!" And that's what I want to hear. I don't want it to be this big arduous thing. Something else we do with the Bookmobile is we don't have late fees. We still have due dates, but they're very soft due dates [laughs]. My perspective on that was "I don't want people to be penalized for using our services." We've been really lucky because so much of our collection is donated, so we have a very small amount of books that we've purchased with grant money that we've gotten. But most of them are books that people gave us for free. I feel like, if somebody checks out a book and they don't return it, well, now they have a book that they didn't have before. Especially for the kids in the neighborhoods that we work in. A lot of them don't have books of their own. And I know that it's a mid-

dle-class mentality that reading should be enjoyable and it should be a leisure activity, but I feel like you should have the opportunity to read for pleasure if you want to. Nobody can force you to read and have fun while you're reading, but if you want to, then those resources should be available to you.

Claire: Why is children's happiness and opportunity important to you?

Cassi: Um, isn't it important to everyone? [laughs] I don't know. I've worked with kids throughout my life in various situations; I was a summer camp counselor a few years ago for an entirely different demographic of kids whose families were very well off, and it was a very expensive summer camp, and then at the school where I work there are very disadvantaged kids. But I feel like kids—no matter what their family situation—want very similar things in their lives. They want to feel loved by the people who take care of them, and they want to feel safe, and they want to feel encouraged and valued for who they are. I feel like that's what libraries have done for me, and that's what teachers have done for me, and that's what learning has done for me. I wanted to share that with other kids.

Claire: What does it take you to feel fulfilled at the end of the day?

Cassi: That's a really complicated question. I think to feel fulfilled I want to feel like I've done the things that I was supposed to do that day. Even if there were things that were hard, or things that I didn't want to do, that I wasn't afraid to do them, and I didn't avoid doing them. And even if things weren't successful, I have an idea of how to make it better next time. Like, one of the things I have gotten a lot better at, both with Antelope and with my new job at the elementary school, is talking to people on the phone. Which sounds kind of stupid, but growing up in the era that I grew up in, email and instant messenger and text messaging are all much easier ways to communicate with people because you have time to think about what you're going to say, and time to analyze what their question is and figure out the best response. But I've really learned that telephone calls are the most efficient way to contact people: you call them on the phone, they answer, and you're having a conversation right away. It isn't a conversation that has to happen over a series of hours or days or weeks—you can get it taken care of right there. And you can prevent a lot of misunderstandings, because if someone has a question they can just ask you right away, instead of stewing on "They said this thing in their email, but what do they really mean?"

And it's another way to communicate with people that we forget about. I know that I used to have a lot of anxiety when I'd call people on the phone, and I would have a script in my head about "Okay, I'm going to say this, and this is the question I have, and this is how it's going to go, and then I'll hang up and then the phone call will be over."

Especially with working at the elementary school, I have to call parents all the time and say, "Hey, we had an incident with your child today on the playground where they punched another kid," or "We have a bill here for child care that you need to pay." That sort of uncomfortable conversations that you have to have with people aren't normally ones you would want to have. But I think I've gotten a lot better about expressing myself and about understanding other people, and thinking more quickly and not obsessing over the tiny things because there's just not time for that.

Claire: How much is your daily list determined by you, and how much is determined by others' expectations?

Cassi: I think it's my expectations, but of course my expectations have been built up by other people. I mean, everybody is a product of their culture and their community and the way that they have experienced life. But it's not like I have an intense checklist usually, but especially with my new job and with Antelope, there are a list of things that need to happen so that tomorrow can happen. At first it was easy

to put it off. When Antelope was first getting going it was a sort of nebulous idea and there weren't really any due dates because we were still trying to figure out what it was that we wanted to do. So it was easy to postpone and postpone and postpone. But once something is up and running and once it is alive and has a life of its own, there's definitely a timetable that gets developed, and there are deadlines for things. I'm sure you can kind of fudge it, but it usually is not beneficial to anybody to continue to delay something that needs to happen.

Claire: What are you afraid that you'll never accomplish?

