



Episode 22 –
**Project Textile: How Students are Mobilizing School Communities to
Support Families Experiencing Homelessness**
Transcript

Matt Butensky:

Welcome back to a new episode of the I Will Be Your Voice Podcast, the podcast where we share stories about issues affecting students and families across Pennsylvania. My name is Matt Butensky. I am a program manager at the Center for Schools and Communities and I am the host of today's I Will Be Your Voice podcast episode. Today I am very excited about our episode where we're talking about Project Textile. Project Textile is an entirely student led charity organization that draws on high school students to gather resources for local homeless shelters and local populations. I could not be more excited to talk about and with the student who has started Project Textile, Anthony Bruno, as well as the principal at Lower Dauphin Senior High School, Justin Hanula, and the school of social worker Denise Haas. So let's start off by talking a little bit with Justin Hanula.

Welcome to the podcast, Justin.

Justin Hanula:

Thank you very much and it is truly a pleasure to be here today and to highlight Anthony on this podcast and we're just very thankful for this opportunity for Anthony to be on the podcast. And the title of it, I Will Be Your Voice is very fitting for you to focus on Anthony and what his cause has been and what his passion is because I think that you could almost use that as a slogan for Project Textile because he's looking to be someone else's voice and advocate for a community. But so yeah, thank you for the podcast. Thank you for highlighting Anthony. And I think what you're going to find is an awesome kid with a huge passion and advocacy and a huge heart. And it has been our pleasure to support Anthony as a Lower Dauphin High School student and it's been our pleasure to watch him grow through this experience too.

And just so proud of him and all of his efforts. And also too, I would say when you're leading a cause like this, you find out that sometimes it takes more than just that passion. It takes a lot of management and leadership and he's done a wonderful job of bringing other Lower Dauphin High School students along with him in this journey too. And so thank you again for this podcast. Thank you for highlighting Anthony. We're proud of him. He's got Falcon Pride for sure and I'm going to turn it over to Anthony and let him speak about his passion and his advocacy. Thank you.

Matt Butensky:

And this podcast is about sharing stories and I'm very excited to hear about this one. So our guest today is Anthony Bruno, who is a student, a senior at Lower Dauphin School District. And we also have Denise Haws, who is the school social worker today. But we just want to first off say, hey, how are you doing today? How are you doing, Anthony and Denise?

Anthony Bruno:

Yeah, I'm doing well. I'm super excited to be here to share my experiences.

Denise Haas:

Hi, I'm doing well as well and super happy to be here.

Matt Butensky:

It's great to have you and we're going to jump right in and talk about Project Textile. Your school principal was giving us a little bit of a teaser on the project, but let's just start at the background and can you tell us about Project Textile?

Anthony Bruno:

Yeah. So Project Textile is an entirely student-led charity organization that I run that aims to gather resources like clothing and food and sanitary resources for homeless populations that are local to our school.

Matt Butensky:

That is amazing. How did you get started with it? What kind of inspired you to create Project Textile? What led you to see that this was a need that your school community was having? And yeah, how did you get it started?

Anthony Bruno:

Yeah, so I've always just kind of assumed that homelessness was an issue. So I really wouldn't say there was any definitive moment for me that kind of opened my eyes and made me realize that, oh, this is an issue that needs addressed. But I would more so say it was somewhat of a culmination of a lot of moments, whether that be moments in school learning about homelessness hundreds of years ago, or whether that be just walking in the streets of Philadelphia or Harrisburg and seeing homeless people. So I mean, really it just kind of came into my mind as something that I was passionate about and something that I felt that I could address through using students, using friends, and using connections that I had to get this really good mission started off.

Matt Butensky:

That's really cool. I love the name Project Textile. I am thinking it's related to the fact that you're collecting clothing donations and things like that. Is there any other reason why you named it Project Textile?

Anthony Bruno:

Yes, actually. So initially in starting this organization, I wanted to focus on upcycling as an addition to the homeless aspect. So initially I was going to have all of these designers because I'm really passionate about fashion as well. So I wanted to have all these designers that would take a lot of the clothing and upcycle it to some more fancy stuff. And that is something that I eventually do plan to integrate into the project as well. But just for now, it's more so based on homelessness. But it kind of just popped in my mind. It sounded catchy. It sounded something like, oh, if a charity organization was called that I would want to join.

