

EXTRA CREDIT

A SUMMER & WINTER SESSIONS PODCAST

Episode 2 Transcript

00:00:02 Introduction

Welcome to Extra Credit, hosted by the Rutgers University Office of Summer and Winter Sessions. Listen to hear from students as they share their experiences at Rutgers and some tips on how to navigate a condensed semester. Also, gain the perspective of professors and learn more about the courses they teach.

00:00:18 Kylie

So, thanks for joining us today. Taking time out, I know that the new semester just started, so I know everyone is going a little crazy.

00:00:27 Kylie

Uhm, so can you introduce yourself and just like tell us a little bit about yourself to the new audience?

00:00:33 Joel Plummer

Sure, my name is Joel Plummer. This is my 13th year or so teaching in the Africana Studies Department. I teach a course that I- that I created when I first started teaching at Rutgers entitled African Americans and Sports.

00:00:53 Joel Plummer

So, my interests are African American history, specifically, 20th century African American History, African Americans and sports, and the political economic consequences of wide scale participation in sports. And of course, my other job is that I've also been a secondary history teacher for more than 20 years.

00:01:21 Joel Plummer

So my other, um, area of work is teaching at the secondary level. And the third thing I do is that I'm a professional photojournalist, so when I'm not teaching, I'm taking pictures of news and sporting events and so really my work at Rutgers allows me to combine my passion for education, African American history, and my— and my media work all into one nice package.

00:01:49 Kylie

Awesome, wow, that's really impressive.

00:01:52 Kylie

Yeah, 13 years sounds like a very long time so I give you props.

00:01:58 Kylie

So how did you kind of get into this field? You know you've- I mean, you've been in it for a good chunk of time.

00:02:05 Joel Plummer

Well, I have to go back in time to when I was a young lad in school and I grew up, and I'm from Plainfield Plainfield, NJ so about half hour away from Rutgers, but I went to a school that was predominantly black- student population was predominantly black. I went to 13 years of public school with black principals, an entirely black Board of Education, black superintendents.

00:02:33 Joel Plummer

And I came out of 13 years of public schooling, knowing almost nothing about my own history. There was one African American history class taught by this man named Houston, Houston Robinson, who was a legend in my town. First black teacher at-

00:02:53 Joel Plummer

The first black teacher at Plainfield High school and he taught a course on African American history and that kind of sparked my interest in it.

00:03:03 Joel Plummer

But what pushed me towards education is in between sophomore and junior year. I was in a leadership program for young, Black and Latino students that had potential.

00:03:13 Joel Plummer

And it's a two-year program and in the second year of that program they made us teach algebra to middle school students from Newark.

00:03:22 Joel Plummer

And I absolutely hate math, but I had to do this this thing, I had to teach. Anyway, I get assigned a student and I'm teaching her basic algebra and I'm just one page ahead of her, 'cause I don't even like math myself, but I'm teaching how to solve like a basic equation, solve for X type of thing.

00:03:43 Joel Plummer

That's one day. The next day comes she comes back and she's struggling to figure out the equation.

00:03:49 Joel Plummer

And I reach out. I'm sitting next to I reach over to her desk, trying to help her. She was like no, I got it. You taught me this yesterday and she figured it out.

00:03:59 Joel Plummer

And at that moment I felt like King of the world, like I realized, OK, she knows something in life exclusively because of me, like I made that moment happen, and this is the subject that I hate. This is something I despise. So imagine if I was spending all day teaching something I actually loved.

00:04:20 Joel Plummer

And so since I was 15 years old, I knew I wanted to be a teacher and I knew- I knew I wanted to teach African American history.

00:04:28 Joel Plummer

And then, how I got to Rutgers is I'm a graduate two times over from Rutgers—Newark, undergraduate and my master's in history are from there- as an undergrad as African Studies major.

00:04:42 Joel Plummer

So I'd always had a connection to Rutgers. My father was a Dean at Rutgers for years, decades. I literally grew up on campus. I went to Rutgers Livingston Daycare Center for preschool.

