

Kasie Whitener (00:04):

Welcome into the Moore School podcast. This is Moore Impact. I'm Kasie Whitener, your host, and today with me is Mara Zepeda, entrepreneur in residence at the Faber Entrepreneurship Center. And recently off a two-week Maymester in Lake City, where we got to spend time with Darla Moore and take honors college students through the process of the Lake City revitalization. Although Darla said, don't call it that. So we're gonna unpack the Lake City Maymester right here on the podcast right now. So welcome in.

Mara Zepeda (00:31):

Thank you so much for having me. It's really nice to be here. Talk

Kasie Whitener (00:34):

A little bit about your background. How did you get involved with the Faber Entrepreneurship Center? Kind of position us of "Hey, what's the experience you're bringing into the room?"

Mara Zepeda (00:42):

Yeah. Um, well, let's see. I grew up in Santa Fe, New Mexico, which I always think is important to start with. My parents. My mother is a cellist and my father was a painter. And in Santa Fe growing up, everybody had nine different jobs. You were a Reiki healer and a potter, and you worked at the health food store and you were also an artist. And, um, it was just a community full of Renaissance people. So I always grew up believing that that was just the norm. And then after I left Santa Fe, I realized that I had existed in a bit of a bubble. And, um, I guess the other key part about my parents and my upbringing is that when you are around artists, there's a constant flow of asks and offers, give and take. You know, there are times when the month is really great and you sell a bunch of paintings and you get to host the dinner for all of your friends from that art show that month.

Mara Zepeda (01:31):

And then there are months when it's really lean. And so you need to rely on the generosity of your friends. And so artist communities, I've always been fascinated by artist communities because they have built into them these, these systems of resource pooling, of reciprocity of trading and bartering. I mean, my father bartered his paintings for my childhood bed. So, um, I guess I never understood that to be entrepreneurship until later in my life. And it's a certain bent of entrepreneurship. And then I guess fast forward, um, after grad graduating college, I went to Reed College in Portland, Oregon, where I studied Russian literature, which is a story in and of itself. Um, and then during the financial crisis really began to feel called to better understand our economy. What was our economy made of? How did it work? I was 28 years old at the time.

Mara Zepeda (02:21):

I really wanted a better understanding of the, like, how, what got us here essentially. And it felt as though there were massive systems beyond my comprehension. And it was around that time that, um, Alex Bloomberg and This American Life ran a story called The Giant Pool of Money, which was about the mortgage-backed securities, right. And how we got into the financial crisis. And I remember where I was hearing that story and I was like, I have to do whatever this is. Um, it was a way of making our economy intelligible. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. So I went to journalism school and studied with Alex and reported, um, I was an economic reporter for WHYY out of Philadelphia and then for Planet Money and

Marketplace. And after a certain point of reporting on the problems of the economy, it became clear that entrepreneurship could be one path towards trying to solve them.

Mara Zepeda ([03:10](#)):

Right? And that's what got me into the field of tech and entrepreneurship. And I think I've founded six or seven social enterprises, nonprofits, venture backed startups, software companies, um, chambers of Commerce, kind of, it's a whole portfolio of really interesting different collectives. And I think where I'm at now is most interested in, I guess you could call it like organizational psychology around how groups of people come together to do things that are greater than themselves, which feels like a core piece of both management, entrepreneurship and, um, just the, some of the skills that we'll need as we head into this next era.

Kasie Whitener ([03:47](#)):

And, uh, we call it the entrepreneurial ecosystem here in Columbia. And so you came into Columbia, into this ecosystem and quickly made friends with like, pretty much anybody you could meet and be in all the places. So talk about that. What is the ecosystem like in Columbia? How did you meet these folks? Like what were you seeing when you first got here?

Mara Zepeda ([04:04](#)):

Well, I was so blessed to have first landed at NoMa Warehouse, where I met Maisie, um, who had started NoMa. I mean like basically right out of college. She's an amazing entrepreneur, and the type of, um, office space I was looking for was at femmeX. And so she pointed me to femmeX, which remains such an incredible gem of this community, which is a coworking and social club that, um, is focused on women, but has, um, all, all genders of, of members and been an incredible building on Richland and Nell Fuller, who's the, um, brains and vision behind that extraordinary space really became a dear friend and collaborator. And, um, I just began to get to know the ecosystem and learn a little bit more about how the Boyd Center fits in how the business school fits in. And I guess one way that I describe myself as kind of like, like an, I'm an interstitial, so somebody that, um, I like to sit across multiple networks and make connections, and that's really my happy place is figure, it, it, it seems like we, especially in Columbia, that it has everything that it needs.