Matt Butensky:

Cool. It definitely is catchy. It caught my attention. So you're a senior now at Lower Dauphin School District. And when did you start Project Textile? How many years has it been going on for? When did you start to develop it?

Anthony Bruno:

So I worked on it a lot just by myself last year. I would say probably around December last year, I kind of got the idea, so 2024, but then I kind of worked on reaching out to local school districts, reaching out to administration within my school and developing the entire idea before going to a lot of my friends and being like, "Hey, I have this really cool idea. I've done this, this, and this to develop it and now I want your help to get everything rolling and start volunteering." So I would say basically it really has not been that long, but the connections that I've made and the things that I've done are really incredible to me based on the little time that I've been doing this for. But I really do hope to keep moving on with this. And I think already seeing that what my group has done in a year, it's really inspiring and really instills a sense of hope into me for what we can do moving forward.

Matt Butensky:

So you talked a little bit about it being student-led. So this Project Textile works like a club at your school?

Anthony Bruno:

Somewhat. It's more so just an entity that functions within the school. So we don't have an advisor or anything and that's actually something that we do stress to our other chapters. It doesn't have to be a formal club because then that would be including an adult and then we couldn't really say that it's entirely student led. So we have been doing just fine with all the students that we have that are leading this organization and we feel as if we don't need the help of a teacher. I mean, obviously it helps to have the support of administration, but we do everything and they help us with the facilities and stuff that we need.

Matt Butensky:

That's great. So you said you reached out to other school districts. So this is beyond your school district, you work with some other school districts. What does that look like? How does that work?

Anthony Bruno:

Yeah, so basically this was the one thing that I kind of started right away doing last year when I was in the planning and development stage. Basically I would just reach out to counselors with a templated email that I had made being like, "Hey, I have this really cool project. I think it could be really great for some of your students that they wanted to join. Here's the link to apply." So basically I would email this to counselors, teachers, principals, et cetera, and either they would get back to me or they wouldn't and they would be like, "Oh, I have this student who I think would be really great for this." Or, "Oh, I don't think this would have a lot of interest at our school." So basically from that I got a good amount of applications because I reached out to a lot of people, but overall now how chapters work at respective schools is basically two people have to apply to be chief school liaisons is what we call them because basically they're just the ones communicating back and forth between me and their school.

So they apply. If they get accepted, then they kind of start to run their school's chapter. They act as the president of their respective schools chapter and they recruit people with the help of us and we determine what homeless shelters that they are going to donate to, what fundraisers or events they're going to hold and how they're just going to go about their mission.

Matt Butensky:

That is a really thoughtful model and yeah, you're doing so much student leadership you're doing... That's awesome. So you are collecting, remind us again what type of materials you collect and what things are donated, what kind of materials are most needed by the organizations that you're then donating the items to. Yeah, just share a little bit about that.

Anthony Bruno:

Yeah, definitely. It definitely ranges. So I would say we do a lot of stuff for students and parents in the school district. And I would say most times that boils down to needing children's clothes, specifically like children that are in elementary school because they grow out of clothes every other month and they're perpetually throwing them away or getting rid of them passing them down and they always need new clothing. In terms of homeless shelters, something that they really need is more sanitary items. So like toothbrushes, toothpaste, hairbrushes, combs, stuff like that, deodorant, and more undergarments, stuff to keep warm, underwear, socks, things like those. So it really takes a lot of research to culminate boxes or events that correspond to who we will be donating to because it's really so different everywhere.

Matt Butensky:

So you said you donate the materials to shelters, but you also have a community closet model and I think you were kind of talking a little bit about that. Can you talk more about your community closet model? What is that?

Anthony Bruno:

Yeah, definitely. So this was something that was initially theorized by one of the people I've been working very closely with, my events planning captain and she was like, "What if we got elementary schools engaged?" So I was like, "That's a great idea." So basically we reached out to principals of elementary schools. My mom is actually a principal of one of the elementary schools, so it was very easy to get it integrated there. But basically the entire program consists of holding, and I put air quotes around this, monthly clothing drives at the schools where at the beginning of each month we send out a letter detailing what Project Textile is and a specific theme for the month. So basically administrators send out this letter through ClassDojo or Remind or some sort of digital platform that details what the theme is and it gets it out to everybody.

