



## Episode 6 – “Milton Hershey School” Transcript

### **Melissa Turnpaugh:**

Hello and welcome to our podcast, I Will Be Your Voice, Stories of Homelessness and Hope. I am one of your hosts. Melissa Turnpaugh, Youth Development Coordinator with the Center for Schools and Communities. Our podcast will amplify the voices and stories of students experiencing homelessness across Pennsylvania and beyond.

### **Matt Butensky:**

And I'm your co-host, Matt Butensky, Project Manager with the Center for Schools and Communities. We are very excited that you are joining us for this episode of I Will Be Your Voice podcast. And on today's episode, we are speaking with Pete Gurt from the Milton Hershey School. Pete Gurt is the president of the Milton Hershey School and Catherine Hershey Schools for early learning as well as an alum from the class of '85. So we are now really thrilled to introduce Pete to our podcast. Welcome President Gurt. Thanks for being here.

### **President Gurt:**

Matt and Melissa, thank you so much for having me and thank you for the extraordinary work that you're doing on behalf of the children across Pennsylvania.

### **Matt Butensky:**

Thank you, President Gurt. And as our listeners don't necessarily know, Melissa is an alum of Milton Hershey School too.

### **Melissa Turnpaugh:**

Yes. So it's great to have a fellow Milt brother online with us today. We made...

### **President Gurt:**

I recollect this class of 2012.

### **Melissa Turnpaugh:**

Good job. Yes, 2012, the best class yet.

**Matt Butensky:**

And as we were saying before prepping before we got started that you said that the Milts stick together.

**President Gurt:**

Yes.

**Matt Butensky:**

Awesome.

**President Gurt:**

Well, in essence, given the unique arrangement that Milton and Catherine Hershey outlined in their deed of trust creates a family environment for children who find themselves in difficult circumstances. And so it doesn't matter if you've graduated in the first class of Milton Hershey School or the recent graduates of 2023, we're all family. And that's what makes Milton Hershey School such a special place to be part of.

**Melissa Turnpaugh:**

Yes, agreed. Awesome. Well, we are so excited to have you here. I'm very excited to have you here. So we'll get started just to learn some more about Milton Hershey. So as being the president, are you able to give us some background and knowledge on the history of the school also as being an alum as well?

**President Gurt:**

Sure. And before we get started, Melissa, please know that I did not go back and look at your discipline file from your years at Milton Hershey School. So you're safe.

**Melissa Turnpaugh:**

It's fine. It would've been clean anyway.

**President Gurt:**

Milton and Catherine Hershey's story is really quite extraordinary. He grew up in a challenged environment as a child. And as a result of that, struggled, failed several times in business, but then through success with the Lancaster Caramel Company, which he sold for a million dollars and then created the Hershey Company and the Hershey Bar, and what an extraordinary entrepreneur. He and his wife were unable to have children of their own. And it was then that the two of them decided that they wanted to leave their entire fortune to those that are less fortunate, primarily focused in the area of Pennsylvania. So the school has been in existence since 1909. It provides for all of the needs of our students. We have a very strong home foundation for the children that we serve on top of a top-notch educational program. And then on top of that, we have all of the wraparound services provided to our children and their families at no cost to them so medical, dental, psychological care, social work support.

So we really are the entire village that wraps around the needs of each and every one of the children that we serve. From the humble beginnings of the first four boys that enrolled in the school, we now have well over 11,000 graduates. Our student body this year will be 2,100 students. And we just continue to grow based on the foundation that Milton and Catherine Hershey put forth for us as outlined in their deed of trust.

**Melissa Turnpaugh:**

Yeah, that's awesome. And so you mentioned about the four boys that started. Can you give us some of how the school has evolved with the demographics of where we're at and how closely Milton and Catherine's original vision closely aligns with where we are today with Milton Hershey?

**President Gurt:**

I think there are parts of the deed of trust that are timeless. And so when you think about what Milton and Catherine Hershey outlined in that document, things like a stable home that was just as important in 1909, and I would argue maybe even more important today. In the deed of trust, it also requires us to provide a strong academic program for our students coupled with a top-notch career technical education program. I would also argue that that is just as important today in 2023 as it was in 1909. All of the other services that I've outlined for medical, dental, and psychological care, all of those are provided at no cost to the children and families. That remains true today.

