

Garry Gilliam 00:00:02 I am not going home and holding the Garra Gillum football camp for 300 kids, right? Because maybe one, if one might have a chance to make it to the nfl, but what, what about the other 299? You know, why, why are athletes using their social capital, their networks, their connections to bring resources and opportunities back to their communities? Cuz dude, not everybody's gonna be an NFL player. How can we get the information, the resources, and bring it to the people who need it? Right? So all those questions, all those different things, my different lived experiences are quantified to this. If you have a complaint, you have a career.

Ryan Newman 00:00:39 This is dare to disrupt a podcast about Penn State alumni who are innovators, entrepreneurs, and leaders, and the stories behind their success. I'm your host, Ryan Newman. And on the show today is Gary Gilliam. Gary is the founder and c e o of the Bridge, ecovillage, a sustainable mixed use community ecosystem in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. The bridge ecovillage will feature solutions to many of the problems facing underserved communities. Gary also serves as Executive Vice President of Urban Planning, development and Community Impact for Phoenix Global, a renowned international consulting firm. Prior to launching the bridge, Gary played in the N F L for five seasons. He graduated from Penn State in 2013 with degrees in business development, psychology, and advertising. Gary, thank you so much for joining us on the Dare to Disrupt podcast. Uh, this is a first for us. You are, uh, I believe you're the first professional athlete, but more importantly, you're definitely the first former N F L player to be joining us on the podcast. And so, just wanna thank you for joining us.

Garry Gilliam 00:01:48 Thanks for having me. We

Ryan Newman 00:01:50 Always like to start Gary at the beginning, so if you don't mind, please take our listeners back to where you initially grew up and where you spent your formative years prior to, uh, ever coming to Penn State.

Garry Gilliam 00:02:01 Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Well, I am from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and for those who don't know, Harrisburg is the capital of Pennsylvania. It is not Philadelphia. It is not Pittsburgh. It is right there in the middle in Harrisburg. And my family grew up there. Uh, my mom is the youngest of nine kids. They live below the poverty line. You know, mom and the fam lived in an abandoned row home where they would siphon electricity from their neighbors, would all huddle around in one room with a kerosene heater. Um, you know, mom and her siblings had to do armed robberies, you know, just to get food on the table sometimes. So a pretty tough situation. And unfortunately, uh, that situation was the same when my brother and I, you know, were born. Uh, luckily there were some opportunities. You know, mom did everything in her power to, to make sure she could find places for us to live, just because though Harrisburg didn't have what, what her sons needed, you know, it's a food desert. The local school district has a very low graduation rate. The homeowner occupied rates are, are very low. There's not entertainment options. So just not really a place where you'd wanna raise, you know, your kids. Um, and mom knew that she experienced it. He saw what that did or didn't do for the children, you know, in the neighborhood and in the community. So she did everything she could to find places for my brother and I to hopefully thrive in a better manner.

Ryan Newman 00:03:16 Unbelievable. Well, you said a word there that I know will come up later in our interview in the context of what you're doing today, Gary, but this concept of food desert, can you just describe what that is for our listeners?

Garry Gilliam 00:03:29 Yeah. Food Desert in, in an urban area, that means you have to travel more than a mile to get to a grocery store, you know, which is in and of itself is an issue. Uh, but, but the bigger issue within a food desert is where the food within the food desert even comes from. You know, where is it getting shipped from? Is it being grown locally? You know, is it fresh produce? You know, things like that. So food desert, you gotta travel more than a mile to get to a grocery store, you know, but there are some compounding issues when we, when we talk about food localization.

Ryan Newman 00:03:54 We'll talk about all that more as we get into this. Um, so you're -

-- , you're in a very difficult situation, quite frankly, a situation that many of the folks listening won't even really be able to relate to. I mean, that's extraordinary. Can you talk about how you made it out of that situation long before you even came to Penn State, um, in terms of your educational journey and your housing journey?

Garry Gilliam 00:04:15 Yeah, yeah. So our situation was really bad, um, and kind of a catalyst, I guess, to mom finding a new environment specifically for myself. In, in second grade, Harrisburg school district was trying to skip me up, uh, two grades. You know, I was a kid who would do my work, get an A, and then just kind of start doing what I wanted in class. And, you know, the school district was like, Hey, you know, mom, we gotta find something to keep this kid occupied, essentially. And, and mom didn't want that to happen. She didn't think that if, you know, just by moving me up two grades, w was what was best for her son. So, luckily, 20 minutes down the road was this phenomenal model of a private boarding school founded by Milton Hershey, you know, from Hershey's Chocolate and his wife. Um, now I had no idea that I, that I was going to this school.

