**Gloria Schultz:** You are listening to the PYD Lab (Music plays)

The podcast for implementers and young leaders who want to examine innovative approaches to Positive Youth Development (PYD) and hear stories of young people leading change in their communities.

(Music continues)

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**Natasha Zena:** Hey, it’s Natasha and you’re in the PYD Lab. We’re talking mentoring this episode. And mentoring hits so many aspects of the PYD framework. From recognizing emotions to positive identity, bonding and to creating safe spaces. And so whether formal or informal, mentoring can have a profound impact on our lives. And so I wanted to talk mentoring with people who actually did the work from an on-the-ground hands-on perspective to big-picture long-term outcome planning.

Sarah Sladen and Philbert Aganyo have been doing youth development work for years. Now in Sarah’s case, it’s been 15 years since she started working in international youth development. She’s an expert in youth economic opportunities, positive youth development, and youth engagement.

Philbert is a youth empowerment advocate and mentor in Kenya who’s involved in a youth empowerment initiative in Nairobi that mentors young people toward job readiness and leadership.

They both offered great insight. Let’s take a listen.

(Natasha begins) Thank you both for joining us today.

**Sarah Sladen:** Thank you Philbert, we’re just really grateful for your time. I know you’re in a restaurant, you’re heading to a conference in Germany next week, you’re a really busy guy so we just appreciate your time.

**Philbert Aganyo:** Oh, thank you so much.

**Natasha Zena:** The topic today is mentoring and there’s so many different kinds of mentoring. I have been a mentor and a mentee.

In one situation I mentored a young lady from the time that she was in the seventh grade all the way through like her freshman year of college, and man I learned a lot about myself during that journey. And then of course you know there’s like the mentoring and the coaching that you do from a professional standpoint, right? So I’ve like worked with young journalists.

I’m curious to know your experiences with mentoring.

Who was one person you looked up to as a kid and why? And what was your first experience with mentoring? And Sarah you can kick that off.

**Sarah Sladen:** Oh sure. I had a series of female figures in my life so I had a number of people that I looked up to who offered different things, but I think the common thread was that they were women who seemed to have a really strong sense of themselves and who they were and women who had really leaned into their curiosity and their talent.

They all had qualities that I looked up to, but also I think just they struck me as people who were grounded in the sense of who they were and had a set of kind of values and principles. So that made a big impact on me growing up and to this day I started having women supervisors who kind of offered the same thing and I learned a lot about leadership and management, both the good and the bad sometimes. So I’ve been lucky I think I’ve had a lot of role models, particularly women, I’ve learned a lot from over the years.

**Natasha Zena:** Yeah, what about you Philbert?

**Philbert Aganyo:** Growing up some of my teachers were some of the best mentors that I had. So in primary school in our quest to improve both my written and my spoken English, I identified a teacher exactly who was actually the head teacher of the school and so that teacher instilled the good English that I speak today.

Same goes with those to my math teacher. Math was my best performed grade at standard eight simply because of that change, and so I had these two mentors both in English and Math who shift my grades and I can confidently say that my performance in Math and English and English have been able to carry to this point is all is attributed to those kinds of mentors that I had.

They were able to add a very significant component to the whole that is the Philbert that you have right now.

**Natasha Zena:** That is amazing, some people are just natural mentors and I love those stories where people see something in you. I think that’s so powerful and it allows you to see yourself in a really powerful way.

**Philbert Aganyo:** Let me say that uh mentorship needs to take different dimensions in the age where technology is taking over the world, there’s a changing face to mentorship whereas yes, the most effective one is still you know face-to-face mentorship where we get to talk to someone. You know, at the end of the day we are human beings and we thrive in human connections.

I think technology may rob us of this, but at the same time I think we may need to just find a way of coming up with a perfect balance and so that uh relationships can continue happening also the human component, the human face, to mentorship is not lost.

I’m glad was the relationship that I had even with my peer advisees about the YouthLead program. All our calls are virtual apart from one. There’s one who is resident in Kenya, we had a few face-to-face moments where we shared sometimes you can just meet over a meal, you know why then sometimes it’s not just about do’s and don’ts it wasn’t about dreams.

