

Yonna Pasch: Your No 1. Advocate Can Be You – Season 1, Episode 9

Amy: You're listening to Beyond 1894, a podcast where we hear from Louisiana Tech University scholars, innovators, and professionals on their personal journeys and the impact they are making in the world around them. I'm your host, Amy Bell, and my co-host is Teddy Allen.

Amy: Hey, Teddy

Teddy: Hey, Amy.

Amy: What is an accomplishment that you're really proud of that was quite challenging to accomplish?

Teddy: My family. That was a challenge. But fortunately, they're easy to please. And we've managed to stick together.

Amy: Yeah. I know for me, I think one of the, the accomplishments that I'm really proud of is getting my master's degree. Because I, I was actually taking online classes and, you know, after a full day's work. I know a lot of people actually do this so, it's not like I'm the only one, but I had like an eight to five job. And then right after, I had to either get online to do the online class, or I had to actually go physically to class. And it was definitely a challenge. I had to stop going to game nights and doing all the things that I wanted to do in the afternoon. Like I had to, you know, it was all about work and school. So, for about like a whole year and a half that was my life, and, but it was worth it. I was really proud of myself at the end of it.

Teddy: Today's guest is a great example of somebody who looked beyond where they were, you know, the eight to five job and then going to class. And they looked at how this is going to look after they get their degree. And that kept them going and the thought of what's possible for me if I can continue and get this done.

Amy: Yeah, so I had the pleasure of talking to Yonna Pasch, and she recently graduated with a Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership, with a concentration in higher education administration. Her journey was quite a rollercoaster, and she tells us about some of the more memorable parts of the ride. She took a lot from her experience and even shares some inspirational insights. I was amazed when I heard her story. Like, I don't think I would have been able to get through what she did. So, I have a lot of respect for her.

Teddy: She had some challenges that we did not have. We just thought we had challenges. Hers was pretty big, and, but once she figured out that higher ed was her path and that she could make a change in young people's lives, she got with the program. And her adult journey in education is pretty amazing and inspiring.

Amy: Yeah. And I also want to point out that she is currently the Director of Student Activities at Northwestern State University. And I love how her story brings both of our universities together. Like, her previous education and professional experience at Northwestern no doubt supported

her, and her doctoral coursework, and in the research she was doing here. And the knowledge she's gathered here at Tech, she is already applied to her job at Northwestern. So, it's really cool to have that point of connection through her.

Teddy: She's a big fan of both schools. Both of them worked out just right for her, and she'll explain that to you. And again, she says, 'It's going to be a drain, but if you want it, you can make it happen.'

Amy: Yeah, for sure. So, let's go ahead and head straight to that interview.

Amy: So, where are you from?

Yonna: I live in Natchitoches, Louisiana. But my dad was in the military and then we traveled often. And then my parents divorced. And we ended up, I graduated from Pine Prairie High School. And it was a small town in Evangeline Parish. And once I graduated there, I went to Northwestern State for college. And I haven't left. We just fell in love with the city and the people. And of course, the university. I guess I now can say from Natchitoches. Sure.

Amy: Yeah. But then you eventually came to Tech.

Yonna: I did. I did. It was, it was a long road to make the decision because I wanted to go and pursue my doctorate degree. And there's several schools in our university system that offer a doctorate degree. Tech did take the tuition waiver, which was great for me, especially being a mom and a full-time employee, but I'm also still paying all my student loans from my undergraduate and my master's program that I'm still paying.

Yonna: So, I wanted to be able to save kinda on cost. And so, I chose Tech for that reason, and that it was on the quarter system. And I, I felt that there was some value in that quarter system process. And it turned out it was a perfect choice for me. So, it wasn't even about the money at that point. It was just it worked well, with me working at a university that was semester university and then going to school at Tech, which was a quarter. It just works beautifully.

Amy: How is that? Cause I think initially it seems like it wouldn't.

Yonna: It would be like chaos, right?

Amy: Yeah.