Mara Zepeda ([05:09](#)):

And the bridges that I was able to forge were really between, um, I would say the entrepreneurial community and then the university. My husband is a professor in the history department at USC. There are some incredible professors in every department that I've had the pleasure of meeting. And there's a lot of, um, there are ways that I think we can share both resources, vision, and objectives with the university to sort of begin to bridge some of that. Um, so yeah, that was the first couple of years of getting to know Columbia. And then, um, we started this effort called Cola Love, which was sort of dreamed up with me, Julie, and then Nell, um, or, uh, Nell and then Julie Tuttle, um, who's a real estate developer here in town and really felt like we were seeing, you know, the spaces, the talent, the ideas, the energy, and we just needed to figure out how to connect them. So Cola Love is, um, sort of an economic and community development engine that's trying to put all of those pieces together, um, with the community members here that are motivated from a place of love and connection.

Kasie Whitener ([06:14](#)):

The Cola Love efforts have been awesome. You guys have done, uh, pop-up restaurants. You're working now with some female entrepreneurs over the summer to help them bridge from Soda City into full-time, retail space. Uh, just the ideas that you've brought forward and then the support that you're getting from Mayor Rickenmann and the city council and some of the funding that you all have been able to access. It's just really amazing the work that you're doing on the entrepreneur side here in our ecosystem.

Mara Zepeda (06:38):

Yeah, it's been such a warm welcome and really have to give credit to Nell's leadership and, um, all the relationship building that she's done over so many years in Columbia. And yeah, the support of the city, the economic, um, office for Economic, um, opportunity, uh, the Carolina Community Foundation. We've had some phenomenal supporters this year. So there are eight popups. There's currently one up right now, um, that I haven't even been to. 'cause it opened when <laugh> while we were in Lake City. Uh, the Liberation is Lit Bookstore, which is on Rosewood, so I'm excited to swing by that. Um, and then there'll be about seven more to come for the rest of the year. And there's also a popup, um, a Spring Supper that's happening right now at the space next to Mr. Friendly's, um, that is, uh, with Chef Wesley. And that's happening right now that's highlighting local farmers. And that's also something I haven't been to yet too. So I'm excited to check out all that's been going on in my absence. You'll

Kasie Whitener (07:32):

Get there. You'll, you're back in town now exactly. This Lake City idea. Well, let's talk about Darla. Yeah. So the Darla Moore School of Business, the only business school in the nation that is named after a woman, uh, this drew you immediately and you were really curious about wanting to understand what's her story, who is she, why is the school called that? So walk us through that. Like how did you access the resources? What, what sparked the curiosity and what made you want to kind of dig in on that?

Mara Zepeda (07:56):

Well, I guess, um, I mean, so much of it is thanks to you and Jeff and to the Faber Center for Entrepreneurship and the Business School. When I arrived in Columbia, I was trying to find my way from a, I wanted to find, um, an academic and institutional home. Um, because so much of the work I've done in the ecosystem, I, I feel like is needing just more research and understanding and development. And I really love working with young people as well. And so it was sort of a collision of factors. It was that fateful meeting that we had at the 1801 um, grill where you were both just so open to these types of ideas. So having a warm reception and an audience that was interested and enthusiastic and, um, interested in collaborating was a hugely meaningful first part of affirmation. And then through this very small world, um, Darla is on the board of the Santa Fe Institute, and I, as I mentioned, grew up in Santa Fe.

Mara Zepeda (08:48):

Santa Fe Institute is, um, an institute that studies complexity science. And so, um, it was sort of born out of the Los Alamos lab, um, folks after World War II where they realized that, you know, the technology that they were building there was way more complex and impactful than any of them had fully understood. And so, um, that institute is very unique in, um, in just its wide range of disciplines. So that explores. So, um, quite remarkably, Darla is on the board of the Santa Fe Institute, and I'm friends with their director David Krakauer. And so there was kind of this confluence events where, of events where I was offered the role as entrepreneur in residence. Um, it started to become clear that Lake City was

such a central place for local economic sustainability. And then the Santa Fe Institute came and led a delegation on sustainable cities to Lake City.

Mara Zepeda ([09:44](#)):

And the foundation really rolled out the red carpet for about 24 of us that were coming from all across the country to better understand what was happening in Lake City. And we brought some students. And that was when I first began to explore and just ask the simple question of like, what bridges have been built between the Moore School and Lake City, which is an hour and a half east of us. Because it seemed as though there were so many principles and ideas inherent in Lake City that I would imagine could be so valuable to the students and the students could be valuable to Lake City. And the real question that the both of us started to ask of what does like a learning exchange and reciprocal relationship look like between these two, um, kind of power centers of, uh, you know, Darla's extraordinary influence, but also just she's built beyond her as a person and individual. She's built a lot of infrastructure to empower other people to now take this to the next level. So from an organizational psychology perspective, that's the part that I think I'm most interested in.