00:04:54 Joel Plummer

And for me, it's like you know, coming full circle from being a 3 year old on the, on the- in the daycare center to now teaching on the same campus I grew up on as a child.

00:05:06 Kylie

That's amazing.

00:05:08 Kylie

So it sounds like it's like there's some similarities between your beginnings to your recent book, the *Sumo Wrestlers and Supermodels*. So can you tell me a little bit about that book and why you wrote it?

00:05:21 Joel Plummer

Sure, so the book is entitled *Sumo Wrestlers and Supermodels*. What 20 years of teaching has taught me about saving, saving black children from American schools.

00:05:33 Joel Plummer

And I wrote it because when I first started teaching, like many young teachers, my goal was to go into the classroom, you know, and I'm going to save the world.

00:05:42 Joel Plummer

And I have this- and I did a good job right? I go to my classroom. Kids love my classes.

00:05:47 Joel Plummer

They're super excited and I, as a young teacher I used to go home feeling good about it like I nailed it today.

00:05:54 Joel Plummer

And my students would give me this compliment that eventually started depressing me. Some of them would say to me, you know, Mr. Plummer, your class is the only reason why I come to school.

00:06:07 Joel Plummer

My class is 40 minutes long. The school day is like 7 hours long. That means that in this kid's mind, they're wasting most of most of their day.

00:06:17 Joel Plummer

And so, I was no longer content with just being a good teacher in in my classroom. I had to figure out, I decided look, I need to figure out a way to duplicate what I do.

00:06:29 Joel Plummer

One of the reasons I argue that my kids like my class and were frustrated with so many of their other classes was because the way schools are designed.

00:06:40 Joel Plummer

They're designed in a generic fashion and so basically a one size fits all education.

00:06:46 Joel Plummer

And in my book, I make the argument that that's particularly detrimental to black children.

00:06:52 Joel Plummer

We all know, or hopefully we understand, that there's no such thing as biological races. But what is real, though, is culture, right there. There's no such thing as a pure biological black race.

00:07:05 Joel Plummer

But there is black culture and shared social historical experiences that shape the way you look at the world.

00:07:11 Joel Plummer

And people that grow up in different areas in different places view the world differently, and often have different goals for the world.

00:07:21 Joel Plummer

And so, the argument I make in the book is that if you have black children that are growing up, powerless.

00:07:30 Joel Plummer

And by powerless, I mean doesn't control its food source, where it gets water, where it gets electricity, where it gets Internet service, where it gets clothing.

00:07:41 Joel Plummer

An education— A generic education, which is what we generally get, teaches Americans how to maintain the system as it is... fit into the system and maintain it.

00:07:53 Joel Plummer

But when you're powerless, people, often outside the system, the goal of the education shouldn't be for you to maintain power. It should be teaching you how to attain power.

00:08:04 Joel Plummer

And so, I argue that when you give black kids this generic education that doesn't fit them, it's as detrimental as training a supermodel, the same way you would train a sumo wrestler.

00:08:17 Joel Plummer

And you could be the best, best sumo wrestler trainer in the world. You're legendary. But now you have a supermodel.

00:08:25 Joel Plummer

And if you train that supermodel the same way you train this, your sumo wrestlers, same diet, same exercise routine, same clothing. When she walks out on the runway, it's going to be a disaster.

00:08:37 Joel Plummer

You have the best supermodel trainer coach in the world. And they're training, uh, sumo wrestler and teaching the sumo wrestler how to be, how to dress like a supermodel, how to eat like a supermodel workout like a supermodel... when that person walks into a ring with a real sumo wrestler, they're gonna get Obliterated

00:08:56 Joel Plummer

And I argue that's the disconnect that's causing this, this gap in schools with black children.

00:09:03 Kylie

Right, wow, that's really powerful.

00:09:07 Kylie

So, what do you look for your overall message? If you could leave your reader with one message, what would it be?

00:09:15 Joel Plummer

Yeah, so the book is divided up in two sections. Once one part is describing the problem and then the other part is explaining practical things that teachers can do to fix the problem.

00:09:28 Joel Plummer

I'm telling them- I'm telling other teachers and parents what they should be looking for in good teachers, what works from real life experience and what I want people to take away from this is that children are not generic widgets.

