



175. Opening Yourself Up to Fellowship Opportunities with Kelly Preheim

Kelly Preheim: [00:00:00] I never thought of myself as being a storyteller, but I guess I am. Because when I'd go out birding on the weekend, and I come back and share my pictures on Facebook and tell what I learned and what I saw, I guess I'm being a storyteller in that way. Many people have told me that they never paid any attention to birds until I started sharing on Facebook, and so that always made me feel glad that I had done them.

Annalies Corbin: [00:00:31] Welcome to Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I'm your host and Chief Goddess of the PAST Foundation, Annalies Corbin.

We know the current model for education is obsolete. It was designed to create fleets of assembly line workers, not the thinkers and problem solvers needed today. We've seen the innovations that are possible within education, and it's our goal to leave the box behind and reimagine what education can look like in your own backyard.

Welcome to today's episode of Learning Unboxed. As always, I'm super excited because we get to have incredible conversations with amazing educators around the world. And, actually, today is a very special treat because, today, we get to talk to probably my most favorite educator of all time. I had to take a little pause there and just figure out how exactly do I want to introduce the amazing Kelly Preheim.

And just for context, you know, I reference Kelly all the time. We have, in fact, done a podcast with her before about her work. But the reality of it is she is hands down probably one of the most remarkable educators I've ever had the privilege over many, many years to get to work with. I know, I'm embarrassing Kelly a little bit here.

But the reality is, you know, Kelly has been an elementary teacher for 37 years. She's currently a kindergarten teacher in rural Armour, South Dakota, which is where I met her many years ago.

And what's amazing about Kelly and the thing that we've talked about before is the fact that she incorporates the thing that she loves in life, her passion, if you will, to do, and that's all about birds and nature and the environment into the curriculum that she teaches her kindergartners through transdisciplinary problem-based learning using STEM and STEAM to encourage children to be curious explorers.

And most recently, Kelly was the 2018 recipient of the Presidential Award for Excellence in Math and Science Teaching. And I was super proud to get to be part of that. And most recently, the 2022 National Geographic Grosvenor Teacher Fellow, who chose as her expedition travel to go to the Galapagos Islands. And so, Kelly, welcome to the program.

Kelly Preheim: [00:02:54] Thank you. That was a very glowing recommendation there, Annalies. Thank you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:03:04] You are very welcome. It is all meant. And today, I'm super excited because we're going to talk with Kelly, actually, about her most recent experience as part of that National Geographic Grosvenor Teacher Fellowship cohort and about the incredible experience that it is.

But before we actually get into the nuts and bolts of that, Kelly, I want to just sort of talk about and acknowledge a little bit about the fact that, oftentimes, we have these incredible teachers and so there's this dichotomy or this sort of stress, I guess, if you will, around, putting yourself out there and applying for these things that are really exciting. But they translate into an experience that you have the ability to bring back into the classroom and sort of balancing the everyday sort of pieces that you're doing.

And you are no different, because I've had many conversations with you around, "Hey, let's do this thing. Why don't you try this thing?" And it's not always easy, so let's start with talking about how do you sort of push yourself to step out of your traditional comfort zone as a teacher?

Kelly Preheim: [00:04:13] Well, usually, what happens is someone contacts me and says, "Hey, you should apply for this or that." And I'm like, "Are you kidding? No. I'm not going to do that." But then, I think about it for a while and I think, "Am I going to regret this someday when I'm retired? And I think why didn't I apply for the Grosvenor Teacher Fellowship?" And so then, after thinking about it, then I decide I can step out of my comfort zone and try it. And I can apply, and if I don't get it, I don't get it. But at least I applied for it.

Annalies Corbin: [00:04:45] Yeah. But it is scary, right? I mean, you know, the reality is that the Grosvenor Teacher Fellow is incredibly prestigious. We had another episode recently that we had a conversation with an Einstein Fellow, so it's a very, very similar sort of process. And these experiences can be life altering for many of the folks that participate in them.