Garry Gilliam 00:05:00 And, uh, mom and I pull up to this big white dome called Founders Hall, right in the middle of campus, and it's, you know, marble inside, and there's chandeliers and like gold everywhere. You know, a lot different than what I was used to seeing there in Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. So we pull up, mom and I go in, collect some information, and then we leave and, and we, and we pull up to this mansion and, and there's a playground. There's kids playing, you know, so mom's like, Hey, junior, you know, go play up on the swings. I'm gonna go inside here, grab some things and we'll head home, right? So mom goes in and I'm playing on the swings, and she comes back out and I go to get in the car and she's like, no, junior, you know, keep playing on the swings. I left a few things at Founders Hall, I gotta go grab them and I'll be right back to get you.

Garry Gilliam 00:05:44 So, you know, mom leaves. And I'm like, all right. You know, I have no reason to think otherwise. I'm having a good time. And, you know, it starts getting darker and darker and darker. And his random dude comes out of the student home and he's like, Hey, Gary, it's time for you to come in and, and shower and get ready for bed. And I'm like, you know, where's my mom? Who are you? Stranger danger, talking about showers and beds? Like, I'm out. Right? So I hopped off the swings and start chucking to where mom says she was gonna be at, you know, and this guy's running after me, like, no, Gary, you know, this is your home where your family, your mom signed you over to us, right? And I'm eight years old at the time, right? I have no idea. Mom didn't get me prepped or anything. Um, so very traumatic <laugh>, feelings of abandonment, you know, the first two years being at the school, you know, cry to myself to sleep every single night. Just trying to figure out, you know, do I get to see my mom again? Do I get to see my brother again? Do I get to see my family? Like, did I do something wrong? Did I do something right? Like, why, why am I here? Right? Lots of questions that I eventually started to figure out.

Ryan Newman 00:06:46 Wow. I mean, that is just extraordinary as you're talking, Gary, I literally can, I can picture, I must feel like I'm watching a movie in slow motion. What, I mean, what, what was your c what was your conclusion to all of that? I mean, what was, when you circled back, did you, were you able to get closure on sort of the way things transpired as they did and, and, and sort of make sense of it all? And how did you make sense of it all?

Garry Gilliam 00:07:08 Yeah, so I was, I was able to see my mom again, right? She was able to come up on the weekends or during holidays. So kind of like being in college, uh, definitely different for an eight year old, no doubt. But I started to realize, you know, the kids around me had very similar upbringings that I did. You know, whether their dad was in their life or maybe a sibling was, was doing drugs essentially coming from adverse childhood experiences, you know, as they call them. And that's why we were there, right? The school itself was founded way back in 1909, again, by Milton Hershey and his wife who couldn't have children. So he founded this school for little white orpha --

-- n boys called the Hershey Industrial School for boys through the sixties. Black males were admitted in the seventies, females were admitted. And by the time that I went in the late nineties, it was no longer just for orphans, but again, for families below the poverty line, that's what qualified you to go to this school.

Garry Gilliam 00:07:58 And in order to get accepted, you had to pass this like IQ test to make sure you could handle the curriculum that they were gonna give you. So, luckily I qualified as well as got accepted and start to, to notice that a lot of the kids around me were very similar to me. You know, smart kids driven, you know, just maybe a little off here, there, just need a little guidance, a little, some resources, some opportunities, you know? So I, it didn't help my home sickness though, but I did notice that everybody around me was very similar to me. So I didn't wanna be homesick, right? I didn't, I didn't wanna be crying. I didn't want people making fun of me. You know, I was getting in my student home. I was in, I think third grade, the rest of my house. They were in high school, you know, so just a huge age gap.

Garry Gilliam 00:08:38 So I I ended up getting involved in a bunch of different things, right? I did sports, certainly football, basketball, baseball, soccer, ice hockey, swimming and diving, like a plethora of sports. But I also immersed myself in everything else the school had to offer. So I did ballet, jazz, and tap dance for almost 10 years, right? I learned how to play the piano and the guitar. I was an actor. I was in band, right? I did everything. And I was just doing it to, to legitimately distract myself from not, you know, being at home, being homesick. But the school provided these things very intentionally, right? All the beyond just being this cost-free residential school, providing medical and dental. They provided these wraparound services that really allowed us to be in environments to grow, right? And they called it the whole child approach, which long story short, hit on four different aspects. Mind, body, spirit, and community, right? So education, our health, our spiritual health, mental health, as well as contributing what we've gotten back to the community. So you could kind of see how that would lead into what I'm doing today.

Ryan Newman 00:09:41 Unbelievable. Um, well, before we get to what you're doing today, there's a big part of your story that we've yet to uncover. And so let's start with how you arrived or how you came to arrive at Penn State. Hopefully it was less traumatic an arrival than at the Milton s Hershey School. Can you share with us what that transition was like?