00:09:43 Joel Plummer

Education has to be tailored to meet the needs of the kids in any particular room.

00:09:50 Joel Plummer

You can't give a one size fits all education and get the most out of children.

00:09:55 Joel Plummer

And that's the point of the book. I need people to understand that you can't teach strangers. You have to know and care about these students, understand their worldview in order to change their educational experience.

00:10:08 Kylie

Right, right, yeah. I have to say I was very, very shy as a child. The teachers that were most effective for me were the ones who saw that and then instead of just like forcing me out of that bubble, just like got down to my level was like do you have any questions?

00:10:23 Kylie

And eventually, you know I grew up. I'm not three anymore and I, you know like started being like "OK, like this is how you speak up," and you know stuff like that so I can definitely see your argument there. That's very powerful.

00:10:37 Joel Plummer

It's interesting that you bring that up. I have a chapter in the book called, "The Smartest Guy in the Room" and it's about teachers going out of their way to make sure every single student at some point in the class gets to be the star in some way.

00:10:54 Joel Plummer

So you might have a kid that doesn't like to talk, but they might be an incredible artist. So you go out of your way to make sure you do some type of assignment where they can show off.

00:11:04 Joel Plummer

You find something that every kid is proud of and that they can share that that they can show off.

00:11:11 Joel Plummer

It might be the kid that's in the school play and you make sure you go to that play and the next day you talk about it in in class, you make that kid a star for- for a day.

00:11:20 Joel Plummer

Like even the quietest kid, there's just something that they're really enthusiastic about. Just because competence is transferable.

00:11:27 Kylie

I will say that was I would say the beginning of me coming more out of my shell just because that teacher, unlike others, didn't try to force anything on me, just kind of like, understood and just kind of let me. She helped, you know, we did exercises and when I was comfortable, I would speak but.

00:11:45 Kylie

She let me find my way. She let me stumble and I think that was essential to my growth.

00:11:51 Joel Plummer

She met you where you were. You should absolutely send her a message.

00:11:55 Joel Plummer

In the last chapter in my book I say, the only reward for teaching, the absolute only reward, is that occasional "thank you" that you get from a student, when the student says, "you actually made a difference in my life."

00:12:11 Joel Plummer

Like we live for that, so send that message that- that's the type of message that makes a teacher think that their whole career was worthwhile.

00:12:21 Kylie

I hope she does know that. Changing topics a little bit, so your summer session course, African Americans in Sports. Can you tell us a little bit about that course?

00:12:31 Joel Plummer

I always had this idea of connecting African American history, sports, and politics and economics together.

00:12:39 Joel Plummer

And so when I got the opportunity to teach a course, they asked me to teach something that wasn't already on the books.

00:12:47 Joel Plummer

And so I pitched the idea of this African Americans and Sports class.

00:12:51 Joel Plummer

And what it is, it's a Trojan Horse that we use to examine race, politics, economics and gender in America.

00:12:59 Joel Plummer

Because it's thinking about sports that's unique, I mean, maybe music is similar.

00:13:05 Joel Plummer

It's one of the few things that touch everybody on every level, and there's something about sports that reveal passions.

00:13:14 Joel Plummer

It taps into some people's true self, and we can examine that to find out what people really think about society.

00:13:23 Joel Plummer

For example, when LeBron James left Cleveland to go to Miami, he had fans. I don't remember what day of the week it was. I don't know. Let's say it was. Let's say he left on a Tuesday.

00:13:35 Joel Plummer

Right? the Monday before, he had fans in Cleveland that adored him, treated him like a God.

00:13:42 Joel Plummer

As soon as he decided to leave this the flip- the switch is flipped, and they despise him, like these same fans that loved him the day before are now sending him heinous racist tweets.

00:13:56 Joel Plummer

I mean he had- and he posted a long line of, uh, racist tweets that, like every racial epitaph you could think of coming at him and I look at that and say, you know what that person that sent that tweet didn't love black people the day before.

00:14:13 Joel Plummer

And then all of a sudden, all these words start coming out of their mouth just because LeBron James left.

