

reThink ELA Podcast with Ty Baker

Announcer:

Welcome to the reThink ELA podcast, hosted by English language arts teacher, Michelle Waters. Prepare to receive strategies, products, and expert advice tailored to help teachers build social awareness, student agency and voice in their ELA classrooms.

Michelle:

Welcome to the reThink ELA podcast. I'm your host, Michelle Waters. My guest this week is Tyreke Baker, a 21-year-old Oklahoma City media production company owner, and activist. Ty has covered the Black Lives Matter protests, local law enforcement and criminal justice issues in the summer of 2020, 57th anniversary of the March on Washington. He's also collaborated with reThink ELA to create a Time for Change writing project. Ty provided digital mentor texts to help students see how they can use their words or visual texts to make positive changes in their lives. So, stay with us and we'll hear Ty's story after the break.

Announcer:

When it comes to reaching students through literature, finding reliable resources is challenging. Your search is over. reThink ELA podcast is here to provide student-tested, research-based strategies, products, and advice. Here's your host, Michelle Waters.

Michelle:

Welcome back to reThink ELA. I'm your host, Michelle Waters. I am here with Tyreke Baker owner of The Black Times. He's 21 years old and has recently founded this media production company that's based in Oklahoma. Tyreke or Ty was in the middle school where I taught several years ago, and so I remembered him through some of my students. We recently reconnected after he started his production company and I wanted to share his story with you. Ty, if you could just tell me a little bit about your journey to become a media production company owner.

Ty:

First, I would just like to say thank you so much for sharing this space of me. I really appreciate this opportunity, and also all of the love and support that you've given me and The Black Times. I am eternally grateful for that. Just a little bit about the journey. I've always been very active in politics, even at the middle school that you taught at when I went there. I remember I was so outraged about this dress code and I started a little petition to then take to the school board or whatever, and got a bunch of students about ... It was just the whole, like ordeal that later led to me just being very involved throughout the years of me being in education systems.

Ty:

When I got in college, I had a rough patch. I had dropped out right as COVID had started and then I quit my job in that April 2020. Then I was just really depressed and in a very dark, deep place. Then George Floyd had happened. I just watched that video and I saw him take his last breath and I immediately just took to the streets as soon as protests started coming in the after days. It was like, I went out the first day, then I went I out the second day. When I looked up, I was on the ground for 28 days, sleeping in the streets with activists and protestors and demonstrators and community leaders who were calling for change in action. I remember, I believe it was the first week I was interviewing Senator Anastasia Pittman at a protest that was happening, I think in Bricktown and Harkins at a Harkins Theater. She had

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asked me, she was like, "Who are you with?" I was like, "Well, I'm not really with anybody. I'm with myself."

Ty:

That just shook me and that question just rang through my head all day, so when I got home, I was really just thinking. I was like, "I love telling stories through film. I love exposing truths through film, so I don't want to sell my work to anybody else. I want to start something. That's what people who are out there calling for. To start something new, just to change something." So I was like, "Why not be an example of that and start my own company?" I was just thinking, I was like, "Well, what's a really cool name?" I was like, "Well, I want to be like the New York Times, the LA Times." Then it was like, "Well, The Black Times." Like this is the time for the black community to defend itself. We've been at this point for so long so it's just the journey after I came up with the name, it just has been upscale, just amazing opportunities. Yeah. That's just a little-

Michelle:

Absolutely.

Ty:

The beginning.

Michelle:

You mentioned that dress code thing. I think that's how I remember you, because I remember you from back then, and I remember hearing you up and down the hallways in our-

Ty:

I [crosstalk 00:05:00] all on paper and Mr. Baker was helping me edit it and stuff. He was saying like, "No, you should include that." I had got I think like 50 signatures maybe. It was ...

Michelle:

And so...yeah go ahead...

Ty:

And then like I don't... I think my brain, like in the next two weeks, switched to what was new and what we were... A new issue that I felt like it was an injustice in our middle school.

Michelle:

(Laughs) So you were hooked at that point. Like, Hey, what can we do to change things? How can we make things better?