And so many of the principles of the deed of trust that are timeless are current today. Obviously, our curriculum has changed, our student body has changed. We are roughly 50% male and female. We have a richly diverse student body that continues to thrive at the school. And so when you think about our curriculum and our approach to meeting the needs of children, that has changed and is certainly very different than it was in 1909, but all based on the principles and the values that Milton and Catherine Hershey expected of us.

**Melissa Turnpaugh:**

Yeah, times have changed, but I do believe that the deed is timeless and I think it's great that the school continues to grow. So speaking of growth, what do you think are some of the biggest growth Milton Hershey has seen throughout the years? And that could be as a student when you were there, it could be when you were just an alum, or it could be now when you are president.

**President Gurt:**

Sure. Well, just first of all, the number of children that we serve has grown rather significantly, and we're still growing our student body. So we'll be 2,100 students this school year with the goal of reaching 2,300 students in the next coming years. And then at that point analyze whether or not growth for MHS is still appropriate. The other part of growth, both in terms of just our curriculum, is that we have more offerings for our students. We believe that all children have multiple pathways to success. So we support and cheer on those students that go on to post-secondary institutions who earn a four-year degree, but we are just as happy for those students that go to the military and for those that choose to be apprentices or receive other credentials that would not be a four-year degree. So it really is providing multiple pathways for success as they define what their purpose should be.

And our job is to support that. Everything we do is individualized from the social emotional learning to the academic program to students that are interested in visual performing arts or athletics or other co-curriculars that each one of our students has an individualized path with a staff that are responsible for carrying out those responsibilities. So that part of growth has been rather significant. One of the most exciting things I think in our history is several years ago we announced the expansion and the creation of Catherine Hershey Schools for early learning. And after a very rigorous process of how do we try to serve more children, we felt the best thing for us to do was to really just expand the age of children that we serve. To come to Milton Hershey School, you must be at least four years of age. But we also know that the students enrolling in our elementary program, so much of their lives are formed from birth to five years of age.

And as a result of that, felt that this expansion into early childhood education gives us the ability to meet the needs of children and families at a much earlier age. And it also gives an opportunity for some of those families to consider Milton Hershey School as a longer term option and serve as a feeder for us, assuming that those families would want to continue the relationship they have with us. Currently, we're in that expansion plan. We're contemplating at least in phase one six early childhood centers located in the Tri-County area around Hershey, Pennsylvania, so in Dolphin Lebanon and Lancaster County. And we're very excited about this new venture and meeting the needs of children and families at that young age.

**Matt Butensky:**

Thanks for sharing all that. It's really unique to hear about the growth, but also to hear about how at the core you have the belief that every student has potential for success. There's different pathways to that success. And that's, I think so important, particularly for the students that we're trying to amplify their voices and stories through this podcast. And that is students experiencing homelessness from low income families. So we wanted you to tell us a little bit more about the students that attend Milton Hershey's School. What are some of the criteria for a student to be accepted or just generally when you look at students, what do you see? And can you just share a little bit more about the students that attend Milton Hershey School?

**President Gurt:**

Sure. When you think about the profile of students and families that we enroll at the school, we see a significant number of adverse childhood experiences that have the ability to derail the purpose of the students that we serve. And that ranges everything. We have a significant number of our students that have experienced homelessness prior to enrollment. Many of our families experienced drug or alcohol abuse and addiction within the home environment, sometimes abuse, unsafe, unstable neighborhoods. And so all of the issues that I'm sure you deal with on a regular basis makes up the enrollment profile of those who come to Milton Hershey School. Some of our criteria is that you need to be receiving less than adequate care from one or both of your parents. You must be between the age of four and prior to your 16th birthday, and you must meet our financial criteria.