00:14:19 Joel Plummer

That's something that was already in that person and their favorite player leaving taking agency over his own life and deciding to do what's best for him. instead of entertaining everyone else brought that out.

00:14:32 Joel Plummer

And I'm like OK we need to examine this. This says something about race relations in Cleveland, about racial attitudes in Cleveland.

00:14:41 Kylie

Right.

00:14:42 Joel Plummer

But we wouldn't have gotten that if LeBron James hadn't moved and pulled that out of people. Sports reveals that... it reveals issues that are hidden.

00:14:52 Joel Plummer

And the other thing we look at in this course is we look at the economic situation.

00:15:01 Joel Plummer

The money-making sports, particularly look at college— look at basketball, look at football. Look at college and look at all the pros. You'll see many black people work in the fields, but very few in management. Very few in ownership.

00:15:15 Joel Plummer

And so we look at the history of this arrangement. Why is it that these people are able to be the product?

00:15:23 Joel Plummer

But they're not trusted to manage their product?

00:15:26 Joel Plummer

It didn't matter how great you were working the field, there's this ceiling. It's the history of black people being valued for their bodies, not for their minds, and nothing, nothing highlights that more than sports, and so these are the things we deal with.

00:15:42 Joel Plummer

And I tell my students all the time. Don't take my course if you think it's going to be like this sports trivia class, where you think you're gonna learn, like, who hit the most home runs in in the 1977 playoffs? You can win bar bets, like that's not what we're about here.

00:15:57 Joel Plummer

We're just using sports as a way to dig deeper into the American psyche.

00:16:04 Kylie

Right, yeah.

00:16:05 Kylie

It accelerates very quickly so I can- I can definitely like see how sports can bring it out of people, you know like their true colors, definitely.

00:16:18 Kylie

So specifically, to your- in your course or just you know things that you have found in general, how do you promote good communication in a remote environment?

00:16:28 Joel Plummer

For me, it doesn't change in that.

00:16:33 Joel Plummer

Like I said, the most important thing for me is that I know my students, and so that's why I make sure my... semester just started and I haven't even gotten a chance to teach my material yet, 'cause I spent the first two classes actually getting to know my students.

00:16:50 Joel Plummer

Because I can't teach you virtually as a stranger, as just some name on, on a screen, I, I really have to have some idea of where you're from, what your aspirations are in life.

00:17:06 Joel Plummer

And so again, whether you're in person or whether you're virtually, you have to make the effort to meet, to understand your students as real humans.

00:17:14 Joel Plummer

Not just some object to be worked on, you have to take the time to meet your students and try to bond with them as much as you can at the beginning of the class to make the whole semester work.

00:17:29 Kylie

So lastly, what is some advice that you have for a student taking your summer course?

00:17:36 Joel Plummer

Just remember, this is my advice for any summer course, remember that summer courses are super concentrated.

00:17:45 Joel Plummer

And so, you have to- have to understand that coming in missing a day or summer school is like missing a week in in a in a regular course.

00:17:56 Joel Plummer

So you have to have enough discipline. You have to know yourself. You have to know that you have enough discipline to stay engaged for class sessions that that are that are longer.

00:18:06 Joel Plummer

You have to know that you can't miss class and you have to know that that I'm going to finish this course in a month or so, but I'm still doing all the work, pretty much all the work that would happen in a normal course. And so you need to have the self discipline to, to get all that work done in a- in a finite amount of time.

00:18:29 Joel Plummer

But it's a very efficient thing, though, if you can, if you can pull it off as a summer school student, you can-

00:18:35 Joel Plummer

You can accomplish a lot in in a summer, in a very short period of time with no loss of information, so long as you're serious and you're focused.

00:18:45 Kylie

Well, thank you for that. I mean that was amazing. Thanks for sitting down with us and you know talking about this stuff about your course and you know your passion. It was honestly, it was like, you really opened my eyes. It was awesome. Thank you.

00:18:59 Joel Plummer

I appreciate that.

00:19:01 Outro

Thanks for listening, and we'll catch you next time on Extra Credit.