Garry Gilliam 00:09:59 Absolutely. So I had some pretty big decisions to make coming outta high school. Uh, one, because the school itself, when you graduate, they actually provide you with the scholarship. And at the time that I went to the school, whatever college, university trade school you got accepted to, they would pay for the entire thing except for \$2,000. So a huge opportunity coming for, you know, kids coming from these marginalized communities, these experiences. So nonetheless, I had had some choices to make regardless, but I had the added pressure of having a bunch of athletic scholarships and academic scholarships to go to Yale and Princeton, Ohio State, Stanford, right? You, you, you call it, it was there. So I had some requirements though, right? I wanted to be fairly close to home, you know, my family was still poor, so I couldn't go across the country and expect them to be able to come see me play, right?

Garry Gilliam 00:10:49 One, two, uh, I wanted a chance to make it to the nfl. So as much as I might wanna go to a Yale or maybe a Harvard, they're not churning out N F L players, right? And then three, and most importantly, I need my degree to really mean something, right? So I chose to go to the Great Penn State University, right? Joe Paterno was the coach at the time. He had this thing called the Grand Experiment that meant not only would our football program be a top 25 program and come tear you up on the football field, but we'd also be academic. All Americans academic, all big 10 players, we'd graduate over 90% of our athletes uncalled. You know, you don't see that a lot in division one sports, right? So this was the grand experiment, and it sounded a lot like the whole child approach, or on our basketball team, we call it the whole m --

-- an concept. You're more than just an athlete, essentially, right? So the culture is what drew me to Penn State, you know, and all the other things is this, you know, went in line. This was a program where they check classes every day, and if you weren't in class and you didn't practice, and if you didn't practice, you didn't play right. They don't care who you are, you're gonna, you're gonna be on the path to finish your degree. And, and I loved it. So I went to Penn State.

Ryan Newman 00:12:01 Amazing. So you, you arrive at Penn State with your fierce football skills. How do you decide, what was it like adjusting to the football team, and then also how did you decide what course of study to pursue?

Garry Gilliam 00:12:12 Yeah, so luckily Milton Hershey, you know, prepped us a lot for, for both of those answers. One, i i, in the structure, in our schedule at the school, you know, we always had to be up early and do some chores and get the class, and you had your extra co-curricular activities and you had set dinner, right? So that was a, a schedule, which we were used to, you know, the average person may not have that, especially coming from, you know, wherever they're coming from, you know, especially like study hall was used to that. Lock in for an hour, do what I gotta do, and get outta there. And some guys like, dude, what study hall? I don't have any homework to do. Like, you still gotta be there, like, get ahead or read this, or, you know, things like that. So I was already used to that, you know, um, in that case.

Garry Gilliam 00:12:51 And in terms of my, my field of study at Milton Hershey's School, again, when we hit high school, it goes back to its trade roots, right? So they have this continuing education pathways, these, these career technical things that, that you can choose essentially trades, things like carpentry, um, drafting, computer information systems, graphic design, agriculture, health occupations, business, culinary arts. You know, in order for you to get your diploma and qualify for that scholarship, you had to get nationally certified in your trade. So I had did graphic design and video production. At the time, I wanted to be a video game designer, because before that I wanted to be an astronaut and got too big. And I figured if I can't travel to other worlds, I might as well be able to create them in video games. Um, <laugh>, so the graphic design, video production go, so got certified in Photoshop, illustrator InDesign, Adobe Premiere, final Cut Pro, right? All those things. And then as I went to Penn State, I used those skills in one of the, in one of my fields of study. So I triple majored while at Penn State and business development, PR and advertising and industrial psychology.

Ryan Newman 00:13:59 Unbelievable. I also love the fact that you wanted to be an astronaut until you quote got too big. I didn't know that that was a requirement, but I guess to fit in those space suits and into that vessel, that's probably an issue, isn't it?

Garry Gilliam 00:14:11 <laugh>? Yeah. Yeah. You gotta go through the Air Force and they're not, especially making planes just for you to, you know, get your training. So,

Ryan Newman 00:14:18 So you arrive at Penn State, you're this triple major, you've got the program down. The Milton Hershey School gave you a great, uh, uh, foundation for how to, how to really excel. I'm sure we have a lot of football fans who don't need me to ask about your football career, cuz they know it. But can you just, for those who may not be as avid or in tune with, with your football experience, can you just talk about some of your highlights as a football player on the field and, and when did the ability to get to the N F NFL one way or another start to really crystallize for you in terms of your football experience?

Garry Gilliam 00:14:48 My journey to the N F L, we'll call it, uh, choppy, right? A skilled sailor is not made on calm waters. Uh, my mantra is perseverance through adversity. Right? Now, as I already explained, you know, my upbringing was a bit adverse <laugh> compared to most, and it was no different in college, right? So, um, my freshman year I redshirted so I didn't play, and I was a defensive end at the time. And that off season ended up getting switched to tight end. So my red shirt freshman year ended up earning a starting spot as a tight end, which was very tough to do on a Joe Paterno team, right? So I ended up earning --

-- my starting spot as a tight end. I'm catching passes, I'm blocking people. I have a whole fan section called Gilliams Island, you know, like life is good. And October 2nd, 2010, we were playing Iowa.