And because I have had the privilege of seeing Kelly's photos in her postings about this experience, I sort of suspect that's the case. And because it ties so beautifully, the expedition that you chose to do, with your passion in the classroom and all the work that you do with your kiddos and the birds, that made it a sort of special opportunity for everybody involved, including your kids, I assume?

Kelly Preheim: [00:05:38] Yes. Like today, I brought them to the Promethean board and we were going to do a science lesson. And they're like, "Show us the Galapagos pictures again. Come on, I want to see those again." I'm like, "Just wait. I'm about ready to start my big student project then we'll start off with that again." And so, they really did enjoy it.

You know, as a rural South Dakota kindergarten teacher, I never, ever in my wildest dreams thought that I'd be able to travel out of the country on a magnificent ship to a magical island. It still blows me away. And when I think about it, it just means so much. And while I was there exploring the islands, I just felt all this wonder and enthusiasm that it kind of made me feel like a kid again. You know, I just was doing all these cool things that I never, never thought I would do.

And so, the Galapagos, it was just a magical place for me, as the birds but also all the other animals. And I've never been on a ship before and I've never been to the equator. And so, there was a lot of interesting things. I didn't enjoy the long plane ride, but we won't talk about that. It just was really long. But, anyway, just like each day was as wonderful as the next as we explored the islands, I loved it so much. It was just so amazing.

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:00] Yeah. And I totally understand why the kids love it. And I love the thinking about the fact that there was so much wonder for you. And because I got to sort of watch it, not quite in real time, but almost, because I talked to you before and certainly when you came back, and I knew what that experience was going to be, because I've been to the Galapagos as well.

But the thing I think that I love the most is the fact that you got to go and, to your point, be that kid again. But almost all the things that make kindergarten kiddos so incredibly wonderful. Because almost everything you do in kindergarten, you're exposing them to new things, and that wonder happens every day in your classroom. And so, I just love that you got the chance to go and be a kindergarten again yourself.

Kelly Preheim: [00:07:45] Hey, I like that. That's a great comparison.

Annalies Corbin: [00:07:48] Yeah. I think that you did. So, I want to dig in a little bit, Kelly, and let's talk about the process of becoming a National Geographic Grosvenor Teacher Fellow. Because once you sort of make the decision as a teacher, "Hey, folks are recommending. I'm being encouraged to do this thing." But then, honestly, there's a lot of work to this. And you kind of built up to this on the back side of, not just the the National Presidential Award for Excellence in Math and Science Teaching, but some South Dakota State accolades as well. And so, there was this sort of build up for you.

So, I want to talk about some of the process pieces or some of the things that you might really think that it's important for folks to know. Because at the end of the day, we want to encourage other teachers to take advantage of these kinds of opportunities, and this one in particular. So, can you walk us through that just a little bit?

Kelly Preheim: [00:08:49] Yeah. So, the Grosvenor Teacher Fellowship was named in honor of Gilbert M. Grosvenor, and he was a chairman of the National Geographic Society. And he did a lot of work with supporting pre-K to 12 teachers. And then, he became friends with the Lindblad's, Sven-Olof Lindblad. And to mark Grosvenor's 75th birthday, Sven Lindblad, he decided to make room on his ships for teachers. So, that's kind of how it got started.

And at first they just took a few teachers. And then, this last time, they took 50 teachers. Actually, we were 2020 teachers, but we had the pandemic, so for two-and-a-half years, we didn't get to go. But they kept educating us and we were doing more and more classes.

But anyway, so some of the things we had to do were - oh. Let me think - well, we had to have a resume. And so, my resume was pretty good by this time because I've done a lot of talks about this, and I put a lot of work into trying to get others as crazy about birds and nature as I am. They have us complete a course, the National Geographic Teacher Certification Course. Then, we had to create a video of ourselves, like using our phone, just talking about all the things we've done and why we would be a good choice.