Yonna: Well, so it's perfect, because when you start with, say Northwestern State would start their school in August, Tech has not started their school until September. So, I can get my stuff done and get sort of kicked off the semester at work for a couple of weeks, and then my studies at Tech would start. So, I was able to sort of, kind of get through that, the crazy rush at, that, always happens at the beginning of the semester. I can get through that, get some calm at work, and then I would start my school at Tech. And then I would finish Tech because it's only 10 weeks. I would finish Tech, and then I'll be able to wrap up my semester for work.

Yonna: It was beautiful. It was like the best way to kind of balance the work/school/family ratio. So, it was pretty remarkable. I didn't know I was going to like it as much, but I did. It was bet, it was a good choice.

Amy: So, what is your undergraduate degree in?

Yonna: I received my undergraduate in Hospitality Management in Tourism. I wanted to be a flight attendant, and I realized I'm short and I would only likely be in those smaller airplanes. And had a couple of interviews for a couple of airlines. And I was like, no, I don't want to do this. I really don't. And I worked at the bookstore while I was in undergrad. And I did my internship and everything with a conference center. I worked at the bookstore, and they needed the, I guess the books that they needed for their master's program in higher ed.

Yonna: And I spoke with a professor and she's like, 'Well, actually, we're doing a meet and greet today. If you want to come by, you're welcome to come by.' And like I didn't even know higher ed was a thing. Kid you not! Like I did not know that you could get a degree to work at a university. That's how much I didn't even know about the higher education field. I went to her that same day. I had, they had an ice cream social, picked up a graduate assistantship, met my boss, and started school in a few weeks after that.

Yonna: It was insane. Like it just wasn't, it wasn't in my path. But I knew I wanted to get my masters in something I just wasn't sure what. And now I do plan events and shape people's lives, if you will, in a higher education level, as opposed to planning events on the private sector or for corporate sector.

Amy: Yeah. And so, what made you want to get a doctorate degree?

Yonna: Once I realized that higher education was something for me, was my path, I knew that I would have to earn a higher credential in order to pursue a higher status at the university. I love what I do. I'm in student activities, and I work with students, and I, program events. We do leadership experiences; we do a lot of fun things. But I know that there's more out there for me, I can know that I can make change and really help students love the university that they're in.

Yonna: Although I'm on the, I guess, like the ground level, when I'm working with students every day, I feel like the impact would be greater if I'm in a higher position. And getting and earning my doctorate degree is a way for me to possibly open those doors for me, whether it's through teaching, through the master's program, or even the doctoral program that we have at the university. Whatever it may be, at least it opened, it has a potential to open up other doors.

Yonna: But I love what I do right now. And it was just, it was perfect timing because I started to go back to school, and then I had some things happen in my life where I had to put that on pause. And several years later, I was like, you know, we got to go back. We had to go and start doing this.

Amy: Yeah. So, when did you start the doctorate program?

Yonna: Well, I started the doctoral program, oh my gosh, what year are we in? So, 2015. But I had pursued what degrees to start pursuing with different universities prior to that. I put some applications out just to kind of see if there's something I wanted to do. And it was early 2010, 2009 - 2010. And then I was diagnosed with breast cancer, and I had to sort of, we didn't know what was going to be my journey at that point. So, I just put that on pause. And....

Amy: So, when were you diagnosed?

Yonna: I was diagnosed in 2011.

Amy: Okay.

Yonna: But it's always it's very tricky because it's December of 2011. And then I started treatment in 2012. So it's sort of like it's 11 – 12 and I put everything on pause. It was, I needed to get well. I had a two-year-old son at the time. And I needed to do this for him, and myself, and my husband, and my family, my friends, and I needed to focus on my health.

Yonna: Once I finished that, I was like, you know what? Life is too short. And this is something that was a goal of mine. I didn't even know it was a goal until I started working in higher ed. And I was like, this is it. This is, this is my career, like, this is what I love to do. It is my passion. And if I want to impact and, and really help students become better versions of themselves, it's like, I need to get my doctorate so I can continue on this path.

Yonna: I was in high school, I was that average student that I, you know, had to study all the time, and I struggled. But I fought through everything, and I graduated. And I was like, am I even doctoral level, like, do I have that ability? So of course, I always questioned myself.