And so the best, and obviously we are seeking low-income family families, and so our income criteria is based on a number of factors. And so any of your families or listeners that would want to refer families, I think the best thing for each of them to do is to go to our website under the admissions tab and really begin to look at the specific criteria. It is an easy process to submit your initial interest in the school, and then it gets a little bit more complex. But we have an

extraordinary admissions team that guides each and every interested family through the process. But I described that profile not because we try to focus on just the needs of our students. I think one of the things about the school is we see promise and each and every one of our students and just as important as their adverse childhood experiences, we try to instill a series of positive childhood experiences surrounded by loving adults, being in challenging environments, knowing that you have a trusted adult.

All of those things that can build resilience, our program is designed to provide, which is why the profile is very different at the time of graduation. So the vast majority of our students do go on to some type of post-secondary education. Many of them, like I said, can be community colleges or apprenticeships or certification programs, but we do have some number that go on for four-year degrees. Our graduate data, our youngest of graduates between the age of 25 and 30 are making an income well above the national average. They experience unemployment less than the national average. They have more continuous learning than the national average. And so when you look at all of both the outcomes of our young and graduates of all ages, the recipe here at Milton Hershey School works, and it is life changing and life transforming.

**Melissa Turnpaugh:**

Yeah, that's great. And so I love that you brought up about just the adverse childhood experiences because that ties into all of the benefits that they get while being at the school. And so being a fellow alum, I know some of the benefits I had was being able to go through those career technical courses and trying to figure out what I wanted to do afterwards. The scholarship money that was provided when I graduated was 80,000 you could walk away with. Now I know it's probably 90 something as colleges are getting more expensive. So what were some of the different opportunities and benefits that our current students are experiencing, but maybe even from your personal experience when you were a student and how those have differed and where we're at now?

**President Gurt:**

Yeah. I do think that today the individualized nature of our approach has really accelerated our success individually. I mean, it's always challenging when you have this number of students to provide individual care and individual focus, but that's at the core of what we do. The continued education scholarship is just one example. And so when I was a student in the mid-eighties, you could only go to a state school and the continued education scholarship at that time was maxed at \$4,000 per year. Today, our students have the ability to earn \$95,000 to apply to their post-secondary experience, and we've expanded what that post-secondary experience can be. So it's not just a four-year university, it's apprenticeships, it's credentialing, it's certifications, and that scholarship then applies for additional costs.

And when you think about that, even middle class families are graduating their children with significant college debt. The vast majority of our graduates have little to no debt at the time of their completion of their post-secondary endeavor, which also gives them an advantage when they get their first employment opportunities to begin making wise financial choices as opposed to looking back and paying off college and student loan debts.

So that's just one of many of enhancements that we do. The other thing, not to take too much of a trip down memory lane, but when I graduated, Mr. Hershey insisted that every graduate got \$100 and a suitcase full of clothing. Well, now the value of what we provide to every graduate in terms of ensuring that their launch from Milton Hershey School is successful in terms of their

basic needs, in terms of technology needs, for those that are in our construction program, they get a full set of tools, if they're in other kind of career technical areas, so that they are employable if their choice is to go immediately to the world of work that they have what they need to be supported during that.

We also have an entire team now who visits with and supports all of our graduates that are in post-secondary institutions now because our philosophy has moved from getting kids to graduation to now ensuring success through graduation. And if we are a family, it's our job then to make sure we're supporting our children between the ages of 18 and 24 to ensure that they then become self-sufficient and independent. And we've designed programs to do that.

***Matt Butensky:***

So amazing. It's so cool to hear about your model, which is based in providing opportunity and additional advantages, and as you were saying, reversing that adverse and providing those pieces, those positive childhood experiences. So amazing, Melissa and I think we're both cheering silently from our microphones hearing about all the cool things that you do. And I think our listeners at schools, at agencies can really pick up things from your model to apply to the youth that they're serving, which is one of our goals and reasons why we wanted to have you here today.

And now a short message. Registration for the 2023 Paving the Way to Educational Success Conference is now open. And today we want to share with you more about this year's keynote presenters. I have my colleague Taylor Teichman here today who's going to talk about this year's speakers. Taylor, welcome.