Garry Gilliam 00:15:37 In Iowa And it was just before halftime, playing tight end, went down the field to make a block, ended up getting engaged in my, my, my knee hyperextended, ended up tearing my A C L M C L meniscus. Part of my patella had three bone bruises cuz of how my knee had bent. Um, and that was supposed to just be two surgeries, one for the M mcl meniscus patella, and then wait for that to heal for about a month, month and a half, and then do the a c l. Now, in between the two surgeries, I'd actually unfortunately developed a staph infection in my bone marrow, right? So now, not only was my career on the line, my life was on the line, you know, and, and all in all, I ended up being out of football. So I don't blame anybody who doesn't know much about me from Penn State.

Garry Gilliam 00:16:22 I was outta football for two years, which half my college football career, right? Um, ended up being five different surgeries, definitely the, the hardest darkest time of my life. You know, they had me on every painkiller you could think of, any hydro oxy, they ended up having me on Dilaudid, which is more commonly known as heroin. Crazy stuff, right? So my mental health is, is starting to deplete. I'm not playing football. I'm to the point where I'm starting to, to believe that hey, C'S get degrees. Like, you know, forget trying to get a a like I've always done, forget going to class. Like, yo, just let me know when the exam is right. So I'm not going to class not contributing to my community. So all in all, I'm just not feeling like a whole man. And I'm like, yo, maybe if I quit playing football, I could still use my scholarship from, from Milton Hershey School, right?

Garry Gilliam 00:17:07 I could still move forward and finish maybe at least one of these degrees. So I called back to Milton Hershey, you know, I called back to Mrs. Debbie Ainsworth, who was actually our, the leader of our religious programs. She was the wife of our athletic director at the time. We had a great relationship, right? She was like, she was like my second mom. So, you know, so I call her and I'm like, Hey, I, you know, the whole woe is me thing, you know, I don't wanna do this anymore. I don't wanna play football. This is a burden. Like I've been a, I've been a whole man, I've been a man of God. Like I don't wanna do this, you know, I, I wanna quit playing football. I just want to maybe get a degree and, and be done with this. And she, and she said some very pointed things, you're not that I hadn't heard 'em before, you know, anything revolutionary, but in the way I was feeling and who it came from in the moment, it just hit.

Garry Gilliam 00:17:51 And she goes, listen. She said, God gives the hardest battles to the strongest soldiers. And what you're currently going through has nothing to do with you. It'll be a testimony though, for the soldiers. You lead one day. So have faith in that control what you can control your mindset and your effort show up every day and you let God take care of the rest. I'm like, whew. You know, get goosebumps every time I say that, you know, and it's, and it's real. And, and it meant a lot. And it was just, hey, control what you can control. God is gonna take care of everything else. Right? You had, you have an anointing upon you, be a vessel for something far beyond your, your wildest imagination. So, so I did, you know, and I didn't have anything else but to lean on, but my faith, because like I said, I was out for two years, ended up having five surgeries, finally come back and my coach gets fired, right?

Garry Gilliam 00:18:38 I was at Penn State when everything went down with the dude. Sandusky never met him, but everything he did affected us <laugh> a lot. You know, they fired our coach, took away our scholarship, they tried to destroy our program. Yeah, well, we stuck together, right? And Penn State is still what Penn State always was, cuz we are, you feel me? So <laugh>, we moved, kept moving, and I eventually changed my positions. Uh, bill O'Brien had come in, I was a tight end, got my starting spot back, but I knew if I was gonna make it to the nfl, I needed to do something a little bit different, right? I was kind of an average athletic tight end at this point. Lost a step for --

-- my injury. You know, had a lot of things in the back of my mind, confidence wise, you know, am I gonna be a good player?

Garry Gilliam 00:19:19 Can I still be a good player? So anyway, ended up convincing Coach O'Brien and let me switch positions my very last year of college. So I moved from tight end now to offensive tackle, which is a very tough position change regardless, let alone your very last year in college, if you wanna make it to the N nfl, not a very smart thing to do. So, switched from tight end to tackle, gained about 40 pounds in about two months. And, um, my first opportunity to get some reps toward my calf muscle and, and missed all the spring ball. So all I had then was training camp to, to, to hopefully get a starting spot. And then I'm getting it, you know, ended up, uh, battling it out and getting that starting spot. Then Bill O'Brien comes up after being in the, in the, in the program for about two years.