And so, that was a hard one for me. I think it took me 16 takes to get one that I could even stand. But anyway, so I did that. And then, you apply in the fall and then you find out in February via phone call.

And I'll never forget that day. My husband had just had surgery, so I had to stay home with him the next day. And we were kind of glum that day. It was a cold winter day. And I said, "Look at this, I'm getting a phone call from Washington, D.C. What's going on here?" And I said, "I'm not going to answer it." And then, he said, "You better answer it. Didn't you apply for something?" And I'm like, "Oh, yeah."

So, I answered it and they asked if this was Kelly Preheim, and I said yes. And she said, "You need to go sit

down because you are our next Grosvenor Teacher Fellow." And I couldn't believe it. And then, she said, "You know, all the sites that you recommended you'd like to go to, you're not going to any of those. We're sending you to the Galapagos Islands." I wanted to choose some that I didn't have to miss school for, so I chose the ones that had summer expeditions. Anyway, I had to miss some school, but it was worth it in the long run. It wasn't so bad.

Annalies Corbin: [00:11:30] It was completely worth it, Kelly.

Kelly Preheim: [00:11:32] It was worth it. There are things that do. And so, we didn't get to meet in Washington, D.C., but I think they're still doing that. The next Grosvenor Teacher Fellows, you meet before the expeditions as a cohort, and then you go to Washington, D.C. to the National Geographic headquarters. And then, they train you and teach you. I really wish I could have gone and done that. But with COVID, we couldn't do that.

And then, there is preparation beforehand. You take that course, and then you get together as a cohort on Zoom meetings, and then they educate you on how we talk about the Grosvenor Teacher Fellowship and the media part of it. And just a lot of things that you need to know. We waited a long time. So, when I got there and I was finally in the Kodiak Raft and they're taking us out to the ship, boy, I was having a hard time not being too emotional to finally get to that ship. It was very fun.

Annalies Corbin: [00:12:39] Yeah. It's a lot of fun. So, let's talk a little bit about the prep course piece, because I do want folks to really understand, there are a lot of moving parts as you just went through. But those moving parts were really intended to sort of help you be prepared, not just for the expedition, but everything that could come after as it relates to the experience that you've had, and the opportunities then that that experience then translates into your classroom.

And one of the things that I love about this particular experience - which is different than some of the other experiences that teachers can go off and do - is that this one is of short duration and it's not intended to take you for a long time, many, many weeks, for example, or an entire semester, even a whole academic year out of the classroom. Because some of them are designed like that. They pull a teacher out, they do this big thing with hopes that the teacher will go back to the classroom. This one is really intended to be a smaller moment that has a more immediate impact in your day-to-day classroom, you're teaching experience.

And so, I'm super curious about how the prep coursework that you did sort of set the stage for what you were going to see when you got there. And then, how you, as Kelly Preheim, the great bird teacher that you are, sort of internalize the day-to-day pieces that you experienced on the expedition. Because I know you, you were thinking all the time not only about how cool that thing was, but what can I do with this.

Kelly Preheim: [00:14:20] You're right, I was thinking the whole time. And so, every evening I would journal on my day one journal and keep as good of notes that I could. So, one of the things they teach us is about these three parts, like these three mindsets that we need to keep in mind. The Explorer Mindset, to help teachers make the most of their expedition and integrate that spirit of exploration into teaching. Because that's something that is sort of different nowadays when kids spend so much time on technology, which I love technology, but there is a balance there. And so, they're not going out and exploring like they used to.

And then, there's also the Storytelling Mindset. They were teaching us how we could create powerful, purpose-driven stories using a range of media so you can effectively share your expedition experience. So, we would take courses where they would talk about storytelling. And they talk about taking certain kinds of pictures and how we would use those pictures to give a broader explanation of where we are. And, also, to develop new

ways for students to engage with and strengthen their skills in themselves so they can become good storytellers, too.

