

Chris Velardi: It's a timely Cuse Conversation with author, counselor, life, coach, and motivational speaker, David Essel, a 1979 Syracuse University graduate.

David Essel: We're telling people don't wait for the pandemic to end. It may never end. Instead, look at this as the new normal now. Let's take care of ourselves.

Chris Velardi: I'm Chris Velardi class of 1995. Glad you're listening. David is a [00:00:30] really interesting guy. He's driven by helping others. As a kid, he really wanted to be an NBA star. He's built a successful career however, writing about and supporting people through addiction recovery, relationship difficulties, grief counseling, and professional challenges. And he's a big believer in the power of positivity, which let's face it, has been a little tricky to maintain during the pandemic. So that's where we started our conversation. How have the demands, what you've heard from folks [00:01:00] that you've been trying to help, how have they changed in the last two years?

David Essel: Beautiful question. We've always worked in the world of addiction recovery. We have never seen so many people struggling with addictions as we have today. So that's been a big change. Normally, Chris, we might get one person a month that joins our holistic addiction recovery program. And now we're getting six, seven and eight. We've had a real strong base of relationship work my whole life. But one of the things that's happened in the last couple years is that [00:01:30] we are getting couples with extreme anger, extreme resentment, not just the normal I'm not going to talk to you for 24 hours and then things blow over. We're talking about people that are arguing six days a week, intense arguing. So that's been brand new. The other thing in regards to addiction that we've never dealt with until the pandemic as seriously as we have right now is the addiction to news, the addiction to conspiracy theories, the addiction to social media.

[00:02:00] And what people don't realize is that as we're engaged and we're following these rabbit holes down many holes that are not truthful in nature, is that it changes brain chemistry. And so when you start to follow someone that is maybe out of the mainstream, or even if you follow the major networks and one network is saying one thing, and the other network is saying the exact opposite, that affects brain chemistry. And then we start looking at the word righteousness, the amount of arguing [00:02:30] on social media, in the streets, in corner banks for gosh sake,

Chris Velardi: On airplanes, anywhere, right? I mean, that's been a part of a big story that's come out of all of this is that people seem to be angry and they're not afraid to express that anger with whomever's in front of them.

David Essel: And Chris, there's something that we term the adrenaline addiction cycle 35 years ago. And it's in full outplay right now. And that's what this means. When you argue, there's a release of adrenaline and you [00:03:00] get fired up and heart rate increases, blood rate increases and adrenaline start surging through your body. Now that's not a bad thing if it happens once every couple weeks or

once a month or once every six months. But when you start to see whether it's with your partner, your children, coworkers, someone at the gym, oh my God, I got a story at the gym that will blow your mind of people trying to convince me, even though I'm very not into this whole scene of saying who's right and who's wrong, people will come up and try to convince you anyway.

[00:03:30] Well with the adrenaline addiction cycle, when you start to argue and that release of adrenaline is every couple days, all of a sudden we face what many people don't realize Chris is adrenaline withdrawal. So the body gets used to adrenaline three days a week and it wants it. And so then all of a sudden your partner rolls their eyes or someone at work makes an offhand comment where two years ago, you just would've let it fly. Now you have to react because the body is craving that resurge [00:04:00] of adrenaline. So that's just one of the many things we're facing that I've never seen in 42 years of work before.

Chris Velardi: I know something else that you're really turning some attention to is mental health. And that's something that certainly we have talked more and more about. And I think for the better in the last couple of years, but how are you shifting and really putting some attention towards dealing with mental health and then helping others help others deal with mental health?

David Essel: Yeah, well, we saw [00:04:30] a couple years ago, the extreme decline in the world of mental health, just because of anxiety alone. And that's the first thing that we started seeing. 80% of the clients that come into me for whatever reason it is, are also dealing with some pretty serious anxiety. So a couple months ago, the governor in the state of Florida, Governor DeSantis put aside \$12 million for mental health care, starting with first responders and then trickling down. So we're watching the trend of my practice, seeing anxiety, [00:05:00] addiction, arguing, breakups, PTSD, insomnia, everything you can think about. And then we see Governor DeSantis say, Hey, this is serious. The physical is serious, but we're missing the boat. And we agreed. So we created a brand new mental health and master life coach certification, Chris. And what we do is we teach people the origin of anxiety, depression, insomnia, suicidal ideation.