So everybody in the respective elementary school that they go to can participate. Basically they just bring in clothing that corresponds to the month's theme and at the end of the month we pick it up. After we pick it up, we kind of process it, sort it all. And with that clothing, we either donate it to homeless shelters or what I have found one of the most gratifying aspects of starting this charity, making boxes for children who need the clothing. So specifically, I think the first box we made was a couple of months ago and basically it just consisted of going to my house, sorting through clothes with a few of the volunteers that I work with and assembling boxes of clothing that corresponded to what the student need. So it was a teacher that reached out to us concerned about some of her kids and basically they just need clothing.

So I was like, "That's a need we can fill." And it just kind of worked out so perfectly that we were able to do that for those students.

Matt Butensky:

It's really cool that you've been able to... I could see how much work it is to keep this going every month and framing a new theme for the month and again, getting schools and administrators to send that information out, get donations on an ongoing basis. So that's really awesome that you've been able to... You're really putting in the work to do a lot for your community and your school community. It's really cool. So I guess what else I wanted to ask you a little bit about was where do you want to take Project Textile? So there's a way for more schools to get involved. I think you mentioned an application. How does that work? How can schools listening to this become interested or students listening become interested in having a product textile chapter at their school or in their community? Share more about the growth and where Project Textile might go.

Anthony Bruno:

Yeah. So definitely one of the biggest aspects of gathering clothing and resources is that the more schools that are involved, the easier it will be and the better it will be, the more we can get done. So on our social media, Instagram page, there is an application where students from any

Pennsylvanian school district can apply to be chief school liaisons. Again, those are students that act as respective presidents of their school's chapter. Once they're accepted, we have an initial meeting with the chief school liaisons. Generally it's two, but it can be one and basically we go over what their job will be, including recruiting students. Once we've done that and given them some sort of time, usually around a month to recruit students, we have another meeting with the students that are acting as chief school liaisons and then their respective members as well as an advisor should they choose to formally establish Project Textile as a club.

But then basically with them, we go over what they'll be doing, what sort of events they'll be holding. And really this program has been something that has allowed our reach to grow exponentially. So I mean, it's really so great to see what students all over the state can do. And that's honestly been one of the greatest things about starting this organization.

Matt Butensky:

That's amazing. Immediately, when we were connecting about recording an episode of the podcast, I went to your Instagram page and I was immediately hooked in and just you have a lot of great information there. So you do social media as well for the project. How do you do that?

Anthony Bruno:

Yes. So I actually do have some people who came to me upon developing the organization who were like, "I think I'd be really great at managing social media." So basically every time we get together, we kind of think of a few ideas so that they can span to the next time we have a meeting, but a lot of the work that goes into getting clothing for homeless people is advocacy and awareness. So a lot of what we do on social media isn't necessarily advertising our fundraisers or events, it's about raising awareness for homeless populations because if people don't know that they exist and people don't know that there are easy ways to do things, they're not going to do them. So raising awareness is such a huge aspect of Project Textile's mission. And we do that by daily and weekly and monthly posts just about what homelessness is, what current policy is dictating and how students can help and how students are helping.

So it's just really helpful to have a lot of people who are really interested in the social media aspect just because it is becoming more and has been becoming more prevalent within society. It's just a great way to get awareness out there.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah, it definitely is. Well, keep that up because it's working. So what advice would you give to other students looking to maybe get this started in their school? How many students do you have working on it or how many classmates do you have that work on this project with you at your school?

Anthony Bruno:

At my school, I would say it's probably around 15. I really can't speak for the other schools just because they kind of manage everything themselves. But as far as advice goes, I would say

nothing's going to happen unless you start. So I mean, that was a huge thing in developing the organization. Nothing really started happening until I started reaching out to people and people started showing their interest. So I mean, really nothing happened until I was able to form a team of students who were really all united and motivated towards the same cause. And I just found that working with so many great people has done so many great things for so many great people.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. You have to start somewhere and you have to have a good leadership. You have to find people that are like-minded and share similar values, grow your own village to get things started. And I'm just so impressed by the footprint that you have with Project Textile and it's an amazing project. All right, is there anything else you want to share about Project Textile?