Kasie Whitener ([10:49](#)):

We had some early conversation around do we create a one day trip? Do we try to get people out to art fields? Like what are the things we can do to motivate this? And our dean, our new dean at the University of South Carolina's Business School at the Darla Moore School, uh, Dean Verma got behind it pretty quickly. I mean, the minute we were able to say, Hey, we wanna build these things and this is what it might look like. Um, and the one that ended up crystallizing came from the Honors College. And we gotta definitely acknowledge Sarah Kelly and all the work she did to put together what turned out to be their first domestic Maymester trip. And so they've done onsite Maymesters before, but usually those are places like Greece and New Zealand and these other kinds of, you know, go away, go abroad for two weeks and they'll do a living learning experiential thing abroad. But this time you and Jeff actually pitched it as, Hey, let's just go to Lake City. We're just going 90 minutes away. Talk about how that really, that conversation went with you and Jeff and Sarah. 'cause I came in a little bit late on that one.

Mara Zepeda ([11:47](#)):

Yeah. And we were also with Andrea, who's the assistant dean, I believe. Um, and she was very warm to the idea, I think. Um, yeah, we sat down and I just remember there was, you know, it's like as with anything at the university, really wanting to make the case for how this is gonna benefit students. Right. And one of, I think there were a number of different reasons. Like one, it's just so accessible, so it's an hour and a half away versus getting on a plane and schlepping to Greece, right? Um, two, it was something that had an existing tie in with one of the university's benefactors. Um, and then three, it was like this combination of, I think what we're seeing for next generation entrepreneurship where you're really wanting to focus on local regional sustainability and that that's, those are all the key words when we think about climate resilience.

Mara Zepeda ([12:34](#)):

When we think about like, um, future policy, I mean, so much of it is gonna be essentially what can local communities develop, um, for their own needs to serve their own needs. And so those ideas, um, in addition to I think just the novelty, we, the Moore Foundation was generous enough to provide the housing for the students. And so the notion that the students were gonna essentially be living in <laugh>

in Moore Farms in Darla's backyard was also very appealing and that this had never been done before. Um, and that it was affordable. That's the other thing, right? It was sustainable for many different reasons in so far as the students weren't having to pay for expensive airfare. And so it was an attainable price point for the students. Um, so yeah, we initially pitched it and Andrea and Sarah were both like, very, very excited and, and, um, supportive of it. And then we got to run with it,

Kasie Whitener ([13:24](#)):

My colleague, Jeff Savage. Uh, and you know, Jeff and I have been working in the Faber Center together for the last two years, and he's now got some, uh, projects that he's working on in the private sector. And those were pulling him from an attention perspective away from Faber work and away from, uh, being in the classroom. And so as the Maymester was getting closer and closer, he said, you know, Kasie, I think actually you probably ought to do this. This is also my, my area of interest, my area of research is in what kinds of mom and pop entrepreneurship can we implement and how can we teach our students more about the traditional businesses that we see in small towns in rural environments. And I mean, I personally feel like this is sort of the future of entrepreneurship is more, it's not the, uh, high tech, high growth Silicon Valley shark tank level stuff that looks really flashy and, um, spectacular that churns that everyday economic wheel.

Kasie Whitener ([14:20](#)):

It's really the individuals that are building small businesses in their hometowns, in their communities, and contributing by meeting a need that they see in the community and building a business that can supply, you know, what the community itself needs. And I'm not to take anything away from our entrepreneurs in the innovative space with that high tech stuff, that's really important things as well. I mean, there is a lot of opportunity there, but I wanna talk to our students about seeing entrepreneurship in their everyday life. Yeah. This like, sort of practical entrepreneurism is my interest and, and my research and my philosophy. So you see this happening in Lake City, you come to us, you're like, Hey, this really cool thing is happening in Lake City. It's kind of around art fields. Uh, there's this sort of blip on the radar. I went, uh, in, I think it was in December, they had, um, a curator's retreat there.

Kasie Whitener ([15:10](#)):

And so I went and spent some time with some, uh, people who are all art museum curators and listened to them talk about their craft and their profession and the work that they have to do and, and the challenges that they have building their businesses, which I thought was really interesting. But I also got to be in Lake City at Christmas time, which was, I was just blown away by the art at Christmas time in Lake City. And I thought, man, I'm in. So when Jeff was like, "Hey, I'm not sure I can make the Maymester thing work, what do you think?" I was like, "Pick me, pick me! <Laugh>. I desperately wanna do this." Uh, let's grow this out. And so as I mentioned, then we bring it to Dean Verma and we say to him like, "Hey, we've got these students that are gonna be part of this.

Kasie Whitener ([15:47](#)):

Three of the six are more school students. So 50% of the class was not just Honors College, but they're also Moore School students. We think that you all ought to be involved in here. And and he did. He came out to support it. Uh, he, uh, participated in a number of things leading up to it. Um, and we can get a little bit to that. So we build the Maymester class, Sarah Kelly helps us design this course number, the syllabus, they put it up there, we start recruiting to try to get students to get involved and get engaged in this. And then what, then what happens? <laugh>? Yeah.

Mara Zepeda ([16:16](#)):

<laugh>.