Cassi: I think the cool thing about community work is that it has real-life application. One of the things I have loved about Antelope is getting to know people in the community, and making those connections and building my own community of community-builders. I've learned about so many different services and things that the city provides or has created, so I feel like my life is enriched by the work that I'm doing. So I don't know that I have anything that I'm worried about not happening, because there are so many more opportunities now than I knew about before.

Claire: What's a hobby of yours?

Cassi: Bookbinding and making things with paper is really exciting to me, and it's something I've been able to use in the schools I've worked in and with the Bookmobile, so that's really fun. Making instabooks is my favorite thing to teach people how to do.

Claire: When you were getting your Book Arts Certification, did you think that's what you were going to end up doing?

Cassi: Yeah. When I first came to Iowa, I was really interested in the book arts aspect of the program I was in. I almost went to the North Bennet Street School in Boston, which is a really well-renowned bookbinding institution. I decided to come to Iowa, for a variety of reason, but I really felt like bookbinding and fine arts bookbinding was what I was going to do with my life. Then, as I took more classes—and I enjoyed the classes just fine—they gave me so much anxiety, and I always felt inadequate. I just thought: "This isn't fun anymore! I don't want to do this."

I took a leather bookbinding class this last semester, which was my last class for my certificate. I didn't even need to take it but I just thought: "I've gotta take it." And that was probably the most stressful semester I've ever had, even though it was the only class I was taking. I made these books at the end, and I think they're pretty nice books, but I just realized "I don't want to do this. It doesn't feel important to me." And I know that there are other people where it's their passion, and they make these gorgeous books, and they make all kinds of connections with people and it enriches their lives to do that, but...for me, I just thought, "Why am I doing this? What is the value of this? Sure, it's pretty, but it took me weeks to make this one thing, and now I have it, and now what do I do with it?" I had this realization that your life can change focus, and that's okay. I always thought of myself as really crafty and really artistic, but when I was surrounded by other people who were much more talented than I was, I realized, "Oh, these people are better at this, not just because they're inherently better, but because they work on it all the time. Because it excites them, and they want to spend hours and hours in the studio binding this book or making this cover; doing all of this leather inlay." Whereas I just did not want to do it. So I realized it was okay for me to not be as passionate about that as I thought I was.

Claire: Do you feel anxiety now about not working in the field you graduated in?

Cassi: No, not really. Because it was just a certificate program. Now they have an MFA, but they didn't have that when I started. I felt like the certificate would just support my library education, because that's what it was designed for. I knew lots of people who worked in the library and had graduated from that program, and it's not like when you finish your bookbinding program it's really obvious what you're going to do with your life. It's not like you have an accounting degree and then you become an accountant; it's not as clear cut as that. So it's not something I've been concerned about.

Claire: What have you had to sacrifice in order to pursue your passion?

Cassi: Well, I'm going to school full-time and working full-time and my husband, Braeden, is too. We don't have as much time to spend together, and sometimes the time that we spend together is both of us stressing out about how much stuff we have to do, and all of the responsibilities that we have that we don't really have time for. So, I think that any time you get caught up in some kind of project, regardless of what the project is, there's only so many hours in the day, and it takes some of that time from someplace. In our case, it has taken time from us spending time together. Which kind of sucks! Because we like spending time together.

But, at the same time, I feel like we're both really supportive of each other, of whatever it is we're doing. And that's really great to know. It's not like things have gotten harder and then we've become resentful of the other person spending more time at school, going to conferences, or late nights at work trying to get things ready. So even though it's been a sacrifice of the time we spend together, at least—at this point—it's okay, because we still support each other.

At a certain point you have to say, I'm doing too many things. And we have to figure out how to focus and how to simplify.

Claire: What is that point?

Cassi: I think it's different for everybody. You just have to figure out what is making you happier even though it's stressful, and what is making you less happy, because it's stressful. For example, we recently asked to be released as Sunday school teachers at our church because it was just that extra thing that was taking up so much of our time and our energy, and it was disproportionately stressful. We didn't feel like it was benefitting us in the same way other things were. But, it took us a long time to get to that point where we realized "This is the thing that has to give." We weren't getting paid to do it, and we couldn't quit our jobs, because that's how we live in our house and feed ourselves and take care of ourselves. And we're so close to finishing school, it would be ridiculous to stop now, and so it was just that third thing where we realized, "Well, I guess we need to step back for now."