**Natasha Zena:** Right.

**Philbert Aganyo:** Sometimes it’s just just showing up and just talk. It’s that step in a relationship that will ultimately lead someone to open up to you about their challenges. And then also that does not belittle the role of technology in mentorship, that is where the world is headed. Mentorship needs to have a different approach because there’s a human face to it.

**Sarah Sladen:** Yeah, I mean I think Philbert the point you made about like just connection and relationship building, I think we leave that out too much in some of our work with young people and we don’t take enough time to build relationships and trust but we want youth to come to the table and consult with us and share you know, their experiences and including their trauma and innermost experiences so we can put it in a report and get it out into the world. And that’s not really I think a good way to work as people, let alone between adults and youth, so changing how we do that I think is really important and perhaps more focused on mentorship and what it takes as a two-way relationship could be helpful in our thinking about that.

I think Philbert you’re so right especially for mentorship relationships, like you’re building trust, you’re trying to build a relationship and it’s so hard to do it online.

Especially if you’ve never met before and that is a huge struggle it’s (pause) I think that we’re all trying to figure out what to do and at YouthLead we do not want to tell youth to take health risks, we’re not going to tell them to organize an in-person meet-up when that could put them at risk or people in their community at risk right now. It’s just not something we’re willing to do, but we also recognize that when you limit engagement to an online platform, you’re cutting out a lot of people.

You know, the digital divide which was already in place, is getting worse. We are also recognizing that, you know, technology can still be a really critical tool to keep us connected and in some ways has opened up participatory options for young people, more than we were able to do when we were meeting in-person and costs and travel and visas created, it you know really presented a barrier.

So, there’s good and bad about it, but for mentorship I think our focus right now recognizing that we can’t necessarily have a big in-person convening, is to try and do whatever we can through the YouthLead platform to promote access to knowledge to learning opportunities as best we can.

**Natasha Zena:** So true. And I think that’s a great lead-in because I want to talk a little bit about the YouthLead mentoring initiative. And so Sarah, how do you take in account Philbert, right, and his experience and keep that in mind while building an international mentoring initiative that’s serving so many people in various countries? Because it seems like a big undertaking, but one of the things that I love about YouthLead is that it just seems like this place where so many different young people can come and there’s like this mutual connection.

**Sarah Sladen:** Yeah, I really appreciate your comments Philbert.

I think you touched on a couple of things that really resonate, and one is that, you know, we don’t just have one mentor in our lives.

We have a kind of community of mentors that speak to different needs and areas of growth and guidance and that you know, the ultimate challenge is trying to build that network of people in your life that can be supporters, guides, coaches, sometimes help you correct quirks, you know, sometimes offer hard truths, people that you trust, and we really try to emphasize that idea that with the mentorship initiative on YouthLead, it is not serving every single need, but really focusing in on how to think about what mentorship is, why it matters, and how to go about building that community of mentors. It’s not about just going out and finding one person to meet all of the needs because that’s not really how we operate as people, right? We don’t have one friend for everything, you know we don’t get everything we need from a colleague. We work as teams, we work as communities.

So the mentorship initiative on YouthLead really came out I think of a reflection that we can provide access to resources and can provide organized webinars, we can do all sorts of things to try and support young people. A core component of that is all of the people and institutions and resources along the way that support young people in being successful.

But, there’s a lot of pieces that go into ensuring a young person’s success, and a key part of that is mentors, people who guide, support, offer feedback, in a way that is trusted with young people. So I think the response YouthLead had was really recognizing that there is a need to help young people find mentors, connect with mentors, understand what mentorship is, but we also have a group of young people who have been mentoring other young people for a long time, maybe they haven’t been talking about it as mentors or self-identifying as mentors, but what we learned from our YouthLead members who are leading organizations, running their own initiatives is that they’re actually engaged in mentorship with their peers and have been doing this for a long time.

So, there is a need and a demand to create space on the platform for dedicated focus on mentorship. So help young people find where those programs are, help set them up for success to access those programs, and also work with those initiatives to lower the barriers of entry for youth who want to get engaged in mentorship activities, find mentors, and connect.

So the page offers a section on resources where we talk about, you know, what mentorship is, how to be a mentor, tips, how to find mentors. It also is building out a library of organizations and initiatives focused on mentorship that include matching opportunities.