Garry Gilliam 00:20:02 And he's like, Hey, Gil, you know, I wanna talk to you. He pulls me in his office and he's like, you know, I've got an opportunity to be a, you know, a head coach nfl. And I'm like, okay, well you, you're not gonna be at Penn State for, you know, 40, 50, 60 years like Joe. He's like, no, <laugh>. This was always a means to an end. So I'm like, all right, well, I actually, at the time, I was trying to figure out if I wanted to stay at the school, not, not to transfer, but I actually had an extra year of eligibility because of how bad my injury was, right? So I'm like, well, do I want to go through another coaching switch? At this point, I had finished all my degrees. I was thinking about getting my b or starting an MBA program on the school scholarship, but coach was leaving.

Garry Gilliam 00:20:42 So I eventually decided to take my shot to the nfl, declared late for the N F L, didn't get invited to the combine. All I had was the pro day where I went battled, put up some of the best numbers across the country at my position. Didn't matter. The draft came and the draft went right. Nobody wanted me, except a lot of people wanted me, no one wanted to draft me, but they wanted me to come to their rookie mini camps, right? Try out, which was cool with me cuz I, all I needed was my foot in the door, right? Just need one opportunity, one blade of grass to get in there and I, and I can make it happen. So I literally got an invite to almost every rookie mini camp <laugh>, except for the Texans where Coach O'Brien was at <laugh>. Go figure. So I ended up, uh, going to Seattle who, um, who had just won the Super Bowl.

Garry Gilliam 00:21:30 You know, they had drafted a few guys at my position, they had some all-pro guys at my position. Probably not reasons you'd want to go to a team as an undrafted guy, right? But that's exactly the reason I wanted to go. And I could tell that undrafted guys low round draft picks, like they, they made a career in Seattle. Guys like Doug Baldwin, Jermaine Curse, Russell Wilson, right? Bobby Wagner, Richard Sherman, like that was the core of our team. And, and we all came from some things, right? Some grit as the team called it. And, and that was me. So I think I fit right in with the culture, right? So I, I tried out and, um, just knew that I was about to get cut <laugh> because my job is to block somebody. And that first practice, I don't think I blocked one person, right? Half the practice, I was on the ground, my confidence was shot, I was running the wrong way, messing up the snap count, you know?

Garry Gilliam 00:22:19 But I knew that it could only go up from there. So right after practice, I grabbed coach and I'm like, Hey, I know I made a a lot of mistakes today. Um, but if you could pick just a few that I can work on right now, I'd like to do that. You know, I can promise you I won't make the same mistakes tomorrow. Just gimme an opportunity. Did that every day after practice, every day before practice. And when it was all said and done, and, and I picked my head up, ended up making that team right, beating out these Super Bowl champions and all pros and 10 year vets and draft picks, right? Young g Harrisburg, Pennsylvania went to Milton Hershey, who's only ever had one other N F L player, right? Penn State missed half my career with a crazy injury, almost a life-ending injury to go undrafted to be right here to make the team right. But it is that what Mrs. Ainsworth was, was saying is that the testimony is that the test to --

-- the testimony is that the mess to the message is, is that the full story? Because as far as I'm concerned, I'm a bench warmer and I'm so far down the depth chart as an offensive tackle that I'm playing tight end again, right? Which comes to help us in, in, in, in a big way

AD 00:23:24 Each spring. Penn State Startup Week powered by PNC connects students with innovative alumni and pioneers who are achieving success in a variety of industries and disciplines. Throughout the week, students discover, explore, experience, and celebrate entrepreneurship. Ways to get involved include sponsorship, speaking at an event, judging a startup, pitch competition or becoming a mentor. To find out how you can get involved, contact us@startupweek.psu.edu.

Ryan Newman 00:23:59 So after the Seahawks, you find your way on the 49ers. So what is the path from the Seahawks to the 49ers?

Garry Gilliam 00:24:05 Yeah. So Seahawks, my rookie year, um, N FFC championship game comes around, we're playing the Packers and getting smashed 16 zero. And coach comes up to me on the sideline, he goes, Gil, you ready? And I was like, yeah, field goal. And he goes, no, Charlie Brown. And I was like, no way. Right? N FFC championship game as a rookie, Charlie Brown was an opportunity for me to score touchdown, right? So we call it the defenses lined up perfectly. They play it perfectly. My man, John Ryan floats the ball, scored a touchdown as an offensive tackle in the N FFC championship game. Wow. Crowd goes crazy. And this touchdown ended up being the catalyst for one of the greatest comebacks in N F L playoff history, right? Not just because of the deficit we overcame, but the way we did it, right? This fake field goal to an offensive tackle had a two point conversion, third and fourth and long conversions onsite kick recovery when everybody in their mom knew we were kicking onsite kick, right?