Yonna: And at the end of the day, I was proud that I made the decision to come to Tech. The staff and the faculty that I met were just so kind and caring and they understood that I was an adult learner. But then this was the path that they know that they were passionate about their work. So, I knew that I was in the right place. Because I was, I wasn't doing this just so I can get a degree so I can get a pay raise, like I, I am doing this because I wanted to know and learn this knowledge so I can help. And that, to me, was the reason why I wanted to go back because I want to be able to be that help for students.

Yonna: I always was the, I'm going to cross my T's; I'm going to dot the I's like, this is my process. And I was really mad whenever I was diagnosed. At the very beginning you, you go through the stages of grief. And I was really upset about it because, you know, I didn't smoke. And I didn't have, I did everything I was supposed to, you know, never really.... It just did everything I needed to, in my opinion, that I was like, I'm healthy, and I try to eat right, and I exercise, and I, and I'm the one that's diagnosed.

Yonna: And I, at that moment, I made the decision that I am not going to be afraid to take these risks. I want to do something; I'm going to set my mind I'm going to do it because life is too short. And I know I want my son to know that regardless of what I faced, I was still able to check those off my list. And whether that is: achieve this goal at work, graduate with my doctoral degree, or even get my nose pierced.

Yonna: And I know that probably sounds like: What? But that was always something I wanted to do. And it was like, I want to get my nose pierced. And I didn't feel like it was appropriate because I was in higher ed and I was a professional. And I was like, you know what? I finished treatment with radiation, and my husband and I were in Shreveport. And I was like, you know what, I'm getting my nose pierced. And that is a symbol for me, that just kind of just shows me every time I see it. And I'm like, you know what? You conquered, and you beat it. Good for you.

Yonna: And so that's, that was that turning moment that it was like, fear can get in the way of a lot. And when you're faced with a true fear, that can truly maybe not end well for you, it puts things into perspective. And life for all of us is crazy. Even what we're going through now, like it's just crazy. It's just how you deal with it. And for me, going back into getting my degree and earning that degree. I have for one, I have a different perspective of what challenges are because that was a challenge.

Yonna: It was late nights. I would come home from work, and I work in student affairs, so that job is 60 hours a week. And I would come home, and I would be a mom. And I would read a story to my son for him to go to bed. And then I would stay up till probably about one o'clock in the morning, getting work done, and studying, and research, and writing. And then I'd wake up at 5:30 to do it all over again. People are like, 'Well, how do you do it? You just must never sleep.' I'm like, 'No, I don't.' But I chose it, and I chose that path because I wanted to accomplish something.

Yonna: And whenever I was diagnosed with breast cancer, I told my doctor because we were laying out the plan for me for this cancer journey. And I said, 'Number one, I want to be able to live my life. I don't want to be stuck thinking that I'm going to die.' And he was just like, 'I get that.' I was like, 'So whatever we need to do, we need to be aggressive. We need to get it done. And I want to check this off my list of things to do.' And he was just like, 'Alright, let's do it.' And that's the way I approach life, now. It's like, let's get in, let's get out, let's do what we can, and what kind of impact can we make as we go through?

Amy: Wow. Did you make time for yourself?

Yonna: I would find those little pockets of Yonna time. It wasn't often, but I knew that there was certain points that I'm like, I need this for me. If I would go and get my nails done, and I would be sitting in the chair, I would have my books in front of me, and I would be reading. But to me, I was killing two birds with one stone. And I was still, at the end of the day, I was still getting my pedicure, and I was happy because I was able to read some, some articles, and highlight, and get things done. Needless to say, my hands never got really touched because I needed them so I could read, but I would always get my feet done. And that would be my 30 to 45 minutes sitting in the chair getting massaged, and getting my feet done while I was reading. So, I just took those little small, little snippets of time for myself. It's fine!

Amy: So, were you still battling breast cancer when you signed up for classes?

Yonna: So, I was finished with treatment. But every day I have to take medication. And every six months, mammogram, and every two years, a bone density scan because of the side effects. I would be traveling to either Alexandria or Lafayette every six months. So, and that kind of plays with your mind a little bit, a little emotional throughout the course of the four years I was in the degree program.

Yonna: But it was just, for me, it was checking off the box, you know. Go schedule your mammogram. Okay, check it off the box, you know. Go meet with your medical oncologist. Okay, check it off the box. Oh, we also have to research this. Okay, well, I would just take, always take my books with me everywhere I went. I would take books with me, and my notebook and my computer. My iPad was like my best friend. It just anytime that you had a moment, I would use it wisely. So yeah, so we were still, still taking that medication.