We’re also using this space on the YouthLead platform as a focal point for learning and capacity building activities. So that means that we’ll be designing a series of events for YouthLead members around different topics and themes related to mentorship.

So there’s a lot happening under the initiative, but we’re also trying to stay really focused on and responsive to what we’ve learned from our members on YouthLead about: what are they looking for, what can be the most helpful, and how do we help connect youth to each other and help them build their own professional network as peers.

And I think it speaks to some of the points that Philbert has raised around, you know, he had multiple mentors growing up that helped him unlock parts of himself. I mean I really heard that, I struggled in math in school and I thought I was really bad at it and then I had a really wonderful math teacher who was patient, who took the time to explain things differently to me, and helped me see that actually I’m not really bad at math, I just learn math differently.

And those are what mentors can do, they can kind of help see and unlock parts of yourself that you might assume aren’t there. But it takes a kind of community of mentors to help you do that so that’s kind of what we’re trying to do with YouthLead.

**Natasha Zena:** No, that’s amazing, and I probably needed that mentor because I was horrible in math (laughter).

**Sarah Sladen:** (laughter) That’s my rant.

**Natasha Zena:** I really love that. Philbert I would love you to jump in and I would love to hear from you in terms of your peers, other young professionals. What are some of the needs that they have right now in terms of either mentoring or coaching?

**Philbert Aganyo:** Let me also mention at this point that I’ll be a mentee and a mentor. I’ve been a beneficiary of the YouthLead program, and in the program itself as a YouthLead ambassador for Kenya we had mentors who were taking us, peer advisors who are taking us through the courses, keeping in check and you know, helping us ensure that we deliver on the tasks that we set out to do.

And also as a peer advisor, I’ve been able to use the same set of learning and the same set of lessons that I got from that experience to also to equally mentor, or rather of being an advisor to other young people.

You mentioned that you go to a mentors training, right? Now I don’t think we have enough of those where mentors can actually check in because there’s this common belief that when you’re a mentor then there is no need for you to keep sharpening your skills or sharpening yourself or maybe learning from experience from other people. And so there is a luck in that kind of community where you guys can go and check in and share about your challenges.

It is believed there’s a perception that when you’re a mentor, then you already have it all figured out, then your life is okay, you yours is just to give, but people don’t realize that even mentors need mentoring. Mentors need support. Mentors need an outlet, a way of communicating because they’re also human beings at the end of the day. They’re not super-humans. And so one of the significant or other prominent needs that I have seen is whenever there’s a lack of that, you find mentors not conforming to the current trends.

You’ll find a mentor, someone who mentored a young person at the university, not being alive to the changes in the environment, changes in the field, and so you’ll find that something that worked in for example 2019, might not be the same tactic that is going to work in 2021 looking at the post-COVID recovery stage. There is a lack in that building of a strong community and I want to appreciate YouthLead for making the first step towards creating that platform where mentors and mentees can meet. But also perhaps maybe Sarah may want to pick this, that even the mentors that we have on the YouthLead platform also need to have their own platform where they can sharpen themselves, but they can also share about their journeys. And you never know, and so that I feel is a need that is existing. Thank you.

**Sarah Sladen:** Yeah, I mean I really appreciate how candid you are Philbert about this challenge. It is real, and it’s you know I think as a team we really discussed a lot of these different things of you know, we are creating space to make connections and we’re creating space for a very specific kind of relationship to be formed, whether that’s peer-to-peer mentoring or connecting our members to others, to other organizations.

We also need to practically offer skill-building guidance and tools for members so that they can take those steps for themselves as well.

**Natasha Zena:** Yeah, and I think that you bring up a really important and interesting point that I think one of the benefits it seems like setting this up at YouthLead is that obviously they’re going to be recommending and partnering with well-respected organizations who have experience with mentoring and mentoring check-in sessions and I also think when you are dealing with younger people there needs to definitely be some type of system, structure in place for safety.

And I totally agree with you, I think when you’re dealing with younger people it’s nice to have guidelines in place and so I think it’s brilliant that YouthLead is partnering with organizations.