Claire: Once you made that decision, how did you feel?

Cassi: The Sunday after we'd asked our Bishop if we could not do it anymore, we were taking the dogs on a walk after church, and Braeden just felt so light that he ran halfway down the block with the puppies because he felt so good—and he never does that! It was so nice to not have to worry about it anymore. Not that we didn't enjoy it, but with everything else all together, it was no longer enjoyable.

Claire: What do you wish you were better at?

Cassi: I wish that I was better at not worrying about things all the time. Especially when I'm in a situation where I don't feel comfortable. After that situation is over, when there's nothing I can do to change whatever that situation is, I'll continue to worry and stress about it, even though it just makes me more stressed

out about other things. For example, one of the things at my new job is parent interactions and dealing with questions or concerns that parents have, and I was surprised at how bad I was at it. A parent would ask me a question and I would answer it, and feel like I'd done a good job. But then they would ask me sort of the same question again. And I would realize "Okay, I didn't communicate something, but I don't know what I didn't communicate, and I'm not sure they're understanding, and I'm starting to feel frustrated, and they're clearly frustrated, and something's not working!" And it took lots of times of not doing a very good job at talking to parents to finally figure it out and realize, "Oh, this isn't a personal attack when they're asking me about why program is this way, or why their child is in a certain place, and I don't need to go through all of the different scenarios in my brain and figure out why they're asking." I could try to just answer their question, and if they have another one, they can ask me that, and it can be a conversation. It doesn't have to be a shield of me saying "No just trust me, your kid is fine."

There are lots of things like that. With the Bookmobile, the other day we were invited to this immigration round table, and we were a few minutes late—no big deal, it was really casual—but by the time we arrived, everyone was talking about the projects they were working on in the community. I'd completely forgotten I had agreed to speak at the meeting, so when the lady in charge said to me, "Okay, stand up" I thought this is weird, nobody else stood up while they were talking. And I just sort of talked about my project in the way other people had been talking about theirs, and then that was it. And then afterwards, we were talking to people and they kept saying "Hey, that's a really great idea, good luck with your idea," and I went: "I didn't communicate that this is something we've already been doing for months! We are already out in the community, we've provided services to people, we've had over a thousand books checked out, and we have hundreds of people in our membership database." For a couple days after it, I just felt so stupid. And Braeden said "It's not a big deal, everyone still had a good time. We made lots of connections, we handed out business cards, we talked to people and as we talked they understood what we were doing, and that's the most important thing." But even so, I just felt like I'd been ridiculous. And there's nothing I can do about it, and it doesn't even matter, but the energy and anxiety that it gave me afterwards was energy that I could have been using for something else that actually mattered.

Claire: What is success to you?

Cassi: I feel like everybody has their own things that are hard for them, and their own things they want to be better at and improve at for any reason, and I think that is one of the things for me. And I have gotten better at it, but I wish that those types of things didn't bother me at all, and I don't know that that will ever be real. But I think that, for me, that would be a triumph; to not worry about stuff like that.

Claire: When was the moment when you felt like a professional for the first time?

Cassi: This reminds me of a question I got asked the other day: "When did you decide you were a grown up?" I feel like I decided I was a grown-up when I got hired for this job at Mark Twain Elementary running the before and after-school program, and I was sitting in the HR lady's office talking about 401k's and healthcare [laughs]. And I thought, "This is what grownups do. I have, like, a real-person job, and I have responsibilities now." And I don't know if I've ever felt like a library professional, which is sort of ridiculous because—I started a library! I made up the whole system, and we figured out a cataloguing system, and those are things that professionals do. So I don't know that I've ever felt like a library professional, but I have felt like some kind of professional. Because I have health care now through my job. And I get a salary, which I've never had before.

Claire: Talk about community.