In 1990, I had a failed suicide attempt. I [00:05:30] know suicide very well. I know deep depression, clinical depression, anxiety very well. And so we started to help people years ago, who were having those moments of suicidal thoughts or suicidal ideation. So we look at all of this and we said, let's put together a 30 hour certification. They will be spending 10 hours on a Saturday and 10 hours on a Sunday with me as the only instructor. We'll do it via Zoom and in person. And then they have 10 hours afterwards to complete the assignments. [00:06:00] When they are done, this is what we're looking for Chris, we are looking for an army of certified mental health coaches. They don't have to have the answers to everything because that's not the world of coaching. We need to be able to give people assignments, exercises, accountability drills to hold their feet to the fire

as they battle through anxiety, weight gain, which is something that's gone huge in our country, right, and addictions.

And then we also teach them, when is it time to refer out? [00:06:30] When are you working with a client that's escalated a little above our grade and we need to look for help from a psychiatrist or someone else that is that skilled. So we go across the board. We talk about something that a lot of people don't understand. Serotonin is one of the most important neurotransmitters in the brain in regarding to feeling that things are okay, equilibrium, stabilization, but here's what people don't realize Chris, 70% of our serotonin [00:07:00] is stored in the gut. So when we're drinking more than usual, when we're eating more than usual, food that isn't healthy, we're destroying the functioning of the gut, which is minimizing serotonin, which leads to irritability, anxiety, depression. So in this certification, we're going to cover everything including grief, but it's not just a grief of losing loved ones. It's the grief of losing a job, a relationship, our identity, our freedom, the grief that comes [00:07:30] with being isolated for several years.

Chris Velardi: What we know is our way of life. I mean, I think there are a lot of people grieving for kind of what we would call normal, whatever that is.

David Essel: Yeah. And this is something really interesting in our brand new book, Helping Americans Heal, we ask people to look at the pandemic from a totally different perspective. We say, look at it as if it's never going away. And now let's get back to mental health. So because too many people, Chris are going well, when the pandemic ends, [00:08:00] I'll get back into shape. When the pandemic ends, I'll cut back. I just had a couple yesterday sign up and that's the first thing they said. We're arguing a lot. We're drinking a lot more. And we were going to wait for the pandemic to end, to really get help. And then the husband said, and we're obviously seeing that isn't right around the corner. So we're telling people, don't wait for the pandemic to end. It may never end. Instead, look at this as the new normal now. Let's take care of ourselves.

Chris Velardi: Yeah. It's so [00:08:30] important to do that. I want to ask you, because you mentioned that there are times when others who kind of do the life coach thing, see that it's time to refer someone to the next level of help. But let me get to that first level. What gives people the background, the experience, the information, whatever they need to be that life coach? There are probably people who say I don't know. I mean, I can barely even tie my shoes. [00:09:00] How am I going to help somebody with some of these very serious problems? How do you make that leap?

David Essel: That's a great question, Chris. And here's your answer. The very first purpose of the 30 hour certification is to help our coaches get their lives together. And to understand that they have the power with the correct tools to deal with their own weight or their own insomnia or sleep issues or their own anxiety and depression. So it's a great question that you ask. [00:09:30] We train coaches

first to know how to take care of themselves, which they learn in the 30 hour program. Then they feel more secure, right? Like, oh my gosh. As an example, Chris, when we talk about anxiety, one of the most important parts of the body when it comes to anxiety is something called the vagus nerve. The vagus nerve runs the entire length of the body. What science has found is the only way to calm the vagus nerve during an anxiety experience is [00:10:00] deep breathing.

So now first you think, wait a minute, I'm feeling anxious. How am I going to deep breathe? We teach you how to do that. Right. So someone who joins the course that says, well, I don't have any addictions. My relationship is fine. I'm okay financially. But I do get anxious because I don't know what's happening with my mom in the nursing home or my husband struggling with work and where's his next career. So we want people to feel the experience of what they're going through. See that they [00:10:30] can actually heal themselves or help heal themselves before they go on to helping others.

Chris Velardi: It's like that thing on the airplane. Right. You have to put your own mask on before you can put on somebody else's mask.

David Essel: 100% correct. Chris, you got it.

Chris Velardi: So let's back up with you. First of all, how did you get to Syracuse University? What put SU on your map?