**Taylor Teichman:**

Thank you so much. I am very excited to be here and to share that we have three incredible keynote speakers joining us for our 2023 Paving the Way to Educational Success Conference. We have Nicole Thomas joining us. She is founder and CEO of GOAT Educators, and she was recently featured by Forbes for her Reverse the Adverse Trauma-Informed Care Training. So she will be joining us to speak about healing student trauma with love. We also have Rene Denfeld joining us. She is an award-winning author, a justice worker and a foster parent. She writes literary thrillers that explore themes around survival, resiliency, and redemption. She has earned a starred Library Journal review, and she has some proclaimed work around *The Butterfly Girl*, which is a heartbreaking yet ultimately hopeful novel. And so she will be joining us. She is a New York Times Hero of the Year in 2017, and so she will be with us talking about her *Butterfly Girl* novel, nurturing, healing in the midst of trauma.

And then we also have Miss Universe of 2021, 2022, Nikki Johnson-Alfano joining us as well. She launched an app in 2015 called Donafy. It was and is an iPhone app that allows citizens to locate and donate to nearby nonprofit organizations that serve people in need of emergency housing, food, medical and mental health care, job training, legal services. And her presentation that she'll be joining us with includes her speaking about her amazing journey from experiencing homelessness to becoming a lawyer.

**Matt Butensky:**

That sounds really exciting. And so our 2023 conference is October 11th through 13th, 2023 in Mars, Pennsylvania, which is near Pittsburgh. And select sessions will be offered virtually. So thank you for sharing that today, Taylor.

**Taylor Teichman:**

Thanks for having me, and we're so excited to have folks joining us at our conference in the Pittsburgh area this year. See you there.

**Matt Butensky:**

Awesome. So to learn more and to register, visit [centerforschoolsandcommunities.org](http://centerforschoolsandcommunities.org) and locate our events tab. We hope you can join us.

We wanted to talk a little bit more about Milton Hershey school's more increased work around early learning, and you talked a little bit about that already with the Catherine Hershey Schools, but we wanted our listeners to learn a little bit more about your work around early childhood education and why Milton Hershey School has decided to grow into offering those programs for early learners and why that sets them up for success.

**President Gurt:**

Well, part of the reason is that we are blessed with resources because of that initial gift from Milton and Catherine Hershey. And in their deed of trust, they outline in the opinion of the leadership of the school and the board is how do you continue to have impact on greater numbers of children while also protecting the assets of the school to exist in perpetuity? Because one of the unique aspects of our deed of trust is that this school and home will go on forever in perpetuity. And so decisions made today have a ripple effect well into the future. And so there's always a balance between doing more now with ensuring that we meet the primary outcome of perpetuity. In that process when the school began to grow, and we are now the largest school in our history, and we're also the largest home and school in the world, and given the resources we had, we began a process where we began to examine how else can we impact the greater needs of children who are underserved.

It was through that process and primarily a tremendous amount of research. And we all know much more now about brain development and the importance of those early years, even prenatal attention and care. And so for us, it was, I don't want to say a no-brainer, but for us it was how do we expand what we do, but do it for children earlier than four years of age, but do it in a different way. So at Milton Hershey School, for instance, all of our students are required to live in our residential setting. We obviously will not have children birth to five at Catherine Hershey Schools living at Milton Hershey School, but we plan to provide them with a very strong play-based curriculum from birth to five. I think one of the differentiators for us, and as we went about this is what are we passionate about?

What do we think we can be the best at and what do we have the resources to do well is launching into a variety of family services, which will really differentiate us, I think, from the majority of models that are out there. So we are making a commitment in family success, not just in the child's success, everything from family counseling, family support, family employability skills, home visits to help make sure that they have a safe environment at home, giving parenting confidence for especially first time parents to learn the skills of play, the skills of reading to your children, singing to your children, all of those things that we are going to help

change the family dynamic in a way that ensures not only kindergarten readiness, but I would say life-changing outcomes for the children and families that we serve. We've done some really unique work with the Hershey entities.

We're here in Hershey, Pennsylvania, so we're developing pipelines right now with Hershey Entertainment Resorts and Hershey companies so that our parents will learn employability skills and have the opportunity to earn a family sustaining wage so that many of them wouldn't even need a place like Milton Hershey School because these early interventions will have such a strong impact that those families will be able to stay and thrive together. So we've got some big ambitious plans. We're opening the first school here in Hershey in September, and the grand experiment, it's always fascinating to plan. It's another thing to do. We're doing everything we can to make sure we're ready for our opening, but we have a lot to learn. We don't approach this from a sense of we know it all. We approach this with a sense of humility. This is a new line of work for us. And while we're ambitious and excited about what's to come, we're also humble about what we still need to learn and how do we put children and families first and utilize their strengths and their assets to help them become better partners with us as well.