Ty:

Even when I got to the high school, I got involved in the student council and that's where I really got involved in leadership and what it means to be a leader. They have an excellent actually outstanding leadership teacher and math teacher named Christy Cooper who inspires literally thousands of kids to just be the best that they can be and accomplish the dreams that they have and so it's just a lot of the

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things that I use today in my company, myself, come from the educators that I've met throughout my life and middle school and high school, including my mom she's teaches me every day and so on so that's yeah.

Michelle:

So it sounds like you already had an interest in activism and like you said, an interest in telling stories and I know that there are a lot of kids out there that have that interest, but I also know that not all of those kids desperately have a strong mom like you did, and not all of them go to Dell City high school and not all of them have a Christy Cooper who I follow online and have for years and she's amazing I wish I'd had her as a teacher myself. What were some of the specific things that your school and that your teachers did to really support your interest in media production?

Ty:

I wanted... Before high school, I mostly dabbled in putting together old photos we had into the little, I think it was the movie maker that my mom's old laptop had, but when I got into a... My love for making films came once I had got in high school and really saw how advanced iPhone cameras had... Phone cameras had become and work and are and I remember one of the events that we organized at Dell city high school was a leadership conference. And I remember I was like, well, I obviously want to showcase how diverse Dell City high school is. I remember my mom had gotten me this hand gimbal that was like, I think 80 bucks. I just remember like walking in... And I took it to school showing everybody, and I showed Cooper what it did.

Ty:

So I just started taking footage of the school and I was just putting together little clips, showcasing how diverse our school is and all the different textures of beauties we have and all that it was awesome. And so I remember I just...they just let me walk around the school. I mean, they... I struggled academically just because it's not I couldn't do the work. It's just that it didn't fill me and this sort of way that film did and so I think they, they noticed that and they just let me do my, I mean, I don't want to this to be that I walk around the school and not do my work. Of course, they made me do my work, but it was cool. I can see that you do this, but you have to push yourself and make sure you're taking care of your responsibilities.

Ty:

So I just remember walking around the halls around lunch, just taking footage and like asking people if I could video them and then just putting something together then I put it on Facebook and it got like 45,000 views I was just like, and so that right there, I remember that moment I got called to the principal's office and Ms. Hill had told me they had principal there. She was like. "Your video that you posted about Dell City, like got like 30,000 views at the time," I was like, "what?!" And it was like, Whoa, like that feeling that I had that just so many people had seen something that I made. It was just like, I have to do this again. It was just that moment right there had really defined what I thought...what defined me as a filmmaker and as a journalist and just telling stories through film has just always been a powerful way for us to connect as human beings. So...

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Michelle:

Absolutely. It sounds like what the teachers and the schools did for you is notice that you had a passion for something in this case, telling stories through video and then gave you opportunities to use that.

Ty:

And it's also just the other experiences that feed into my movie making and my film editing is just like paging, I paged at the capitol, which if people don't know what that is, it's like a internship in a way for like high schoolers to get to know the legislative process in their state, and you can intern for a week during the legislative session here in Oklahoma. And so I did it junior year and senior year, and it's just that experience right there. It was like, well, I obviously love movies, but I also love politics and I never really knew up until this last year, how I was going to tie that together. I was always just my major in college was political science, but I was also like I love making films I want to learn how to do that stuff.

Ty:

So, what do I do? So last year happened and it just perfectly intertwined with each other, but if I hadn't had those experiences, me and my mom had hit a hard time financially junior year and that was the first time that I was going to page and one of the requirements is you have to wear a suit jacket and those are expensive. We did not have that money. So I remember I asked Cooper, I told her and she was like, "No problem. I have..." She gave me a gift card that she just had in her car. And that moment right there, if I hadn't...if I couldn't have been able to afford that, I wouldn't have been able to gain that experience and get the knowledge that I have now that drives me. So it's just moments like that of educators really reaching out and to some people that may seem like something small, but that was a huge step of opportunity to me.

Michelle:

Yeah, absolutely you know, my story as a writer is similar in that I had teachers who recognized that I had a gift and an interest and then provided opportunities and in my case they called me into the principal's office. The first day of school, I think it was eighth grade year and I'm freaking out all the way there wondering what in the world it is that I have managed to do to get in trouble, and come to find out they were calling me there to tell me to that they wanted me to be on year book staff if I wanted to be on year book staff, then they needed to get that change right now and so I thought, "Okay, well, if you're going to go this far out of your way, I really don't have to lose. Sure."