Amy: So, what is it like being an adult learner coming back to college.

Yonna: Oomph, it was a journey. It really was for me. You really had to want it. It didn't come easy. I never really questioned my decision to go back. But I had some lows. Because it's a struggle. It's a, it's a mental drain. It's a physical drain. It's a financial drain. I mean, it's, it is. But for me, I kept looking beyond the four years and what was that going to look like for my family and myself and my students that I work with?

Yonna: It was it was fun to learn about my craft. It was fun to know that there's a world bigger than Northwestern State, than Louisiana Tech, than the UL system. That they're, there're so many of adult learners that don't have that opportunity to go back, or they don't know that they have that opportunity to go back. And that it's possible. They just don't know it's possible. And that's what's the unfortunate part. What I learned is the resources are there. But they may not feel confident; they may not feel comfortable.

Amy: Yeah. But your teachers and your professors, they, they worked with you?

Yonna: Most definitely. I appreciate them so, so much. My professors at Louisiana Tech, they understood. We can reach out to them. I have their cell phone numbers. They understood that we worked in higher ed. My cohort, we became really close because we were all working in higher ed in some capacity. That's what made it easy, was knowing that I had a resource at the university that can help me get through a really hard program.

Yonna: Earning your doctorate degree is, it is a challenge. But whenever I crossed that stage, it was very emotional for me, because I could not believe what I had accomplished in four years. And I had already received two degrees prior, but that degree meant so much more. Because I learned a lot about myself. I learned a lot about this institution. I learned about the practice of being a Higher Ed professional. And that, to me, was just so rewarding.

Amy: Can you expand on that? What did you learn about yourself?

Yonna: Well, I learned that I am stronger than I feel I am. When you sit with professors that have been in the field much longer than I have been in the field. And I've been in the field since 2003, so for, you know, for several of, you know, a long time. But they are the seasoned professionals. Like those are the people that know everything, whether they were the admin side of the house or the academic side of the house. They just know a lot. And I learned that I can stand up for myself. That I have a lot to bring to the table.

Yonna: Where in certain situations, in the past, I would just shy away from any kind of controversy, because I wasn't confident with the knowledge that I had. Where, here, I'm like, I know this. And I know about this topic, or I know about that topic. And I'm not afraid to tell you, and it may not be 100% correct. But I learned that I can stand up for myself, and speak, and speak in a way that people are going to listen. And I didn't know that about myself. Like I knew that I was, I knew that I could talk. I mean, because people, I can always talk to anybody. But there were a lot of times I would just shy away from speaking because I didn't want to sound wrong.

Amy: How did you gain that confidence or how did you learn that about yourself?

Yonna: You know, I feel like you just you get that confidence the more you know, and with all of the research, and all of the pushing that envelope, and always.... The professors here challenged us so much and put us out of our comfort zone so much.

Yonna: Like if I had to sit in my, in one, in another class and they say, 'Okay, tell us about your topic. Give us your 30 second synopsis of your topic for your dissertation.' And it could be like anybody from five to twenty or thirty people in a room, and I'm just like, 'I don't want to stand up and talk about this right now.' But you have to do it. And so, that just taught me that they just,

they just pushed you and just pushed you, and if it wasn't for that, then I probably would not have gained that confidence.

Yonna: Like my professor, Dr. Shrub, he was just like, you know, 'You need to do this professional development internship.' It all depends on what part of the cohort you're in, that you had to do. And he was like, you know, 'You could write a research. You can, you know, get try to get published. Or you can....' There was so many different options.

Yonna: And I had thought, 'Well, let me just see. Adult learner....' I researched adult learner internships. Right? Like, I don't know. We'll see what happens. And Rehab Education pops up on my Google Drive, or my Google. And I was like, 'What is Rehab Education?' And I start reading through it.

Yonna: Well, I send them an email. I'm like, "Hi, I'm Yonna Pasch. I'm a doctoral candidate at Louisiana Tech University. And just wondering if you guys take interns.' Within five minutes, the CEO of the company emails me back. And was just like, 'Well, we are a startup company. We have been in the world for two years. We've never had an intern, but let's chat.'