Anthony Bruno:

Yeah, I would just say this is something that I'm probably going to do for the rest of my life. I would say I'm planning on when I turned 18 this summer, forming it into a government recognized nonprofit because also a lot with homelessness is about raising money and that's not really something we can do right now without that official government title. But the more people we have, the more it helps. If you're a student listening to this right now, I implore you to look at the application in our Instagram page and to sign up because you can do something, you are able to do something. Every student has some sort of talent, some sort of capacity, whether that be social media, whether that be being a great leader of a chapter, or whether that's reaching out to people, reaching out to administrators, students. I mean, there's really something for every student within Project Textile.

Matt Butensky:

Thank you. I wanted to touch base with Denise waiting in the wings. Denise, any thoughts or ideas or you're hearing from Anthony today, your district has been very supportive of Project Textile. Share just a little bit about Project Textile, your work with Project Textile, seeing it in your school and the impact that it's made.

Denise Haas:

Absolutely. So for me, I remember coming here to the high school and I saw that there was a piece of paper that said Project Textile for Homeless Families and they were doing a clothing drive and I immediately thought, I need to know who is doing this and where this came from and I wanted more. And so I have met with Anthony numerous times and this project is just so amazing and the more and the more I learn about it, I'm just so empowered by it and inspired and I'm so happy that he's able to do this and he's so passionate about it and that it's happening here at our school.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. I'm sure you're incredibly proud of Anthony and all the students who work on the project. And Denise, you are your school district's McKinney Vento liaison.

Denise Haas:

I am.

Matt Butensky:

So I imagine this is something that you can also share with other school districts if you ever have the opportunity, other McKinney Vento liaisons to help spread the word, think about adopting a Project Textile chapter in their school district as well, just kind of support the project in that way.

Denise Haas:

Absolutely. And I definitely would like to do that and just I think people aren't aware of it and I think Anthony brought up such a good point. Anybody can do something and everybody is valuable and everybody is important and you can make a difference.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. Well, and Anthony, you hit the nail on the head talking about just the importance of raising awareness and being an advocate. Often these issues are hidden in communities and we don't necessarily see it in day-to-day and it could be easy to kind of turn a blind eye to certain things. And so raising awareness is a huge component of the work that you're doing along with the actual physical, tangible donations that make a difference and that are things that your families and your schools need and that your shelters need. And you talked about being intentional about the things that you collect with your shelters. I think I was looking at some of the notes you provided. You work with five homeless shelters in your area, is that right?

Anthony Bruno:

Yeah. So it really is basically just donating to shelters that need it. So it's definitely a lot of research as well. I would say in organizing this whole organization, a big point of interest to me was researching homeless shelters that needed help. So reaching out to these homeless shelters, I learned so much about their respective missions, what they needed, who they are serving, and it's just been so amazing to work with so many great homeless shelter administrators, food bank administrators to work to give people what they need.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. And we talked already about how this is a student led organization. Why has that been such an important component for Project Textile, that it is a student led student empowered organization?

Anthony Bruno:

Yeah. I would say the big thing is that we're showing adults that we can do it. I think there are a lot of people who look at children and are like, "How are they doing this?" It's because we can. It's because we're the future of the entire world. Our views are going to evolve and grow into policy of the future and people like me want to start now. I shouldn't have to wait until I'm out of college to do something that matters. So definitely starting early has been such a great thing for me. And I just have loved working with so many students who are like-minded in that sense, seeing that they just want to prove themselves and this is a way that they can do that really efficiently, really great.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. You're growing a community working with other schools. That's not something that a lot of students do. They don't often do outreach to a lot of other school districts to see how projects can transfer and you can kind of grow your impact. So that's really awesome that you've done that. So honestly, just congratulations on all your hard work along with the other students that you work with and just very impressive what you've been able to do with Project Textile. Anything else you want the listeners of this podcast to know about Project Textile or about students and families experiencing homelessness?

Anthony Bruno:

I would say just to reiterate, there's a spot for everyone on this planet, in this world in Project Textile. I would say again, raising awareness just about the issues that plague our world at the moment is so important in developing a brighter future and that starts bottom up. Students are the future and really starting earlier is better. So I implore anyone listening to this to look at the application in our Instagram bio because you really can do something great.

Matt Butensky:

Yeah. Power to the students. So tell us exactly where we can find your application and your Instagram account. What's your handle?

Anthony Bruno:

Yeah. So our handle is @projecttextile_pa and the link to the application can be found in the bio of the Instagram account. I believe the title of the link is PAPT application. On this application, students who wish to apply for chief school liaison positions can write a quick synopsis about themselves, why they love the Project Textile Mission and why they would be qualified.