Mara Zepeda ([16:18](#)):

I just remember having some calls ... I mean, I'm so grateful for just the accompaniment and like that we got to do this together. Um, it was so fun. And I mean, I think, so there were a number of things, like we were coming right at the end of Artfields, and so everybody warned us, this is probably the worst time to come, right? Because they were coming right at the end of the entire culmination of the entire year's worth of effort. Um, but in many ways it was, it proved to be a wonderful time to come because as the Artfields team was doing De-installation and decompressing, our students came in and kind of provided that opportunity for business owners to provide feedback, to be listened to, to, um, they did a, a number of interviews with them. So I think the timing worked out really well.

Mara Zepeda ([17:00](#)):

And, um, you know, I think there's just, when you look at a city when, or when you look at a small town as the living laboratory of study, you really start to understand that it is this exercise in complexity because there are so many different things that are making this go. There's, um, we met with Lynch's Lake Historical Society, and so understanding the history of that region, which is very specific in particular the, um, arc of southern agricultural towns and the way that those economies have to be reimaged and rebuilt. Then you have, um, the like undeniable, um, demographics of the, of the area that are, you know, it's about 75% African American. Um, and then the, um, ways that the Moore Foundation has already set up 12 years worth of experiments and what that next chapter looks like, the role of the churches and communities of faith.

Mara Zepeda ([17:53](#)):

And I mean, there's like so many different parts when we actually start to talk about economic development. We did a service project where we went to, um, the resource center, which is the local food bank and understanding, you know, food, food needs, especially in these, um, times of inflation. So it was fascinating for me to just realize that there, when you are able to have immersive experiences like this, you can actually start to touch a number of pieces of the el of the elephant that are oftentimes left out of traditional conversations around traditional economic development. Right? But once you're in place, all of that complexity and the interconnectedness starts to make sense. So yeah. I'm curious to hear what you picked up on and noticed.

Kasie Whitener ([18:33](#)):

Yeah, I wanna unpack that a little bit because I think that when we think of one of the challenges and something we've talked about on a number of episodes on the podcast has been around the sort of academic silos where people come in to study a discipline. And it's not a mistake to call it a discipline 'cause it really is about focusing on a particular thing and staying in your lane, right? Like that's how academia is built and what we're seeing, I think with, I think the internet of course broke this open for all of us back in the early nineties, right? Uh, but really we're seeing a much broader spectrum of people wanting to understand these complex systems and all the different things that go into this. And so one of our students, Shelby mentioned that she had taken an economics class in her freshman year, and that economics class had just completely blown her mind.

Kasie Whitener ([19:21](#)):

Like she said, everything she thought she knew were, it was all completely unpacked and repackaged. And so that she wasn't wrong necessarily, she just didn't understand. And by the end of that class she had, and I thought, isn't that great? Like, it's great to have a class that gives you this like, high level of enlightenment, especially in your freshman year. Mm. I mean, if you can have that class, it's pretty amazing. Um, but so then we get to Lake City and we get this kind of microcosm, it's not a global economy, it's not a digital world, it's not the things that these students are used to kind of moving through. Instead, it's a very self-contained, uh, interdependent complex set of systems that are all related to nonprofit giving, um, the foundation and the investments that they're making, individual business owners and proprietors, the community organizations that are there to serve and to volunteer the historical society that's there to preserve and tell the stories, like all these different stakeholders in Lake City.

Kasie Whitener ([20:19](#)):

And so I, I would say like when we think of stakeholder theory and the business side, and we're talking about who are your investors and who are your employees, right? But then you go into this city and you go, let's talk about the stakeholders, the people who are benefiting, but also the people who need to be putting in the work and who's got what stake and what are they providing. The last day we were there, we met with the superintendent from the school district, and to add that, that piece of it, right? We also met with the mayor to add that piece of it. So every, every meeting that you set up for these students in the two weeks that we were there gave them another dimension to this full 360 degree view of Lake City. And I was just fascinated the whole time I was there, I was just fascinated by

Mara Zepeda ([20:58](#)):

It. Wasn't it amazing? Yeah. Uh, I, I felt the same way and the recognition that it's almost like, um, I mean yeah, when we went to the school and the high school and just how impactful that was and realizing, okay, this is Lake City's future, and like, here's this building full of so much incredible talent and energy and vision and experience. And we, and just that sense of like, what could they unleash right now, you know, like tomorrow if they were, um, and I think that's where the superintendent is really interested in going to around the talent development and some of the partnerships that, um, the Power Forward partnership with the school district. Right. Which may be worth speaking to as well. Um, but yeah, it's almost like what was, so one of, of the many things that were so mind blowing to me was this notion that you had to think about the students in schools. And that's where I think Carla Angus's leadership with Artfields Junior and always centering art in the next generation and youth has been so utterly unbelievable. Um, and now those shows are touring all throughout South Carolina. So having the ability to create conditions where young people can see themselves as agents of their own change in their own community, and that beginning with art and creativity and entrepreneurship at a very young age, and

Kasie Whitener ([22:14](#)):

Take responsibility for the community that they're building. Yep. And if you want to live in a better place, that that change starts with you, that effort starts with you, which I thought was really incredible too. Yeah. So let's, um, back up just a little bit and talk about what is Artfields? Yeah. People who are like listening to this podcast for the first time. We did do one. So we went to, uh, art Fields on the Thursday before this May, the Maymester began, I took, uh, some of my colleagues from the management department. We all went out to art fields and spent time there. And I did interview two of my, uh, colleagues that went with me. And they talked about what they saw at Artfields and their experiences at Artfields. So that was really cool. That's another episode of the podcast you can access if you wanna



hear another perspective of what they saw actually while the competition was happening. Um, but so explain for people that didn't listen to that episode. What is Art Fields? What is it about, sort of, what's the history of this event that they've got going on in Lake City?