Garry Gilliam 00:25:04 Just to go in the overtime to win the toss check Cobra on a zero blitz, Jermaine KE scores a touchdown. And we're going back to the Super Bowl my rookie year, and I was a huge part of that, right? So huge opportunity. We go to Super Bowl to play Tom Brady and the Patriots who we're actually taking care of rather nicely we're down in the one yard line, you know, the play where we should hand it off to old Marshon Lynch beast mode <laugh>. But Coach Outsmarts himself and decides he wants to throw the ball, <laugh> it is intercepted under one yard line and we lose the Super Bowl, right? But long story short, ended up being in Seattle for a, a few more years where I did earn a starting spot as an offensive tackle, and then earned a couple more contracts down there in San Francisco with the 49ers, uh, Kyle Shanahan and the, and the gang. And, um, retired in 2019.

Ryan Newman 00:25:56 This brings us to a really interesting point. As part of doing our research for you, we were, we looked at your Instagram page, and one of the things that's interesting is one of the quotes that you have pinned on your Instagram page, and it says the following, no one is going to stand up at your funeral and say, he had really a really expensive car. And great shoes don't make life about stuff. So, Gary, talk to us about after the nfl, what inspired and motivated you to go in a dramatically different direction in founding the Bridge

Garry Gilliam 00:26:31 Man. So we'll take you back in time to my time at Milton Hershey School, and I had two big questions. One, <affirmative>, where are the rest of the Milton Hershey School campuses, right? Because this school has a ton of money and this is a great model and a great campus. Where are the rest of them? And moreover, question two, where are the other towns like Hershey, right? Like, where's Coca-Cola's town? And, and where's McDonald's town? Like a Yo Elon, Jeff Bezos, what's up, where's your town at? Right? Because Milton Hershey realized it was more than just creating places to work, right? This chocolate factory, but he created an ecosystem for his workers, created places to work, eat, live, learn, play, right? Hershey Park, Hershey Theater, Penn State, Hershey Medical Center. Eventually he built homes, provided jobs, right? And, and what that has yielded to this day are some of the highest property values in the state of Pennsylvania.

Garry Gilliam 00:27:28 Some of the lower cancer rates, one of the highest graduation rates of a local public high school. It's --

-- an international destination, a global brand, and with what I'm most proud of, the largest educational endowment in the world, right? Beyond Harvard, beyond Yale, is Milton Hershey School. So when we talk about people, planet, profit, philanthropy, perpetuity, right? This true legacy, Milton Hershey and his wife laid the blueprint over 100 years ago in 1909, right? So what are we doing? So why aren't these other corporations investing intentionally in the UNF infrastructure there communities, right? This pays off in a very, in a very good way. So those are the two questions. Go to the NFL right? Play in Seattle and then play in San Francisco, down in San Jose, actually in Silicon Valley. And in question number two comes right back, right? Where, where are the, why aren't these corporations investing into the infrastructure of their communities?

Garry Gilliam 00:28:22 Cuz in Seattle there's a huge homeless problem and lots of drug use. San Francisco, same thing. People can no longer work where they live and live where they work. There's no middle class. If you make below \$160,000, that's considered low income in San Francisco, right? So now the mi there's no middle class. So the middle class is living in low income homes. What about the actual low income individuals, right? They no longer have homes to live in. Turns out. Little nod to the psychology degree, not that you need one to understand Maslow's hierarchy of needs, right? Before we can start talking about education and leadership and contributions to your community, well, we gotta take care of some of these basic needs, but we don't talk about what happens when you don't take care of those physiological needs, right? What happens when you don't provide shelter and food and, and security, right?

Garry Gilliam 00:29:09 Well, humans, we look to change our state of mind, right? We don't wanna deal with the cold, we don't wanna deal with the hunger, we don't wanna deal with the lack of contribution or commitment to your family or community. So how do we change our state? Unfortunately, drugs and alcohol, right? So the two are going hand in hand. I don't think I've ever seen a homeless person in Hershey. So again, why aren't these corporations investing intentionally in infrastructure to their community? And moreover, what's up with my athletes? Why are we only coming home and holding football camps, right? I'm not not going home and holding the Garry Gilliam football camp for 300 kids, right? Because maybe one, if one might have a chance to make it to the nfl, but what, what about the other 299, right? Their mom and dad and Uncle Charlie think that they touched my hand.

Garry Gilliam 00:29:53 They got the juice, right? Like, like space jam. But like, I met a lot of broke athletes, never met a broke plumber. You know, why? Why aren't athletes using their social capital, their networks, their connections to bring resources and opportunities back to their communities? Cuz dude, not everybody's gonna be an NFL player. Not everybody's gonna be a rapper. They definitely shouldn't be drug dealers, but there's interest across the spectrum. How can we get the information, the resources, and bring it to the people who need it, right? So all those questions, all those different things, my different lived experiences, all ified to this. If you have a complaint, you have a career, right? Identify a point of pain and provide a product, a good, or a service or a model for set issues. So that's what the bridge is. It was a bunch of different business plans that had actually written up through business school.