**Matt Butensky:**

That's really exciting. Congratulations on opening your school this September. That's really cool and will be so interesting to see in years because there has been such an emphasis on early learning for the past few years now, the ripple effects in, as you said, the tri-county area around Hershey, Pennsylvania in time as those students go into grade school and secondary school, that will be really interesting to see. I'm sure it will be studied. So thanks for sharing that.

**President Gurt:**

We actually have a very rigorous process to give our teachers and family success advocates real-time feedback in terms of interventions that are working effectively with children and families, things that might need to be adjusted over time. But we also have a contract to study the long-term outcomes for the next 20 to 30 years because part of the mission of Catherine Hershey Schools is not just to serve the children and families, but it is to be a resource for other providers and to provide evidence of based practices about what's working and to be transparent about what's not working. We have very, very high expectations that we know we're going to have to adjust over time, but a lot of the professional development that we're doing with our staff now, as an example, we plan to offer to other providers. So that's a way to strengthen the entire field of early childhood education, which is also part of the mission of Catherine Hershey Schools.

**Matt Butensky:**

Awesome. Thank you.

**Melissa Turnpaugh:**

Yeah, I'm super excited to see the development of the Hershey location and as it branches out continuously throughout the tri-county. So we primarily, Matt and I work with students, with homeless liaisons that work with students experiencing homelessness and different shelters and communities, and a lot of them have different smaller networks of support. So being at Milton Hershey School and emphasizing extending opportunities for students to be successful as they transition into adulthood, what are some of the skills and important areas of support that you



would encourage our shelters and homeless liaisons to maybe implement in their curriculum or support services?

**President Gurt:**

I do think at the foundation of our deed of trust, Milton and Catherine Hershey basically asked for three things. One is the importance of character, building character, mutual respect, all of those that are today still in our school pledge and our sacred value, how critically important that is regardless of career choices one makes. And then secondly, builds on strong work habits is the entire way to win the day is to ensure that you are having daily work habits in terms of working hard, working smart, working collaboratively with others. And that can be both in scholastic work, but it could be in accomplishing daily tasks and just basic tasks that we do every day is that I think Mr. Hershey's DNA was if you're going to do something, do it well, don't do it half. And it doesn't matter what the task is, if you learn those basic skills, you will finish and complete and be successful.

And then finally, in their deed of trust, they did not ask for any alums to return a financial favor to the school. We are well-endowed based on his gift. What he did ask is exactly what you're doing, Melissa, which is to come and take advantage of the place like Milton Hershey School and go out and serve and change the world. And that can be done in a variety of ways. And so I would encourage anybody in this business to think about those basic tenets of success. But I would also say that we have to make sure that we always see the hope and promise and nurture the dreams of each and every one of our children. For them to have hope, they have to see a future.

And they're already disadvantaged, and so the more we focus and talk to them about their needs and their tragedies, while that's so important, and yes, trauma-informed care is important, but if we do not focus on their potential and their future, I think it runs the risk for all of us to have both our work and the children that we serve be stuck in negative circumstances as opposed to seeing a better future.

And so a lot of the work at Milton Hersey School is really focused on the future and having children be able to see themselves successful, even if it's the next week and then after the next week, the next month, and then after the next month, it's by the time they graduate or transition from one school to the other. And so those building blocks for success have to come with a sense of hope, but it also has to be supported by extraordinary effort with a team that both loves and challenges the students. I mean, we have a concept here that we learned from some of our reading of the warm demander, which is, it's not new to Milton Hershey School, but we want to definitely be warm and loving, but we want to demand the best of our students every day and to learn those skills of success in order for them to be successful when they leave us.