Mara Zepeda ([23:03](#)):

Yeah. Well, as the story goes, as I understand it, I think it's now in its 12th year. So at the very beginning when Darla sort of returned back to Lake City and decided that she was gonna make that her full time home from, I believe she'd spent a lot of time in New York and DC um, they were looking for this small group of, um, her and her friends was kind of, as she puts it, throwing spaghetti at the wall, looking for what is a catalyst for economic development. And they looked at, I believe it's called Art Prize in Grand Rapids, Michigan, um, as being kind of this huge pop where it was bringing, I think something like 60,000 people into Grand Rapids. And so they sort of put their bet on let's have a festival that has this really big pop. And so it's 12 southeastern states that participate in art fields.

Mara Zepeda ([23:46](#)):

Um, they get, I think over a thousand submissions. And then there is an independent jury that whittles down the submissions. I think this year I can't, I think it must have been around 500 pieces of art. I've also heard 700, so I should probably get to the bottom of it. But, um, at any rate, so it's a nine day art festival where mostly it's visual artists display their work and the businesses in Lake City identify the works that they want to show and they curate them. And so there's a lottery system where businesses will pick a number from a bowl, and then those businesses will decide which pieces of art they want to display. And so they're very proud when, you know, they win or when they get high in the lottery. And then those business owners essentially have become curators to some degree of bringing that art into barbershops and hair salons and antique shops and Mexican restaurants.

Mara Zepeda ([24:33](#)):

And, um, so it's a quite unusual experience and that you're going into the businesses in order to see the art. And then at the end of the competition, there is a pretty significant prize money, I think it's some of the most prize money, um, in the Southeast for these types of festivals with over \$150,000, I wanna say. Um, that's been given and as awards to these southeastern artists. So that is a nine day festival. And, um, they are now, they have kind of pivoted and expanded, and that they're now, um, branding themselves as a year-round art town. And so under this, uh, these four co-directors, they're moving now to figure out how can we sustain this type of economic impact. So it's not just a flash in the pan, but, um, it has sustained, um, impact inside the community. And so some of the things that they're doing are programming throughout the year. So the program that you came for in the fall, um, the exhibit they had, um, in the fall is one example of that. And then they're building tiny homes for artists to try to attract artists to come and live there. And then they just finished, uh, beautiful studios, uh, ceramic studios on Aline Street, as well as a way to try to attract artists to live there full time. So what, creating the conditions for, um, professional artists to come and live there and move there and contribute to the community.

Kasie Whitener ([25:53](#)):

The four directors had some good candid conversation with our students on, I wanna say it was Monday, so we were in the second week already, or it might have been, it might, I can't remember when it was, but they were pretty deeply immersed. The students had seen a good bit of what art fields is and how it works, and they'd seen a good bit around the city. Um, and then they gotta sit down with



these four directors and hear their vision and their, their ambition for what they think Lake City can be. Um, and I think they were inspired by that conversation. But it was interesting because Carla then took us on this, uh, tour of sort of the other side of the tracks, right? These other parts of Lake City that are not the renovated downtown main Street. Um, and I wanna come back to that in just a second, Carla's trip into these other spaces.

Kasie Whitener ([26:39](#)):

But that provided a contrast to what the students have been seeing for about a week in the downtown spaces. These downtown spaces were one of, it was one of the three things that Darla said Lake City had as an asset. And so on Wednesday, middle of the second week, we got to spend an hour with her, and she talked about these three assets that Lake City had. Number one, it had what she called an entrepreneurial backbone. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative> Lake City, when they were an agriculture hub, individuals grew their own produce, right? So they owned their land and they owned the means of production, and they owned the produce itself. And then they owned the market where they took that produce to the market, and they sold that produce at market, and it went, you know, to wherever it needed to go. And she said, this entrepreneurial backbone is something that you can't teach.

Kasie Whitener ([27:25](#)):

It's there, because that's the way Lake City grew up, is that they had the strawberry market, the bean market, and the tobacco market. It's gone away. The the markets have gone away. The produce has gone away. Uh, but that entrepreneurial spirit, she said, still lives there. So that was really interesting. I'm unpacking that in my research a little bit more. The second thing she said they had was, uh, proximity to Florence. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. So there's a much bigger town north of Lake City, and those people will travel, they'll make day trips down to visit and spend their money in Lake City. And fact, when I was sharing this over the weekend with my mom, she is born and raised in Florence. I was born in Florence. My grandmother lived in Florence most of her life, certainly all of her married life. And my grandmother and her friends used to go down to Lake City to go shopping.