Garry Gilliam 00:30:40 Bunch of points of pain that I thought I had solutions for and lived in solutions for, right? Milton Hershey School, Penn State, you know, why are these athletes not investing in their communities and their education? You know, they weren't involved in the same things that I was involved in. Nobody's walked in my shoes in that way, right? So with that said, how do we bring that model forward? How, how do we get corporations to invest in this way? How do we get athletes to bring things back to their communities beyond athletics? Well, first you start to do it. So what the bridge does, <laugh> is acquire properties like schools, malls, warehouses, shopping centers, or just land and convert them into these 15 minute cities, if you will, a mixed used eco village. Our eco villages have spaces to go figure, work, eat, live, learn and play a --

-- mini version of Milton Hershey and Hershey, Pennsylvania, if you will.

Garry Gilliam 00:31:34 So these properties, we take these schools and provide office spaces, co-working spaces in the workspace. Eat is, is farming and restaurants live is housing, this is low income housing, veteran housing, senior housing, and market rate housing. So a true village, the learn aspect is education, teaching people how to use the spaces, right? Promoting self-sufficiency. So how to start businesses, how to farm, how to own real estate. And then the play branch providing outlets for people, right? So entertainment spaces, uh, virtual reality concerts, things like that. So instead of complaining about the dirt bikes, the ATVs, let's provide an outlet for that community, right? So we take all those things together by the spaces, provide the programmatic activities, and it creates a system, right? The bridge, we call that systemic empowerment.

Ryan Newman 00:32:24 Systemic empowerment is as opposed to systematic oppression, which is something you also speak about. Um, so can you talk about your, your capital model? I assume that a re what you're describing requires a tremendous amount of capital and the portion of which you're able to maybe get through state assisted programs or grant verbatim programs versus private investment.

Garry Gilliam 00:32:46 Yeah, so a true public-private partnership, I like to call it capital stack lasagna, right? So I'm a I'm gonna say a bunch of stuff, but I promise you it makes sense. So there's Reg D and rag A funds, essentially just private offerings to bring in some accredited and unaccredited investors on the private side. On the public side, we've got different tax credits and grants, tax credits. We've got low income housing tax credits, new market tax credits, veteran housing tax credits, grant wise, I mean, there's grants for a plethora of things, whether it be infrastructure or programmatic, um, different bonds. You can go out public muni bonds, green bonds, sustainability bonds. You've got your traditional institutional debt or construction loans. And then what we like to bring in, you know, are corporate engagements or corporate sponsorships. You know, I've played in a lot of stadiums that have company names on them. Well, hey, how about you put your name on something that's engaging and helping the community in a positive way, right? Maybe you're not gonna go out and build the town of Hershey, but you can invest intentionally into the infrastructure of the community you're pulling your workforce from.

Ryan Newman 00:33:47 Incredible. And so where are you today and what's your vision of where you want to be in the future?

Garry Gilliam 00:33:53 Yeah, so we're currently under construction, Harrisburg. That Eco Village is looking to be complete sometime in 2026. That is a phase construction that will have parts of the, the campus coming online before then. Um, currently working up in Bridgeport, Connecticut, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, uh, forest Park, Georgia, lake County, California, a few places like Nigeria, Zambia and India also right across around the world now. And, um, establishing a pipeline. And, and what we realized was, was from Covid that really ramped up the availability, unfortunately, of these schools, malls, warehouses, and again, municipalities are looking for their highest and best use. And a lot of times they've reached out to us like, Hey, look, we have a property. We've actually got funding grants, tag credits that could go toward this. We just need the team to execute it. Right? And that's where the bridge comes in, that we facilitate those public-private partnerships, bring in the community organizations, uh, bring in the, the glocal residents to, to aid in what that design looks like. And then we implement it from design to build to filling the, the operation.

Ryan Newman 00:34:57 So in a, in a, in a tr uh, to use a, an industry term or is, is the eco bridge actually asset light, meaning that you don't actually own the underlying real estate, you're really providing all of the infrastructure as a service? Or would you say you are a real estate developer?

Garry Gilliam 00:35:10 Yeah, no, a real estate developer, we are, we do own the properties and then the other corporations operate the spaces within it.