Ty:

You have to see seize the moment. We only get so many in this lifetime.

Michelle:

Absolutely, absolutely. I went through that experience. I was on newspaper staff. I didn't... Majored in journalism in college and became a newspaper reporter and then did some other things. And, but through all that journey, like you said talking about being able or realizing that you could take your storytelling skills and put that with your interest in politics, you put those two things together. That's what I've done with rethinking LA, putting my writing and my teaching together. I'm thinking that's what teachers need to learn and understand is that we need to look at kids and figure out what their interests are and how they can tie that into their academic life and their real world life.

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Michelle:

So looking at what you've said, you also mentioned that Mrs. Cooper who provided that gift card for you it so actually her support for you went beyond just do your work and here's a opportunity to record something. She made sure that you had that opportunity.

Ty:

Oh yeah. I mean, and that's just one of the moments. There's been multiple moments I can tell you that Cooper has helped me out and just been there for me. But Dell, there was a lot of teachers there that were just dedicated at just making sure their students had a good life or a good time while we were there and really tried to prepare us for the journey that was ahead of us. I mean, and I don't feel like I was prepared enough entering the real world, just because I feel like me personally, I'm the type of person I don't get something through my head unless I experience it myself. So it was really I had this expectation of what my life needed to be like when I first got out of high school, and I just really had to learn that I don't need to know everything at the age of 18.

Ty:

I have a whole life ahead of me, things are just going to come. But what I did try to tell myself with that was all the things that I learned prior to me being 18, I somewhat have to utilize that and see how I can guide myself in the now, not necessarily thinking in the future. I would just always think about everything that I've learned from my mom, from Cooper, from other people in my life before I turned 18 and graduated high school and I just really try to ground myself on that knowledge, not as necessarily seeking knowledge, that's just going to come with me... Come to me with experience. It's, it's that they've, she's done a lot and it's just, she continues to do that for her students. It's... I don't know that type of encouragement from a teacher does that it's special. Yeah.

Michelle:

It sounds like you're saying that your teachers have encouraged you to be a lifelong learner, not only to value what you learned in high school, but also to continue to learn and grow.

Ty:

Yeah and it's okay not to know everything. We're human beings. If we knew everything, there would be nothing to learn and grow from.

Michelle:

Absolutely. So With all that said, what are some things that you would say that teachers, English teachers in particular, can do to encourage students like you to tell your stories and work on promoting positive changes in your communities?

Ty:

I think a teacher has a interesting, a educator in general just has an interesting perspective from a child's view because they look up to you as, as someone who holds knowledge. I feel like that sort of standard, you have to recognize that you, as an educator, you have the power to influence and encourage, but also the power to destroy and dismantle a dream that could change the world. And so I think it's really important that every day you enter that classroom, you're really thinking of your students, not as a

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group, but also as individuals. Think, looking at the certain interests that you may see, maybe this kid is really into art. He's not so strong in math. Maybe I can find a way to incorporate math into art and, and draw his attention maybe, and just really, really know your students.

Ty:

A lot of the best educators I know how to have that personal connection with their students and don't just see them as a number or a statistic I feel like that's really important to make sure that when those, when they go home their life doesn't end, they're still learning things. They're still seeking acceptance. It goes a long way with walking into that classroom and knowing that you're accepted, knowing that you have a place to...knowing that you have the right to be here and learn first off, cause some countries don't ev... Don't even value. They don't even have acce- countries don't give access to education like we do. So I feel like it's important to make sure that they utilize that and making sure that they're just, yeah.

Michelle:

So flipping that coin on to the other side, what advice would you have for students like you who maybe have an idea that they like to tell stories, but they haven't really grown yet to where you are now. What, and maybe they're still in high school or middle school. What advice would you have for them?