Kasie Whitener ([28:08](#)):

And the reason they went shopping in Lake City all through the sixties and seventies and eighties was that Lake City didn't dress shops, didn't stock a lot of merchandise. And so you would end up wearing the same thing as every other girl in Florence. Oh. Unless you went to Lake City and bought your dresses there, <laugh>. Oh, funny. And so in the sixties and seventies and eighties, my grandmother and those would go down to Lake City and buy their dresses in Lake City just from Florence. So these are the two things. So they have, they own their means of production. They have this entrepreneurial backbone, they have the proximity to Florence and people who will come and shop. And the third thing they had, and Darla said it, we are cute <laugh>. And it was this, they had not demolished the main street buildings. And so there's two blocks on Main Street that have these historic buildings that could be renovated into usable spaces. And they would be cute. They would be fun to come down and walk and sort of get this nostalgic vibe of these like early turn of the century kind of, uh, and I mean like the 1910s right. Era, uh, of Lake City. And so I think what was compelling then is to see, okay, they've done this, they've now built this thing in Lake City, and then how do we get people here? And that's what you mentioned, what they, they had taken the model from from Michigan and said, let's draw people in with this art.

Mara Zepeda ([29:18](#)):

Yep, exactly. Exactly. Yeah. And those assets, um, so interesting to think about market towns and that notion of seasonality too. Um, and that's something that I has really been sticking with me from coming back there from Lake City, is when you think about market towns and agriculture, they were talking about having the strawberries in the early summer and the tobacco in the fall. So you have these cultures that are galvanizing around these kind of pops of activity, and then that activity carries you throughout the next six months. Right. Um, that is really fascinating to me. And it's so antithetical to a lot of the sort of like growth at all costs linear up into the right, you know, <laugh> right. Um, types of, um, conceptions that we have about business and entrepreneurship. And to think, when you think about sustainability from a place of seasonality and sort of ecological sustainability too, that's something that's just been sticking with me from our visit as well.

Kasie Whitener ([30:15](#)):

And the work that is required in the sewing. Yes. Right? So like here you are in, you know, it's spring, the strawberries are ripe. We just had yesterday was like national go pick strawberries day or something. So like, it is, the strawberries are ripe now, right? But then what happens between, you know, tomorrow and the end of the summer, all of this is unpaid labor, right? Yeah. These are people that are now, they're gonna do the planting and they're gonna do the growing and the harvesting, and it's not until they go back to market that that revenue comes in again. And so from a business perspective to see those cycles and it's, there's this pop as you mentioned in that revenue, the income that all comes in, but then you need to keep that income sustaining you until the next pop comes back around again. Yeah. And that's what our Artfields team is saying. Like, if Artfields in its nine day glory is an economic pop, how can we either recreate that later in the year? Or how can we create smaller, um, maybe not pops, but smaller sort of bubbles that'll show up and kind of raise the level of income and bring that revenue in year round? Yeah.

Mara Zepeda ([31:21](#)):

Yes. And it goes without saying, now that you're mentioning all the agriculture, of course, the one thing we haven't mentioned, which has been an oversight is more farms and botanical garden, which was the central feature that started all of this, which was, um, Darla's family's tobacco, um, farm. And that has now been repurposed into a world class botanical garden, which is utterly extraordinary. It

Kasie Whitener ([31:42](#)):

It really is extraordinary. It's

Mara Zepeda ([31:43](#)):

Just, it's so mind blowing that it exists in South Carolina and Lake City of all places. And so that, um, as I understand it was like the, the first hub, they had these, they made these big bets on a botanical garden and an arts festival. And so here you have all of this incredibly fertile land. You have world class, um, botanists and horticulturalists that are working this land that are planting all different types of ecosystems that are testing different plants to see whether they're gonna be able to grow in South Carolina. So there's, there's a lot of, um, agricultural backbone that's also been invested in at more farms. And to what you're pointing to, it's just making me wonder whether building that inter, interstitial bridge between the art and the creativity and then the ecological sensibility and what's happening at the farms. And I know, um, shady Rogers in particular, who was such a tremendous help to us, um, during our visit, and wa was our key point of contact there. That's really what he's passionate

about, is how to build those bridges between the agricultural awareness that's happening over at the farms with this creative ecology that's happening downtown and the business district. So

Kasie Whitener ([32:56](#)):

I love that you we're talking about the farms too, because I think that was <laugh> another reason my mom, my grandmother, my nana would come down from Florence was to go and tour farms and those kinds of things. Mm-Hmm. And I mean, certainly more farms has only been more recent, so I don't believe that was one of the ones, they weren't coming to Lake City necessarily. But, um, there's this idea of sort of ecotourism that is popping up in a lot of other places, and that Moore Farms is making an effort into that space. Right? We can draw people down here with this concept of just come and tour the farms and see what we're building here. We were also talking about how they're creating revenue for themselves in that way. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. And so I, something that was interesting to me with the students was to talk about nonprofits, foundations philanthropic work, right?