Matt Butensky:

That's awesome. And so if a student were to fill that out and you were to receive it and they needed more school or school district support, you would help them with communications that they might be able to share with a teacher or other school staff to kind of show what the project does and kind of again, get some buy-in because buy-in is still important, right?

Anthony Bruno:

Indubitably. I mean, I've worked so closely with the administration at my school and at the schools that we already have chapters established at and really just opening their eyes as to what students really can do and what students as part of this organization has done generally tends to get them on board. So I would say as long as you do have the support of adults, it's very possible and it's even possible without their support. I mean, students really can do anything they put their minds to. I mean, young people are the most ambitious demographic of people on the planet, so really they can really achieve anything and showing adults the achievements that Project Textile has made really gets them on board.

Matt Butensky:

Thank you so much for sharing. And just again, want to reiterate how proud we are of the work that you're doing and done. So thank you again and just a little bit more information. Hearing from Anthony today about the Project Textile, just any other thoughts or insights from your perspective as the school of social worker?

Denise Haas:

Absolutely. Thank you so much. Yeah, we're really super proud of Anthony and he is just so insightful and I remember when I first met him to tell him how amazing this was, he was just so humble and was just like, "Oh, you're meeting with me for this?" I was like, "Absolutely. This is amazing." And he was like, "Oh, okay." So I think that all the things that Anthony has done is so incredible and it really ties in with the mission at Lower Dauphin School District is we exist to educate, engage, support and inspire our Lower Dauphin community. And in addition to that, one shared value at Lower Dauphin is we are committed to providing the opportunities that support the student's natural desire to learn, develop abilities, expand interest and improve decisions in making skills. So with keeping the Lower Dauphin School mission and that shared value in mind, I wanted to help give Anthony and Project Textile a chance to expand on their interest and I really wanted them to know that Lower Dauphin is here to support and encourage them.

I feel like they are doing such amazing work in general and I feel like they're committed and I know that Anthony will be graduating and he has mentioned that there's at least 10 other students that are very interested in this. And something else that really stuck out with me is that our superintendent, Dr. Milbrand, often talks about creating memorable and impactful moments for our students and staff and for myself, I know being supportive to Project Textile is both of those for me and I hope as well for Anthony and his entire team. So we're just like I said, really happy and excited to be a part of this and I'm hopeful to see this continue to grow not only in our school district but around in helping all families that truly do need help.

Matt Butensky:

I love that, Denise. Thank you so much for sharing that and your district is certainly doing that by giving students room to lead. And Project Textile is an amazing program that you have that is born in your school district from Anthony, so you all should be very proud of that.

Denise Haas:

We are extremely proud. So thank you so much for your time and thank you for allowing us to get this topic out. I do think it's so important and we want to be there for the community and people that are in need. Everybody deserves that.

Matt Butensky:

Yes, we all deserve the basic needs and more. So thank you, Denise.

Denise Haas:

Thank you so much.

Matt Butensky:

Anthony, thank you for spending time on this episode with us. Again, super impressed by Project Textile. And like I said, I'm ready to pass the torch for hosting this episode. You were amazing on today's episode. Thank you so much for sharing. You are absolutely a student leader. I'm excited to keep following Project Textile on your social media account and see what else you do. Congratulations. And you're going to be graduating this spring, right?

Anthony Bruno:

Yes. Yep.

Matt Butensky:

Any plans you want to share?

Anthony Bruno:

Not currently. I plan to go to college to study either political science or business to hopefully keep up with the mission of Project Textile. As I said, I want to reiterate that this is something that I plan on doing for the rest of my life. This is something I'm really passionate about and just spending my time on it doesn't feel like work to me. So I'm really excited to see what is in Project Textile's future.

Matt Butensky:

Anthony, again, thank you so much and I could not agree more that I am excited to see where else you take this work. You're clearly a very strong advocate and a leader and I could see you being in this work professionally, I can definitely see your skills are high above where I was when I was a senior in high school. So congratulations on the work of Project Textile.

Anthony Bruno:

Thank you so much.

Matt Butensky:

Thank you. Well, thank you for listening to this episode of the I Will Be Your Voice podcast. We hope you enjoyed today's episode and that you tune in again.