Ty:

I would tell them that every single person is a storyteller, it's just about how you tell your story or tell a story. Some people tell their stories through painting. Some people tell their story through creation, like inventions and stuff. I mean, you just, you really have to figure out what fits for you in this lifetime, and don't be afraid to experiment on a thousand different things. I went from playing instruments to then sketching, to painting to videography. It's just my artistry connects itself and it's, they're not [inaudible 00:18:01], but you just, you really have to just put yourself out there and just try different things.

Ty:

If you come across something on the internet and you don't know what it is, take the five seconds to go Google it and learn something today. And also, I would say to them, the internet is the most powerful tool you have right now to learn anything you want to learn. There's no limitations on what you can learn today. If you want to learn how to design t-shirts or make shoes or start a nail c... You can literally do anything, and so it's really just about dedication and consistency. If you have something that you're passionate about, explore it. You just really got to put yourself out there and make sure that your dream comes true. I mean, it's not as hard as it seems.

Michelle:

Absolutely and you say that the internet is very powerful and it's powerful for us, like you said, as learners, and then as consumers, but as you have shown, and as I am working on doing as well, the internet is a powerful tool for content creation and for making change and for not only like global change or community change, but change in our own lives as well. That's something that I saw and wanted to... And what my kids to see is that they can use this tool in order to improve their own lives now, and also in the future.

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Michelle:

And also starting now to recognize what your interests are and what your talents are, and starting to grow that is so important because when that happens, you're going to naturally gravitate to other people who are doing the same thing, which I think happened here in that I saw what you were doing and I had already started an educational publishing company and with that connection, we were able to work together and partner to create a time for change. I've already had some teachers who've worked with that and have helped their students see that they can make changes and they can tell stories.

Ty:

What really excites me about that is that unit that we partnered on that was in the very beginning phases of The Black Times, and me covering what was going on. So I'm excited for any future stuff we do, because there's just been so much that has happened between now and then. Another piece of advice that I can offer to students who want to start a company is telling them that if you have a passion, continue to do that. Don't worry about, well, I can't start a company if finally have one piece of content. Oh, I can't start a company, if I don't have any, any content, don't worry about that. That's going to come to you. I just continued to go out there and do what I loved eventually the name came to me, but not only that I started, I didn't start with a website.

Ty:

I started on Instagram and I just, and then knit... To some people that's like, "Oh, that's just social media," but social media is so powerful. You can connect with activists all around the world. Politicians all across the country I saw that opportunity and I just, every day I told myself I'm going to follow 10 people a day you know, I'm going to see what happens after 30 days, and then people just started following us, like the ACLU of Oklahoma, the Oklahoma Museum of Art, which was...I can't believe that happened, but it's just like, you don't need all the fancy stuff to start something that will last generations. You just got to have that passion and dedication. We just started our website a month ago, but we, our presence has been mainly on social media and people are now starting to know our company's name and stuff you really got to find out a way to do it unconventionally if you don't have those resources.

Michelle:

Absolutely. So figure out what it is that you're wanting to do get started now, even if you don't think you're ready, just get started and go for it and just grow from there. It sounds like what you're saying.

Ty:

Oh, yeah. Because news is there's so much out there. There's so many stories to tell. As within like, I think the second month of like, I think in August, I told myself, I was like, "Well, I always, if I'm going to be a new source here in Oklahoma, I need to know what's happening all across the country." So I went to our Twitter and I followed a journalist in every state, I followed two news publications in every state and I tried to follow as many house or Congressmen in DC and women as I could. Just really knowing that like social media allows you to literally see all across this globe and utilizing that and funneling that as a source of information for your news company, production company, or even just being inspired and being active, I highly recommend it to people.

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Michelle:

Well, is there anything else that you'd like to add? Anything that I have, that I have missed?

Ty:

I just want to say thank you so much for all the work that you've done, even dating back to me being in middle school. I'm really grateful to you and to educators like you. Shout out to my mom, shout out to Cooper. [inaudible 00:23:11] I love them so much. Wouldn't be here without them. And thank you. I really appreciate this.

Michelle:

You're welcome. Thank you for listening to the rethink ELA podcast. Remember you can follow and support us on Apple podcast, Google podcast, Spotify, and Stitcher. You can also find the writing project Ty and I created at: rethinkela.com/atimeforchange.