**Sarah Sladen:** And I think that more broadly, you know, what we’re seeing is that particularly with COVID, that there was a real need for those kinds of resources and support. I think that that’s going to be true all the time, that you know my hope is that YouthLead isn’t just a website where you can find resources, but that you can find a community of like-minded young people who are working for change, who understand what the challenges are and that you can connect, build relationships that also really creates a resource for folks who are excited about mentorship, who want to be mentors, because you’re right Philbert, like it is I think it’s a calling but it’s also not an innate skill you want to really connect them with each other into the platform.

During COVID we’ve seen among our YouthLead members like how incredibly adaptive they have been in the face of enormous challenges. And being flexible, so one of the PYD recommendations was kind of related to the PYD domain of engagement and contribution and the need for us to be more flexible and creative about what this can look like.

It can be formal programs, it can also be space for informal connection for coffee, for conversation, but that can lead to a lot of really incredible things and much deeper connections with young people, with each other, with between adults and youth. How connection and mentorship can occur in different kinds of spaces is something we’re trying to think about. So what is our role? Our role needs to be to provide better guidance, resources, and tools so that when those connections are happening, they’re happening in a way that’s positive, constructive, safe, versus extractive or harmful.

So that would be one PYD recommendation.

**Natasha Zena:** Yeah, you touched on it so let’s go there, that’s one of my favorite parts of the show the PYD recommendations. The ‘P’ stands for “Publish,” the ‘Y’ for “Youth,” and in this instance the ‘D’ for “Disrupt.”

What’s your first recommendation for published? A published reading source you recommend on a youth development related topic. It could be a book, article, report, and why.

**Sarah Sladen:** I like the *Journal for Youth Development*, it kind of brings together in one place interesting research and learning around youth development as a practice with a particular focus often on PYD. And the latest version is pretty interesting, it includes something called the Peoplehood model as a framework for Indigenous Inclusion.

The latest journal issue also looks at identifying opportunities and challenges in supporting LGBTQI youth. So there’s a lot more learning going on, which is pretty interesting but it’s hard with everything going on to keep track of what’s happening and where progress is really being made and in particular I think more attention to the *Journal for Youth Development* has been a nice resource just to kind of bring together some of those insights and I think hopefully push some of the, push the field forward in some of these important ways.

**Natasha Zena:** Uh, I’m going to do a shameless plug because some of our YP2LE colleagues were actually featured in a special edition of the journal that focused solely on PYD, so I also recommend that you check that out.

What about you Philbert?

**Philbert Aganyo:** Let me also just mention that uh one published book that really changed my life, this book *The Winning Attitude* by John C. Maxwell.

That is the book that my university, my college mentor gave to me. She told me that I might not be able to understand what you went through, and neither am I able to give you any solutions, but there is one book I would like to recommend. Go read this book *The Winning Attitude*. Trust me, I still give people that book to date. I look for it when I don’t have all the solutions, I notice that I identify with someone’s problem or orientation upbringing. That is one thing that I always recommend.

**Natasha Zena:** Oh, that’s an awesome recommendation. Hopping into your second one “Youth,” what’s the resource or project you want to tell us about?

**Sarah Sladen:** I used to direct the Youth Economic Opportunities (YEO) network and we had a group come and speak called hashtag Mimi Syria. This was founded by a guy named Mohsin Mohi-Ud-Din, and it was a program of Ashoka’s Youth Venture.

Mohsin was using storytelling, and giving young people and Syrian youth facilitators cameras, and working with young people in this Za’atari refugee camp. They started in 2014 to lead um, to kind of tell their own stories and the idea behind Mimi Syria was to decentralize the power of narrative and creative enterprise. So they focused on advancing storytelling for healing, empathy, and change-making, building young people’s communication skills, focusing on psychological well-being, leadership, community engagement.

I was really inspired by the program because of the way that it put the power of storytelling into the hands of young people directly so they could speak for themselves, tell their own story, as opposed being talked about, which you know I think is particularly acute for young people who have experienced trauma or violence.

Refugee youth, they’re often talked about in the way we cover these populations and this was a chance for them to tell their own story, and in the process of doing that, processing their experiences, building their skills and confidence.

I just thought that it was a really cool way of using storytelling as part of engaging young people in well-being.