David Essel: I was born in Utica, New York, a tiny little city, an hour away. Right. And my dad got a job opportunity at Syracuse University. So [00:11:00] we moved up from Utica when I was very young. So I was in Syracuse. Chris, when I was six years of age, I'll never forget. It's the only memory I have of six, but I was going to be a National Basketball Association Player. That was my only goal. I slept with a basketball every night. Back, now we're talking about back in the 60s. Right. And so in the 60s, we really didn't have the proliferation of basketball camps for six year olds that we have today. So it was probably [00:11:30] about when I was 10 or 12 that I entered my first basketball camp. I ended up working with some amazing coaches and my dream became bigger. And then I tried out for the Syracuse University basketball team and I made it. Played there for two years.

Jim Boeheim, it's so funny because I saw him a couple years ago and I have so much respect for Jim, Chris. And here's the reason why. I went back to Syracuse University to do the keynote address for the graduating class in the school of education. [00:12:00] And this was I think three or four years ago with Dr. Joanna. And I can't remember the exact year, but when I was there, Floyd Little was a friend of mine and him and his wife and rest in peace Floyd. We love him so much.

Chris Velardi: One of the great.

David Essel: His wife, DeBorah and Floyd brought me into the chancellor's office to do a presentation for a group of individuals there. So Floyd and DeBorah and I got along great. And then the next day Floyd said, Hey, do you want to say hi to coach [00:12:30] Jim? So this was about two months before I was going to do the keynote. So we went to a practice and coach Jim Boeheim was there and he's got his parka on. It was February and he's starting out the door and I go, Hey, coached. Now here's the thing, Chris, that's so beautiful about Jim Boeheim. I played for Syracuse University 43 years ago or whatever it was, 44 years ago. And Roy Danforth was the coach back then. Jim was the assistant. Jim wasn't even my main coach and he turns around [00:13:00] and he goes, Essel, how the heck have you been? Chris, I was blown away. I hadn't talked to him in 40 years. And then the next thing he said was just so beautiful. I see you're making a huge difference in the world of psychology. Keep going strong.

Now how many coaches have that type of empathy, understanding and love of the human nature to be able to remember a guy that wasn't a star. I didn't average 30 points a game, nothing like that. [00:13:30] But I have so much respect for him. And so through Floyd Little and Jim Boeheim I stayed connected to Syracuse University. Every month I'm on WSYR TV and Syracuse on a show called Bridge Street.

Chris Velardi: Yeah.

David Essel: So I was just on the show yesterday. And so I keep my Syracuse ties very, very tight to my chest. I just love the university so much.

Chris Velardi: And it's something that you hear. There is a strong thread that runs through the orange [00:14:00] family. Right. I mean, it's the kind of thing that those relationships don't end certainly when people leave campus. They only get stronger it seems. And it sounds like yours have been the same.

David Essel: Oh, identical. I still have friends at the university that are working there that I'll stay in touch with. And then of course, when in the last couple years with my mom and dad, the last 12 months, my mom and dad passing, I've been back into Syracuse. I've gone back to the campus just because I love it so much. And then of course, back on Bridge Street TV. [00:14:30] So I'll never lose my Syracuse connection. I absolutely love it.

Chris Velardi: It's a great thing. When you kind of do spend a moment and think, well, before I go there, let me ask you, after Syracuse, after you graduated, how did your journey go from future NBA star, at least in your mind to author and speaker and somebody who really [00:15:00] makes a living, trying to help others make themselves better?

David Essel: What a beautiful question. I believe that everyone is giving gifts. We're giving gifts at birth. We come out of the womb with certain. Some people are very mathematical. Some people are very logical. Some people are very creative.

Some people are very athletic. I wish I could say that was me. I was up to a certain level, but I couldn't break through that glass ceiling. But one of the things Chris that I think I was just naturally given is a desire to lead. [00:15:30] As a point guard or a shooting guard, it was my responsibility to have the team running certain plays and all that. And I did that starting at eight years of age in elementary school. So it was very natural for me to be a leader.

And that led me into the world of sports psychology. At Syracuse University, Dr. Carl Sanchez. And I got to tell you, Chris, I have tried to find this guy ever since I left. He turned my life around and I talked about him during the keynote address at the school of education, the commencement address [00:16:00] I gave. Carl Sanchez saw me and I played for two years. And then I transferred to a smaller school because I really wanted to play, but sitting out a year, sort of dampening my enthusiasm. So I came back to graduate. I'm walking across the campus one day and I hadn't seen Dr. Carl in a couple years and he grabbed me and he said, Hey, how you doing? And I said, well, I said, doc, I really don't know where I'm going. I'm back at Syracuse University. And he said, come on, let's talk.