Kasie Whitener ([33:43](#)):

It requires a level of revenue to be self-sustaining so that revenue has to be accessed. It can't simply be a, and we have a philanthropist in this, right? We have Darla Moore as a philanthropist, but it can't simply be all outbound currency. Yeah. Right. You can't simply continue to just pour money into what's happening in Lake City. There's got to be some at some point that has to turn that economic wheel so that it starts to sustain itself. And so how do you create a revenue, revenue streams outta something like a garden? Um, one of the things the students got to do when they stayed on site, the boys shared a house with Max, which is one of the horticulturists who's spending the summer there. And so they learned through Max just in casual conversation with this other college age guy that was there too. You know, what is this field like, what does that profession look like? And what are the business opportunities in that kind of space? So even something as niche as like, they just happen to be rooming with a horticulturist <laugh> and gave them exposure to a completely different line of work and a totally different economic outlook from somebody who is working, you know, with his hands in the soil Yeah. And, and these naturally occurring, um, opportunities and products.

Mara Zepeda ([34:55](#)):

Totally. And I think to that point, when we talk about sustainability, getting really brass tacks around what we're talking about is these, um, you know, in the world that I sort of come from and have studied around cooperatives and, um, sustainable economies, like you're talking about liberatory technology so that you don't have to rely on global, um, multinational corporations for basic needs is kind of a premise of sustainability. So what is the local community able to provide for themselves? And so you're looking at indicators like food, housing, shelter, water, those baseline subsistence pieces of the economy. Um, and then you're sort of checking it off the list. You know, like, how much does this agricultural land actually feed and sustain this community? Right now it's not a lot. I mean, Walmart is the grocery store in town, and there's a lot of really terrific efforts underway, like the two notch community garden that we saw.

Mara Zepeda ([35:51](#)):

Um, but just asking these basic questions around sustainability and resilience, I think could be so profound given the rich agricultural land that they have and the assets. So a lot of the conversations I've had with some of the art field folks always end up coming back to food as this really exciting area to begin to explore because, um, that will decrease the prices, increase community health by a tremendous

amount. Um, it won't, you won't have to be working so hard to make money to buy \$9 ketchup right from Walmart if you can figure out these different ways, um, of doing this in a more communal fashion. So there's, um, an effort that I'm really deeply involved with in Vermont, um, that is called Shelburn Farms. That reminds me a lot of, of what I could imagine being possible in Lake City. But essentially that's become sort of a world class farm education center, um, where they bring teachers and students to come and learn about sustainability and farm education and regeneration. And so I'm just thinking aloud about how there are existing models of this, especially rooted in, um, food systems and agriculture that could be really valuable

Kasie Whitener (37:01):

And making those connections. And until you get there and see this is, this is what I'm seeing, it's got my mind churning. I I can now connect it to things I've seen in other places or things I've read about in other places. And let's start to make those connections and those resources in the same way that as you're in Columbia Yeah. And you're hearing different conversations around the city and going, Hey, you know what? I heard Al Fuller talking about that. Let's get her in the room with us so that we can have this conversation. Or, Hey, I heard, you know, the folks at the McNair Institute talking about that. Let's get them in the room and have this conversation. And so to go into Lake City, immerse yourself there for two weeks with the students. I mean, of course the 95 to 99% of what we're trying to do is expand their horizons Yeah.

Kasie Whitener (37:45):

And help them to learn to be critical thinkers and understand what they're seeing and, and try to put those things into perspective and then think to the next step, like what happens after this? Um, but a lot of it too is bringing your experience in the room and looking around and going, Hey, I think I know some things that might be able to share here in Lake City when we think about a long-term relationship, the Darla Moore School with Lake City and the economic development experiment that's happening there, and that's what she called it. Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>, it was an experiment, it's a laboratory. Uh, there are opportunities for all of our disciplines within the Moore School to go and find those niche creative things that are happening and then bring with them when they show up this vast amount of resources and knowledge that they have Yep. Where they can say, I saw something like this somewhere else. Let's, you know, bring it into the conversation.

Mara Zepeda (38:37):

Yep.

Kasie Whitener (38:39):

On the second week, <laugh>, we had issued a survey to the business owners and you mentioned this might not be the best time to talk about our fields or to visit with you guys, um, but the survey gave the students the vehicle they needed to go and learn more about the individual businesses experiences. And then that created data that the Art Fields team can use to move forward the Lake City Alliance can use to move forward. What will we do next year? Hmm.

Mara Zepeda (39:07):

I'm so curious to hear from you about your ideas. I mean, the food and hospitality program kept coming up as being a potential key partner, and I know the School of Visual Arts as well, so I could just see, I mean, I know that, um, I guess I tend to go really far, really fast. <laugh> Dean Verma is like one step at a

time, <laugh>. And I'm like, no, but there's, there's okay. But, um, <laugh>, I, I just think it could be so phenomenal to put together some type of multidisciplinary something or other because, uh, there are so many pieces to this puzzle that I think having the mind share of people from the School of Visual Arts and also from the hospitality could just fill out some of the missing gaps that we had because it was clear as we were doing the survey that it's not just business, right?