And then, the other strand would be the Leadership Strand. So, this also supports the teacher by leveraging my skills and experiences and networks to grow as a leader. So, we all network together, our cohort. And it's interesting how we all help each other and give each other ideas. And that's something new for me, I think, is that Leadership Strand.

And then, also becoming an ambassador for the place that I visited. So, they want to try to help others to understand the interconnectedness of all of us on the earth, so we can teach the geographic skills to others and help them understand the importance of conservation. Because, really, when you think about migrating birds, when they're here, I sort of think of them as my birds and that my birds left. But, really, these birds are flying down to Central America and South America and all these habitats along the way. They need to be intact. And so, we all need to work together.

And the same goes for when we were there, we noticed they used some kind of special camera to look at the beach. And there were all these little microplastics out on the beach, and yet they're so secluded and far away from where there are a lot of people. So, our plastics are somehow getting all the way down to the equator, to a secluded island. So, that's kind of too bad. But anyway, so those are some of the things that they teach us.

We really did quite a bit of coursework, but it helped me in a lot of areas and just really opened my eyes to a lot of things that I didn't know about.

Annalies Corbin: [00:17:29] In terms of topics or in terms of content that you could bring into the classroom or some combination of the two?

Kelly Preheim: [00:17:37] Kind of a combination, but just thinking about being a storyteller. And I never thought of myself as being a storyteller, but I guess I am. Because when I'd go out birding on the weekend, and I come back and share my pictures on Facebook and tell what I learned and what I saw, I guess I'm being a storyteller in that way. Many people have told me that they never paid any attention to birds until I started sharing on Facebook. And so, that always made me feel glad that I had done that.

Annalies Corbin: [00:18:07] Yeah. I think there are so many elements or aspects of that work. And, certainly, over the years as I've watched the different things that you've been doing, and the after school program in your Chickadee Bird Club.

And I think that just to sort of set some context for our listeners, because I do make reference to you frequently, actually, on this program. I don't necessarily always call you out by name, but folks have heard me talk about, "Hey. This teacher who's so amazing because she loves birds. But what's really cool about that is she's managed to get all these kids to love birds who, otherwise, would have seen a bird, but maybe not really thought much about a bird. And the thing that's most remarkable is these kids keep coming back. So, she has this after school program, and it's not just the kindergartners, the kids come, and they come for years and years."

But that's not always the case, right? And the other thing that I love about that is because you've developed such a mixed age group and their passions that they have, which, obviously, they're absorbing in part from you, that they're also not shy about being in mixed age groups, especially as they get older. And that tends to fall away for lots of kids. So, what's the magic there? Because I think it's all rolled into the entire conversation we're having today, Kelly.

Kelly Preheim: [00:19:28] Oh, I don't know. I mean, there's definitely a passion for birds. I'm not sure, but when we are together on Monday - so I have 44 students now in our small school, and they range from kindergarten to eighth grade. Well, that's not even counting the kindergartners. They just have their own. They're too tired to come to a bird club after school. But first grade to eighth grade has 44 students, well, I split them into two groups now - it is just abuzz. Everybody is so happy and they're all talking birds. I can't barely answer all the questions. It's just so exciting. I love my time with them.

And then, I love taking them out on field-based, like going birding in town. And then, at the end of the year, we take a birding trip to the local dam, where we have a wooded area that we can go birding, and that's something they really love.

Annalies Corbin: [00:20:30] They do. The pictures are wonderful. I always love them when I get to see them. But I guess all of that is my point, so your classroom and the experience with students is very action oriented. So, I'm super curious about the sort of action components from your experience on Galapagos and through the Grosvenor Teacher Fellowship. What did you bring back to your classroom? What have you been specifically doing this year as a result of that experience that you didn't do before?