**Natasha Zena:** Wow.

**Philbert Aganyo:** YouthLead to me has been an amazing, amazing program that I would encourage every other young person to get involved with.

Talk about opportunities, education, events, it’s all right there. YouthLead to me is the one initiative that I make a lot of noise about.

**Natasha Zena:** No, that’s amazing. And what do you have for us for the “Disrupt”?

**Sarah Sladen:** I would come back to this point about training adults to work more inclusively and effectively with young people.

I love seeing this, you know, this attention to bringing youth to the table and you know youth should be consulted. Nothing for us without us. I was thinking about all of the youth activism over social justice and climate in the last few years and how young people have really taken the lead and surpassed adult decision-makers, demanding that these issues be on the global agenda that they get a focus now.

And the resistance to that, you know was like “These youth are so inspiring and wonderful but like we’re not going to take up these ideas right now.”

**Natasha Zena:** Right.

**Sarah Sladen:** Um, there’s sort of conversations around including youth, but the actual practice of doing that is hard because it requires relinquishing power and making space in a meaningful way and being uncomfortable and getting outside of our own limitations and frameworks and all of us, myself included, again just like we were struggling with that, but I think it’s a really key part of change in terms of how we solve a lot of these community and development challenges.

I mean youth are ahead of us, and we’re not making space, and we need to do better and I think there’s some specific skills that we could relearn as adults that we tend to sort of let atrophy as we get older so.

**Natasha Zena:** I think that that is an amazing way to wrap up this episode. I thank you both so much for coming on and not just sharing the work that you’re doing, but your ideas around it and your hopes and dreams for adults and youth working together and expanding mentoring relationships.

I think it’s awesome that YouthLead has kind of added this to the amazing work that you’re doing.

**Philbert Aganyo:** Thank you so much for organizing this and for allowing us the platform to share with you. And of course, we look forward to more and more interactions.

We were wondering what we were going to do after becoming YouthLead the advisors and you know, ambassadors, but now I’m grateful that there is now the opportunity to become mentors that has again been created, so again there’s a whole system of value chain that has been provided as a result of the YouthLead initiative.

I want to really thank you all so much for making this happen, uh both Natasha and Sarah.

**Sarah Sladen:** Thank you Philbert, we’ve learned so much from you and we really appreciate your time. You’re always so thoughtful and just appreciate your time and wisdom, it’s been just such a pleasure learning from you.

**Natasha Zena:** Yeah, thank you both and Philbert for the win, coming in and advocating for some things that you’d like to see on the platform during the podcast.

Yes, I love it, I love it thank you both so much for joining me today.

**Sarah Sladen:** Oh thank you Natasha, this was fun! (laughter)

**Natasha Zena:** Oh good, yay!

(By herself)

It’s time for our three PYD recommendations. We’ve been having fantastic conversation around mentorship, so I would be remiss if I didn’t guide you to three of my favorite mentoring resources.

My first recommendation is, well, the mentorship initiative. I invite you to visit [youthlead.org/mentorship-initiative](http://youthlead.org/mentorship-initiative).

Now, the great thing about this page is that it was designed with the mentee and the mentor in mind. From discovering mentorship resources, to connecting with YouthLead members, you can even learn more about partnership opportunities.

And, you can learn more about our mentorship event series. The series will run through fall 2022, and all events will be recorded and uploaded at [youthlead.org](http://youthlead.org).

Our second resource is the article “Five Ways Mentoring Can Positively Impact Your Life.”

Now this summer, I had the pleasure of interviewing Edna, who was a member of our youth advisory group. Edna shared her inspiring story of how mentorship played a role in helping her become a young leader. Today she’s paying it forward by mentoring other young changemakers. We will link directly to the article on our podcast home page.

My third recommendation is the mentorship toolkit for mentors. Can’t leave the mentors out, it’s so important for mentors to receive training as well. This toolkit was produced by IREX through the Mandela Washington Fellowship Program. It covers creating milestones in the mentorship, it goes over setting expectations, negotiating differences, and other sensitivities.

I hope you enjoyed today’s discussion as much as I did.

(Exit music starts playing)

Sarah, Philbert, thank you both so much for your insight and joining us today.

Until next time, this is Natasha and you’ve been in the PYD Lab.