Yonna: And I freaked out. I was like, okay, maybe I'm a little too confident because now I don't know what to tell them. Because I didn't know what an internship meant in this doctoral program. I just was like, okay, intern, whatever. Well, I have a conversation with the CEO, and then I have a conversation with the second person in charge. And before I left to go on a vacation, I was hired as an intern for this company based out of San Francisco, California.

Yonna: And if it wasn't for Dr. Shrub, pushing me to go and to challenge myself, I probably would not have done that. I probably would have just researched it, and just wrote some papers, and see what happens. And not to say anything against that process, because that may be a perfect process for someone else. But I'm not that person. Like I'm going, well, let's challenge it. Let's see what I can do.

Yonna: And I had the privilege of becoming a retention coach for Western Governors University for 269 students. So, they've come through the pipeline as a reentry student as an adult learner. And once they got through that process, I would reach out to these students every week. How's it going? How are your classes? What can I do to help you? Like, you know, tell me about, how was your week. And you start building this rapport with these students. And you want to see them graduate, but you're sort of just pushing them on through the year. But my internship is only for six months.

Yonna: So, I got that experience, and it was absolutely phenomenal. And I have learned so much just from that experience, and it's because he challenged me. Because, and that's what I'm saying how I learned so much about myself. That I just never thought that I could do all that I did.

Amy: So, what is some advice that you would give an adult learner here in Louisiana, here at Tech?

Yonna: The most, the number one thing that I would say, first and foremost: You are your best advocate. If you know what you want to get done and what you want to accomplish, you are the best person to make that happen. And I learned that through my cancer journey, I learned that through my internship, and I learned that through the doctoral program here at Tech. You are your best advocate. If you don't stand up for what you want, no one's going to do it for you.

And if there's nothing that no one learns, that is the best advice I could probably give. Because if you say that you are your best advocate and you believe it, those resources are going to start coming to you. Because you're asking the right questions. You're asking those challenging questions. And you're figuring out your plan, whatever that may be. What, because every plan is different, and every person is different. But whatever it is, as long as you are focused on that, you will succeed, and you will earn that degree, or that certificate, or whatever it may be as your goal. But you have to be your best advocate.

Amy: I like that. Yeah.

Yonna: And that's how it was for me. I mean, through my cancer journey, I was aware of everything that was happening. I wanted to know. I wanted to be aware. I was taking two parts of two research studies because I was an anomaly. I was young. I didn't have breast cancer in my family. They're like, 'Can we test your heart?' and this other, it was something else that they were testing. I was like, 'Sure.' So, I knew the process.

Yonna: And one day, I was sitting in the cancer center. And she, they always read, the nurses always read out like what medication you're going to be getting. And she's going through the list as my premeds before they go into the port. And I said, 'Mmm, there should be another one.' She's like, 'No, this is the da, da, da.' And I'm like, 'No, there's another one that I'm supposed to get before my chemotherapy.' She takes the clipboard, and she's looking, and she looks at the bags, and she says, 'I'll be darned, you're right.'

Yonna: If I wouldn't have done that, I could have had an allergic reaction to the chemotherapy. And that's where I'm saying you are your best advocate. Know what's happening around you and figure it out. And no question is crazy. Like, if I wouldn't have asked that, who knows what would have happened because people make mistakes.

Yonna: And if you know you have credit hours that you're not sure if they transfer or if you don't know what degree program is out there because things have changed since you were last enrolled at the university, ask those questions. You may be able to transfer right on into a degree program that will get you to your finish line, whatever that finish line is, quicker. And less cost. If you're all online. You just never know until you ask those questions.

Amy: Yeah. So, how has, how is your experience here at Tech and getting your doctoral degree affected the way that you approach your job at Northwestern? Because you still work there, right?

Yonna: Mhmm. I do. I do. So, it's funny you should ask. So, my dissertation, it talks about, the theoretical perspective of it, is distributive leadership. And distributed leadership takes everyone at all the different levels and kind of distributes that responsibility to everyone that's on, that's around the table. And it sort of disperses that. And that's where in higher ed and adult learners is, everyone should play a role to bring in and to retain these adult learners. It's not just recruiting's issue or admissions, or even the adult learner side, the electronic continuing education side. Everyone should come to the table to kind of create what this experience is for adult learners.