Kelly Preheim: [00:21:04] Well, I spend more time talking about being an explorer. And that sometimes you might feel scared to go do something, but you need to sometimes step out of your comfort zone and do that. But we're also talking more about observation. And so, I have to have a student action plan when I'm done.

So, this is a two-year commitment. You have a year where you're preparing to go on your expedition. And then, you have the year afterwards where you come up with a project. I'm not quite done with it yet because I can't figure out what to do for my big ending piece. So, what I plan to do is really work on those strong observation skills and acute awareness of nature. And I've always done a pretty good job of that, but this year I'm really working on it.

So, one of the things we're doing is comparing the Galapagos animals to some of the South Dakota species. And so, I have about a dozen. For example, the Double-crested Cormorant, I have a picture of it next to the Flightless Cormorant, and then we talk about what we see. And then, I show them more pictures of them and we talk about, "Well, this one's flying, but I don't see any pictures of this one flying. Does it fly?" Things like that. We talk about, "Oh. This one's eating fish. Well, this one does, too, but it's also eating an octopus."

And so, we talk about how these animals are the same and how they're different. And I'm trying to teach deeper thinking skills where we can just have a discussion. Even in kindergarten, they are able to do that. It takes a while to get it going and to get everyone to participate is tricky.

I'm also going to work on the value of sketching and taking field notes. Which, kindergartners can't do the field notes, but they can tell me what to write, and I can write that in my book. And then, I ordered these cute little books that they can go ahead and draw the picture, and we'll take that with us on our field experiences.

And then, of course, I'll teach them about birds. And then, I'm going to put a little more effort into the conservation efforts. So, with young kids, I don't want them to worry about birds. But I talk to them about Galapagos, and what a great job Ecuador has done to help conserve Galapagos Islands by making most of that in National Park, and then the strict rules they have about their National Park.

Annalies Corbin: [00:23:34] So, a lot of components there for kindergartners. See, that's the reason why I think you are such an amazing teacher, Kelly, because that's a lot.

Kelly Preheim: [00:23:43] Oh, thanks. And I didn't even tell you, I'm going to do some e-birding with them. So, they're going to help me keep a list of how many of each species we see, and then I'll submit it to eBird, it can be our class total rather than mine.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:00] I love that. They have ownership in that. They're popular.

Kelly Preheim: [00:24:03] They're already counting birds, so they might as well count them for a reason.

Annalies Corbin: [00:24:06] Absolutely. It gives them a context for it. I love that very, very, very much. You know, as we think about sort of wrapping the conversation a bit, I guess one of the things that I know that folks that are listening to this are really sort of wondering, I guess, is, as you work on sort of the next steps and you think about - I mean, a two year commitment is a lot. And I wonder if folks really sort of understand what you sort of got yourself into. And, obviously, it was a really powerful and exciting experience. But I'm curious about what would you tell another teacher that was contemplating sort of running down this path?

Kelly Preheim: [00:24:57] Oh. I would tell them it's definitely worth it. And I think that at first it seems a little bit daunting. But once you get going, it's just so much fun. I've enjoyed the whole process. And I just learned so much about myself. I learned so much about the earth. And I think they would really enjoy it. And two years is not too much, it actually was more than that. So, they cut it down to two years, and I think that's just right.

And then, also, bringing back my other experiences that I can share with my students, like being on the ocean, seeing whales, and snorkeling, and kayaking, and hiking up volcanoes, and seeing all the other amazing animals. And then, these animals had the ecological naiveness. They were not afraid of us. They just were there and we could get good looks and great observations. Of course, that's about Galapagos. But these adventures are great and - I don't know - it was just a once in a lifetime experience. I would really encourage teachers to give it a try.

Annalies Corbin: [00:26:13] And whether it be this or something else, but just any sort of opportunity to have a field experience, whether it's in the field in nature or in the field in some other environment, but just to go out and try new things. I love the way you very, very deliberately bring those components back into the classroom.