So we went in and I was just having a general [00:16:30] education. I didn't have anything specific. And then I went into the school of education, but I didn't feel that that was my calling Chris, for whatever reason, maybe it was my lack of patience with children or something. But Dr. Carl Sanchez sat me down and he asked me a bunch of questions. Where do you want to be, where do you want to go, what's driving this, your heart.

And it was all about helping people in the world of health. So Dr. Carl Sanchez said, well, we don't have a degree that would fit you. So [00:17:00] I'm going to make a degree and I'm going to present it to the chancellor's office and to the school of education. And gosh, darn it Chris, before I knew it, he called me up and I went and worked with a woman named Marie who's still in the school of education the last I knew, and she sat down with me and said, Dr. Carl Sanchez just moved the world for you. You now have your own degree that you'll be working on for the next two years called health selected studies. Chris, that turned me on so much [00:17:30] that I went on to get my master's degree in sports psychology to continue to help people. And from that day, it's exploded and I'm loving what I'm doing. And here's something else I will never retire.

Chris Velardi:

The other thing you mentioned there is somebody took a chance on you. Somebody said, I see you, I see what you're interested in, what you're passionate about, and I'm going to help you make that work. It's another common thread that we hear so often from people at Syracuse University who [00:18:00] have come through the university as a student and even as alumni. And they said, I got here, I kind of hit a wall, but there was somebody who took a chance on me and allowed me that opportunity to move forward.

David Essel: Yeah. And Chris, the same thing happened on the basketball court, like Tommy Green was the head coach back then, Mark Metters, who was a former player at Syracuse University was an assistant coach. And then of course there was Jim and Roy Danforth, [00:18:30] but they saw potential in me. They really did. They saw my drive, my determination. And they gave me a chance. Chris, not everyone division one school is going to give a non-scholarship player a chance. That just doesn't happen. I mean, they'll give them a chance because of the fact that they, maybe they have to because of something to do with the NCAA, or I don't know what the rules are, but they welcome me in as a walk on, they knew I did not have a scholarship. They gave me the best opportunity in the world. And [00:19:00] with those guys pushing me, I became a better basketball player than I ever could have imagined.

And that's just another Syracuse University story. There was the director of the school of education. Now we're going back 44, 46 years. I can't remember his name. I think it was Dr. Burt something. I wish I could remember his name, but he was another instrumental player. When I went to him and said, I'm working with Dr. Carl Sanchez. And I think we're going to shift out of education. I love that guy. He was awesome [00:19:30] as the dean of education. And he looked at me and he said, and I support you. And once again, Chris, it's all coming from the university. And when you're young and impressionable and you have those kind of role models, you want to do the same in your own life as well.

Chris Velardi: Well said. Absolutely. Final thing I want to leave it on is just kind of big picture. When you think big picture about being a part of the orange family, being orange, [00:20:00] what does that mean to you?

David Essel: Well, it's great that you asked that. When I did the commencement address, I said to Dr. Joanne, I go, you know what I would love is I would love to Photoshop a picture of me on Mount Everest with a Syracuse University flag blowing in the wind. And Chris, that's how I feel. I really do. When Floyd came down to Naples, Florida, which isn't far from where I live Floyd Little, when he came down to speak to the alumni, I was right there. I was front and center front seat. [00:20:30] Whenever I have a chance to talk about Syracuse University, of course I never miss a game on TV. And we're really fortunate now that we're in the ACC and I'm in Florida, I get all the games. It's phenomenal.

So to me, it has been probably one of the biggest benchmarks in my life. The words, Syracuse University carry a hell of a lot of weight. When I'm talking to corporations about our mental health certification program, or I'm talking to organizations about, we have a [00:21:00] free program called Helping Americans Heal. It's an online healing program and they go, oh, you're an Orangeman. I hear that all the time. And then we immediately go into basketball stories before we do the work.

Chris Velardi: We've all experienced it, right? Mention Syracuse and off you go. Strangers become friends, friends become family, all the stories. If you want to learn more

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about David's work and his books from the counseling to the mental health training program, he talked about, there's a link to his website in the description [00:21:30] of this podcast. As always, subscribe to the Cuse Conversations Podcast so you don't miss an episode. And thanks for listening. Stay well and go orange.