**Matt Butensky:**

So interesting to hear that. And thank you for sharing so many just awesome pieces of information today. We wanted to start to ask you about if we have listeners thinking that they might have students that they're working with that could be potential candidates for Milton Hershey School, how do they start the process of looking into applying? Where do they go to get that started?

**President Gurt:**

I think starting at our website, Milton Hershey School's website, Mhskids.org, there's an admissions link there. As soon as the inquiry process starts, each of our applicants is assigned kind of a guide through the process. We have extraordinary admissions counselors that are assigned throughout Pennsylvania and actually the entire nation. So we try to then nurture the children, the families, or the referral source to help navigate what we need and how we need it. We're also on all kinds of social media for any of your families or referral sources that go to Hershey Park or other Hershey entities. We've now have QR codes all throughout those organizations thanks to their support. So we try to make it as easy as possible to link families or referral sources to our network of support systems and then work with them throughout our process.

We're on all of the social media outlets as well. And we receive a number of applications a year. Admissions is somewhat competitive. We do give preferential treatment based on need. So for many of the families that you work with and that this podcast is designed to reach, they actually have a preference in our process because we believe they can benefit most from a stable home environment coupled with a strong academic and career technical program.

**Melissa Turnpaugh:**

That's huge. Thank you for going over that. And yeah, with us working with students experiencing homelessness, it would be a great benefit for them to be able to have that stable home environment and the structure and the academic support. So just a final question. So you've shared a variety of opportunities and different strategies for our listeners as well as our community partners. So for our educators and listeners, working with students with low income families, what would be your word of advice or tips that you would provide for them?

**President Gurt:**

Well, I would just say building on what I've said previously is that my circumstances, I was the youngest of eight children, grew up in Philadelphia. My father died when I was two years of age. My mother was an extraordinary woman, an extraordinary parent, but did not have the financial means to take care of her kids. And through a friend said, have you ever heard of this place called Milton Hersey School? And I went through the admissions process. I spent 13 years here. I enrolled at the age of five, graduated after spending 13 years here, went on to post-secondary education, never thinking that I would have the honor and privilege to serve as a president of this extraordinary home and school that changed and transformed my life.

Somebody, many people between my kindergarten and 12th grade experiences saw in me what I didn't see in myself. They pushed me beyond my capabilities that I did not think were possible. And so my life is indebted to people that saw hope and promise, not pity. And so as you work with and network with the people that you serve, is each and every one of these children have God-given potential and talent. And our job is to help them get fit for their purpose and serve others.

And so again, it's not to ignore that our children come with significant challenges, but our work should be aspirational and inspirational, not simply needs-based. Because needs-based means you might meet the need but not necessarily prepare for the future. And I think the combination of that from an outlook perspective, for anybody working in this field, it is extraordinarily challenging work. It gets tougher each and every year. The needs of our students are more severe and pronounced, but that should not detract us from doing the work that we need to do

on behalf of each and every one of the children and families. In fact, it should motivate us to do even more.

**Melissa Turnpaugh:**

Yeah. Thank you for sharing that and for sharing about just what brought you to the school and the different people that saw potential in you. I know I can attest to that in having different teachers and staff and houseparents that really encouraged me to push to do my best when I didn't think I had that in me. But with that message, we're going to close our episode of I Will Be Your Voice, stories of Homelessness and Hope. Thank you President Gurt for being with us today. It was such an honor. Thank you for providing so much information, not just about Milton Hershey, but also about the Catherine Hershey schools as well. It was awesome to be able to hear just a variety of settings of the roles that you've played at Milton Hershey and how our community can learn more about the school.

**President Gurt:**

It's my pleasure to spend this time with you. And again, I thank you and encourage you in your life-changing work.

**Melissa Turnpaugh:**

Thank you.

**Matt Butensky:**

Thank you, president Gurt. You were a fantastic guest. We really thank you for your time today. It was great to meet you and great to hear some reminiscing between you and Melissa as well. So to learn more about the Milton Hershey School, please visit [www.mhskids.org](http://www.mhskids.org). And to learn more about the Catherine Hershey School's early learning, please visit [www.chslearn.org](http://www.chslearn.org). Thank you for listening to I Will Be Your Voice, stories of Homelessness and hope. We hope you enjoyed the episode. Please check back and tune in again.