And the last thing that we haven't really talked about, but I'm super curious, is, so what is the interaction then been with your fellow teachers as you come back from this experience? What is all of that about? What is that reception? Because sometimes - and I've had conversations with lots of teachers that have had the chance to do these things - it can be daunting and it can be daunting for others. Because sometimes folks internalize, "Oh. Then, we're all supposed to be doing this thing, and I don't really want to do that." I'm curious about sort of what that experience has been.

Kelly Preheim: [00:27:10] Well, they've been very supportive and they enjoy hearing my tales. I felt like at first I was talking too much about it, but I was so excited. But, yeah, I think they're interested in it. I'm trying to encourage them to also apply.

Annalies Corbin: [00:27:29] Yeah. Yeah. Everybody should. Same question then, Kelly, what about the families and then the community? Because I have no doubt actually your kids go home and they chatter about Miss Preheim and Galapagos and whatever it was that you were talking about during the day. I mean, it's always been the case with you and your kids. But I'm curious about has there been a response to sort of the added insight that you're now able to bring into your classroom experience from the families? Do they get it, do you think?

Kelly Preheim: [00:27:59] I think so. Yeah. I've gotten a lot of great responses from my students and even from my bird club kids. Their parents, they're very impressed. And that's another piece of being a Grosvenor Teacher Fellow, now I need to go share it out in the community.

And so, my next big thing is I talked to a women's group in town, but I need to also do a community talk. So, pretty soon I'll do that and invite people to come see my slideshow and I'll talk about Galapagos. But the kids, really, they get their parents jazzed up about it, and I think that they're really appreciative of it too.

Annalies Corbin: [00:28:44] Yeah. And then, the last pieces then in terms of some of the work is, you do your community talks and you are actually going to do a presentation at South Dakota Ornithologists' Union meeting, which is a kind of a big deal. You're the keynote, I believe.

Kelly Preheim: [00:29:04] I am. I can't believe it. So, that's pretty nice. I just found that out yesterday.

Annalies Corbin: [00:29:10] So, lots of big things coming because of these experience. And I guess really that was my point of wanting to be able to sit down and have a conversation with you is that, as educators, when we open ourselves up to really incredible possibilities, even just the process, to your point, of going through the applications and whether it worked out and you had been selected or not, so much was learned through that, I have no doubt. And then, being able to have the experience itself is really, really meaningful.

And so, I want to personally thank you for putting yourself out there on behalf of the children that you teach, and then also being willing to share with the rest of the world what those experiences have meant to you.

Kelly Preheim: [00:30:01] You're welcome. And thank you for saying that. I guess, I just have this really strong feeling that I want to make a difference in the world and I don't want to be forgotten some day. So, I'm just going to do everything I can to make a difference and help the kids help nature, help the earth. I just have to do what I can, right?

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:21] A hundred percent. And the kids don't forget, that's the reason in eighth grade they still show up for the Chickadee Bird Club, Kelly. So, let's be really, really clear you're making a difference.

Kelly Preheim: [00:30:32] Well, thanks.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:33] Well, thank you very much, Kelly, for taking time out of your afternoon at the end of your school day to have this conversation with us. I greatly, greatly appreciate all that you do and for the conversation.

Kelly Preheim: [00:30:45] And thank you for the kind words and for listening to me talk about this most awesome experience.

Annalies Corbin: [00:30:53] Yeah, absolutely. We look forward to your next adventure because we'll have a conversation about that, too, I have no doubt.

Kelly Preheim: [00:30:59] Really? I didn't even know I was having another one.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:01] I think you have many adventures still left in you, Kelly.

Kelly Preheim: [00:31:05] Thank you.

Annalies Corbin: [00:31:06] You're welcome.

Thank you for joining us for Learning Unboxed, a conversation about teaching, learning, and the future of work. I want to thank my guests and encourage you all to be part of the conversation. Meet me on social media, @annaliescorbin. And join me next time as we stand up, step back, and lean in to reimagine education.