Ryan Newman 00:35:16 That's, that's fantastic. It's, it's amazing to, to think of where you've started from, where you've come --

-- , and the way in which it's been full circle really speaks to that community part of mind, body, and spirit, um, in that, in that those four tenets from Milton s Hershey School, it's really incredible. Well, I, I'd now like to turn the questions over to Carlton. Carlton Jarmin is a fourth year student in a five year bachelor's and master's accounting program at Penn State. He was the co-founder of SRE ai, a software to decrease the frequency of misdiagnosis of severe mental health concerns. Carlton, I'll now hand the interview over to

Carlton Jarmon 00:35:55 You. Thank you. So Gary, just wanna say it's awesome getting a chance to talk to you. I can tell the passion that you have for building up these communities, uh, as another Mil Hershey student. I know everything you're talking about, you know, like, um, I'm not sure I can put as eloquently as as you did, but I also grew up in like a challenging environment and face a lot of financial crises and, uh, different family curies like that. Um, so Moon Hershey definitely made a big impact on me. There's so much to talk about. You talked about a lot. I know you mentioned that the, the schedule that we had, um, set forth from Moon Hershey School, we had to do the chores in the morning and, um, we had to get up early for class and, uh, we had a really set schedule as a part of being in Monterey school. Uh, what was it like actually transitioning from that lifestyle into, uh, Penn State?

Garry Gilliam 00:36:42 Yeah, well, I felt as though we had an advantage and do have an advantage. One, I knew how to wash my own clothes and cook my own food. And theres plenty of people in college that don't know how to do that because their parents have coddled them their entire life. I do believe that the adversities that we faced, one to get into Milton Hershey School and at Milton Hershey School is the same weight on the bar that makes us stronger in life, right? And being at Milton Hershey or, and then going to Penn State confirm that, especially with our schedule, right? I was used to it. I was used to a structured schedule. Most kids that leave Milton Hershey go into Penn State or into their collegiate career and don't have structure. My structure got reinforced because I was a, a football player, right? So we still had to be up at 5 45 for workouts, still had to be in class and had to be at our meals and check, you know what I'm saying?

Garry Gilliam 00:37:31 So it was the same thing. So Milton Hershey just kind of prepared me for being a division one football player with the schedule, you know, with check in classes and having study hall and study hours and having to ble be places and, and a lot of the other kids weren't used to that, you know? So I was used to it football player wise. And then, like I said, just family and consumer science if you were knowing how to cook and then clean and sew, just basic things like the average cat at the university wasn't doing it, and it was very apparent.

Carlton Jarmon 00:37:58 No, that, uh, that makes sense. I I've noticed that myself whenever I entered in my freshman year. Definitely agree on that front. So this is something I'm curious about as well. How have you cultivated your personal and culture identity in light of the dichotomy between the success that you've found now and business, uh, real estate, athletics, uh, per, uh, public speaking versus the challenging start that you begin with?

Garry Gilliam 00:38:22 Yeah, what comes to mind is, um, crabs in a barrel, right? And we oftentimes hear about this crabs in a barrel mentality. And, and for those who of of you that don't know it, if you put a bunch of crabs in a barrel, you don't have to put a a top on it because anytime a crab starts to get out, another crab pulls it down, right? And a lot of times we think about our urban centers or our marginalized communities, our black communities as kind of these barrels and crabs. So for me, I was always like, whoa, why? Why are the crabs in a barrel in the first place? Right? They belong in the ocean, right? So, so to me that's a system has been put in place to keep people oppressed, right? Certainly their mindsets, like we talk about gerrymandering and, and redlining, like those things limit people's opportunities to grow generational wealth and own a home.

Garry Gilliam 00:39:05 And people can refinance a home to invest in businesses or to invest in their children's education, right? So some of these opportunities th --

-- at have been limited based off of a system that was in place, as you get older and educated, you start to see, oh wow, that's what happened. So then we go back to crabs in a barrel, right? If a crab ever has made it out, a professional athlete, a doctor, a lawyer, in most cases, they're not bringing a ladder back to the rest of the crabs. They're not breaking the barrel so they can go to the ocean and be abundant, right? And the resources they have. So that's really the driving force behind the bridge is forget a ladder, we gonna build a whole bridge outta this thing, right? Let's provide the opportunities, the resources we've got, the models, the technology. Like having weak links in our community as a species is not beneficial to anybody. The solution to maybe an asteroid coming from Deep Space is inside the head of, of an astrophysicist on 17th Street who never got the opportunity to develop her mind because she wasn't exposed to it, right? Like we're, it's a disservice to, to us as, as beings, to not provide the resources for everybody. Because when we talk about inclusion, like that's real, like, like solutions are in people's heads that can't get it out because they're not educated at this point. And that's a, that's a detriment to, to we as a species.

Carlton Jarmon 00:40:17 I completely agree. Um, I was act, this is actually something I'm passionate about myself. Uh, I just wanna say I personally understand where you're coming from there and I wish you the best with, uh, the work you're doing with the bridge.

Garry Gilliam 00:40:27 Thank you.

Carlton Jarmon 00:40:28 For sure. Thanks.

Garry Gilliam 00:40:29 Absolutely.

Ryan Newman 00:40:31 That was Garry Gilliam, founder and c e o of the Bridge ecovillage. If you haven't already, be sure to subscribe to dare disrupt wherever you listen to podcasts and look out for next month's episode. Thanks for listening.

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