Cassi: Something about community that I've learned is, you can choose it to a certain extent. There is a specific community that we're trying to serve with our Bookmobile project, and even still, that's something we chose. We didn't necessarily choose all of the challenges that come with that community, but we chose that community. There are all sorts of ways in your life that you can choose the community that you interact with and be a part of, and that's something cool I'd never really recognized before. When we talk about community, you usually think, "Oh, where I live. The people that I interact with." And it seems like happenstance, like you can't choose those things. But there are all kinds of smaller communities and groups that you can self select, that you can choose to be a part of. And I've been really lucky, and really impressed by the people in my community who choose to serve other people with all of the things that they do.

Working at a non-profit and working in community work is not easy. It's something where the rewards aren't really obvious, and it's a lot of work, and it takes up a lot of time that someone who's working a 9 to 5 job doesn't have to consider. But there's something special about the people who choose to do that. It's really great to get to know them. Everyone is different in their own way, but they're all very passionate about people. And I think that that is really wonderful. I've met all kinds of different people who don't necessarily have anything else in common, other than community, and wanting to serve other people in whatever way. And it's not just graduate students, it's not just parents with kids in the school system who are concerned about the school system, it's older people who have lived in the neighborhood for 40 years, who are still excited about making things better for other people, even if they don't have kids, or even if their kids live far away. Even if they're doing everything they want to do, part of what they do is to make things better for other people.

Claire: Now that you've found this niche of what you love, do you think you could ever feel fulfilled in another area? Maybe if you got too stressed or sick?

Cassi: I think that one of the cool things about community work and about non-profit work is that these things run on volunteers. One of the cool things about the Bookmobile is the wide variety of people that have wanted to volunteer with us. We have college students who need community hours for a class that they're taking, we have graduate students who are really passionate about being more involved in the community where they live, we have parents of young children who are excited about this project because it serves children and they want their kids to be a part of something like this, we have people with no kids who live in the community, who are excited about different things happening, and we have older retired people who want to give back to a community that they have been a part of, that they've benefited from. They then want to help other people benefit. So, I feel that there's not really a point where you are no longer able to be involved. Which is kind of awesome! There are lots of fields where you have a short window of influence and ability to participate, and I feel like this is a field where that is not the case.

Claire: How else did you benefit from community when you were growing up, whether or not you realized it at the time?

Cassi: I know something that I didn't recognize until I was working with the kids that I work with is how much I benefitted from my family situation, and having a really stable home, where as far as I knew, money was never an issue. It wasn't something that I worried about as a child. We always had food to eat, and I always felt safe in my home, and for so many people that is not the case. So, having safe places where kids can go, like having school be a safe place, or a library or another community organization be a safe place for kids and families is even more important than I realized.

Claire: Why?

Cassi: I'm a big fan of Maslow's hierarchy of needs. He talks about how you have to have your basic needs met first, like food and shelter, and then you have to feel safe. Then you need to feel valued, and then the very top one is that you can feel fulfilled and become self-actualized. Which, no one ever really reaches. But in order for you to be passionate and improve yourself, you have to not be hungry every day. And you need to not be worried about survival needs, and then you can worry about the things that are more abstract than that. I think if we want our community and our country and our world to be educated, and if we want people to care about other people, we need to make sure that people are fed and feel safe, because otherwise, they're not going to have energy about other things like learning at school and learning about taking care of people other than themselves.

Claire: Why is it important to you to help people, rather than go off and do your own thing?

Cassi: I think that as much as people like to pretend they're a self-made-man and they did things all on their own, it's a delusion. Everyone lives in society. Whether you choose to engage in society in the same way other people do or not is your choice, but everyone benefits from the community that they live in. We have paved roads because of taxes, and we have safe cars because of regulations, and we have good schools because we have people in the community who are willing to work in those schools and work with our kids. I just think it's foolish to not invest in the world, because the world has invested in you.

Claire: What one word best summarizes your advice to other creatives?

Cassi: I feel like it's your whole project—it's "passion." If you aren't passionate about the work you're doing, then it's not going to be worth it, because it's going to take over your life and become a part of every conversation that you have with people, and every late night you'll be laying in bed thinking "How can I make it better?" and "what if we try it this way instead?" If you aren't excited about it, and don't really care about it, it's not going to be good. And it's not going to be worth it.