Mara Zepeda ([39:55](#)):

Like business is the screen through which there's a lot else that's actually happening. Right. So, um, I guess next year it would just be really neat to think about how we make this interdisciplinary. And, um, I would love to think about what the arc of the year looks like and what we can be doing now this summer to begin to prepare the soil for what we end up harvesting next year during Strawberry season. Right. Um, and just beginning to build those relationships. 'cause as you know, from having experienced it yourself this past year, like first you have to just get your body there and go Mm-Hmm. <affirmative>. And then from there, you then have to be the evangelist that's bringing people in <laugh>. That's right. So it's a not insignificant amount of sort of like herding cats, aligning schedules, getting people in their cars. And I'm just so amazed and grateful at, you know, once you were in, you were like all in and you were making the drive every day and you were commuting to Lake City. So,

Kasie Whitener ([40:47](#)):

I mean, I would've stayed on site, but I've got the morning obligation that I had to be here in Columbia for the morning obligation. So we, uh, we're wrapping up here. We're towards the end of our time together on this particular episode of the podcast, but there's still a lot more to unpack as far as Lake City is concerned. What would you say was the key takeaway for you in terms of helping these students to kind of open their eyes to an experience or to build the curriculum around this? A lot of the curriculum was reflective. So after they had experienced something, think back to it, you know, what were the questions that you had and that sort of thing. Um, what would you say was the key takeaway or the thing that you felt like was the, the, the ultimate achievement of this Lake City maymester experience?

Mara Zepeda ([41:25](#)):

I think for me it's that it was a reminder that building momentum is the key function of anything. And so these students got into this cadence where every day they were getting exposed to different people, different ideas, field trip inputs, business owner, multitasking. Now we're in the computer, now we're walking. And you know, especially in this post covid world, there's a desire that people have to be in community to be working together on things larger than themselves. And then to have novelty and momentum. How do you compete with these, you know, little devices in our pockets? Um, it, this is just offering endless novelty. And so when I think about pedagogically creating opportunities for momentum where there can be real change and real transformation, and it's because you're able to construct experiences that are offering like wisdom learning, novelty, and, um, and just those really tight containers of like two weeks of let's go and let's see what we can make possible. And that's possible too in being in partnership with you, um, and kind of bringing shared skill sets together. So for me, I think one thing from a pedagogical perspective that really stuck with me, and especially seeing the way my husband's, um, academic semester unfolds, is there, there seems to be, from my perception on the outside this like, slog, like you're slogging through 16 weeks and they're,

Kasie Whitener ([42:51](#)):

And 16 chapters in a big tome of a textbook that we've been buying every semester. Totally. \$95 a piece

Mara Zepeda ([42:59](#)):

<laugh>. And they're just like, tired. And like this is, they're, I mean, the environment is so difficult right now, I think for educators. And so a huge curiosity that I just came away with is like to what we were talking about at the end, what would a certificate program look like? Or what would something look like where you had these two week sprints where you were completing a project, you were making measurable difference, you had a massive amount of input that you could then begin to chew on and synthesize. And if you could do that seasonally, or if you could do that quarterly to this question about how you create like, seasonal touchpoints that have really high experiential value. And I could just see the transformation in the students and like, there's a lot more synapses that are firing, right? And they're making a lot of connections and it's, it's kind of like a mess of information where you can't say that it's necessarily structured and organized and it's all gonna come out in this one tiny exam or something.

Mara Zepeda ([43:52](#)):

Right. Um, but they feel as though they've, there's a sense of self-efficacy that they've accomplished something and they really like, have gotten their, they've gotten their hands around something. So that for me was just one of the key takeaways is like, what are ways that we can begin to shift some of our, um, pedagogical frames so that we can serve students better, everybody can be more engaged, it can be way more enlivened. And, you know, we had things like students cooking together and them living together. So I'm just so grateful for the opportunity for Sarah and Andrea and you and Jeff and Dean Verma, and Dean Kelly also from the Honors College for taking a chance on this experiment.

Kasie Whitener ([44:31](#)):

It was really tremendous and a great non-linear experience, which I've, you spend so much time in that linear classroom semester by semester, uh, that when you can get into something like this, if you, I think you used the words fully immersive. It's just energizing. And so I'm grateful to you for bringing the opportunity and for organizing, uh, everything that we did onsite in Lake City. I felt like it was a great opportunity for us to learn both of us and then bring a lot of that energy back. So not our last time in Lake City. Definitely not. I'm sure we're gonna be back there doing some more of that. So thank you Mad Zita for being part of this and participating in the Maymester with me and, and opening Lake City for us at the Darla Moore School to experience such a joy. Thank you. This has been Moore Impact. When you learn more, you know more, when you know more, you do more. Thanks for listening.