Yonna: And with that being my dissertation.... At my job, we were going through a transition period with our university programming council. And it was a really tough transition. We had students that were having to leave, and they were graduating, or we needed a new structure

because the old structure wasn't working. And it was quite interesting that I was like, 'Oh my gosh, the answer has been here this entire time.' And it was a distributive leadership process.

Yonna: Our guidelines for our programming council. So, what we've done in the past, we had our typical exec board: the Executive Board President, Vice President, Secretary, Treasurer, whatever. And then we had committee heads. And then we had coordinators. And so, the exec board ran the organization. The committee heads were in charge of these events, these typical traditional events at Northwestern State, and then you had these coordinators that supported those committee heads.

Yonna: But the executive board officers were our seasoned event planners. They knew everything about our campus, they knew everything about our processes. They knew everything about our vendors that we used to use, or normally, or typically use. But they were not part of that process of planning these events. They were running the organization.

Amy: So, you're kind of like wasting that knowledge.

Yonna: We're wasting the knowledge. We're wasting the, the three, sometimes even four, years these students have served on this council. But they're not planning events.

Yonna: And so, we looked at the individuals, the titles, not the people. And we looked at what process could work. And we have enacted that theoretical perspective of a distributive leadership process for our council. And so, we still have the supervisors, we have managers, and we have coordinators. The coordinators are running the events, like they're their events, but the manager also goes to their committee meetings. And the super, one supervisor, is also going to that committee meeting. So, every week, we have all three tiers at that roundtable, having those discussions, and really kind of making those events work.

Yonna: And it has been brilliant. It has truly been such an eye-opening experience for me as well as my students. They were just like, 'It just makes sense. It's like why have we not thought about that? To put the people that know how to do stuff, like let them do it.' And they don't have.... Like, the student that is a coordinator, they run the meeting, it is their meeting, it's their event. The manager takes the minutes. The supervisor guides them with process and the policies that we have. So, you have all the knowledge and the skills and the brainstorming sessions. You have all three types of people there making decisions on what's gonna be best for our campus community. It's brilliant.

Yonna: That was a way, I was like, 'Who knew that my dissertation topic and my theoretical framework is actually being used in my job. Like, who knew?' And I was like, 'I'll take it. That is a win.' Like I just, I didn't, I wasn't searching for it. It just was like an epiphany probably at one o'clock in the morning when I was doing my work. And I was just like, 'That's it. Like, that is, that's the answer.' But it was scary. It's like to buck a system that has been in place for years. It worked out beautifully. So far. Let's knock on wood. So far it worked out great.

Amy: Yeah. Awesome. Is there anything else that you'd like to say to the audience, or anything, any last thoughts that you'd like to impart before we say our goodbye?

Yonna: Well, I'll leave you with this, or leave everyone with this. This has been my mantra ever since I started working in higher ed, is that: Wherever you are, whatever you're doing, you should always leave the space better than how you found it. And I take that with setting up a

room, to, and cleaning up behind ourselves. But also the people that we work with, and the people that we want to come to our Universities.

Yonna: We want to leave, we want our students to leave, Northwestern better than they how they found it. We want them to leave Louisiana Tech better than the how they found it. And the way they do that is by their experiences that they involve themselves in. They become better people. So, they are leaving with being better versions of themselves. And so, that's what I ask for people to do: Leave the space better than how you found it. Which also means pick up your trash, but you know, pick up behind yourself.

Amy: And wash your hands.

Yonna: And wash your hands. Please, wash your hands. That's it. That's good. Thank you for having me.

Amy: Yeah. Thanks for being on the podcast. It was a pleasure.

Yonna: Thank you so much.

Amy: Thank you for listening to this episode of Beyond 1894. If you liked what you heard, please rate and review us. It will help others find our podcast. If you would like to find details about the episode, check out our show notes. To find our podcast webpage, go to 1894.latech.edu/beyond. If you have suggestions for future episodes email us at 1894@latech.edu. We would love your input, so tell us what you would like to hear!

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