Al Motley (00:01)

Most technology teams at that time were just sitting back in their check team waiting for tickets to come in, help desk, keep the Wi-Fi up, and fix computers. But that didn't feel right. It felt like we had to engage sitting in classrooms, partnering with the academic team in a way that we were really enabling their work.

Ryan Newman (00:23)

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 Al Motley. Al is the founder and CEO of Techademics, a technology company focused on innovation in education, social impact philanthropy, and the nonprofit sector. Al also served as the CTO for Matchbook Learning, a charter school management company

as Chief Information Officer for Philanthropy, an impact-focused fintech company, and as a technical advisor for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation. Al studied management science and information systems at Penn State. And Al, this is the first for us. You're the first entrepreneur we've had on who's from the educational technology space. Thank you so much for being here.

Al Motley (01:14)

It's great to be here. Thank you.

Ryan Newman (01:15)

I'd like to start as we normally do, which is at the beginning. So if you could take our listeners back to those early formative years, where you grew up, early influences.

Al Motley (01:24)

Well, for me, I was born in Chester, Pennsylvania, which is right outside Philadelphia. Chester, you don't know, is a small town, which is actually the first town founded in Pennsylvania in the early days, and William Penn actually landed there. It's had so much restoration and change over the years, but I'm proud there. My father's from there, and immediately after that, then the family moved out through the age of one to Mississippi, surprisingly. My mother's from there, and...

We decided to just do a more different lifestyle. And from there, my two brothers and my sister were born. And my family moved down there. They actually built the school within the first couple of years while in Mississippi. And I think that was one of my early, early really ~ insights into education

forecasts that we're not getting into in the past. My pathway to many stops, I grew up in many cities because my dad did turnaround housing work. So he would work and be deployed to a different city.

really helped turn around properties, really helped to really get engaged with communities. And really that led us to really bouncing around from places like Mississippi to Dallas, Texas, Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, and then Philadelphia as well. So my pathway involved many schools, as you can imagine, in consistency around how going to different schools and challenging as well, because when you work at turnaround housing, you live where you're working and therefore you may be around schools that are underfunded and

maybe not performing as well. So my background is really around trying to innovate and be a student in spaces where there might have been different opportunities as well and then challenges at same time.

Ryan Newman (03:02)

So you said three siblings, right? you're- As the oldest, was it kind of incumbent upon you to really demonstrate courage each time you went into a new community and you had to start a new school and- Yeah. And did that leave you with a couple bumps and bruises along the way? Because I'm sure that's not easy in terms of initial touchdown.

Al Motley (03:04)

That's a great point, Ryan. think if I were something so I'm the oldest of four, but we're all between myself and the youngest. We're five years apart together. So I look at as tight siblings, but they really have looked at me as older than I see myself. One, because of the unfortunate, my mom passed when I was 10. So I had to really early step. Wow. At 10 years old, I mean, she was 29 years old. She had a past of breast cancer. And what that did was really propelled me to

Ryan Newman (03:40)

When you were ten, your mom passed away.

Al Motley (03:49)

really grew up really fast and really worked with my siblings to really help support my father as a single parent at that point. We moved from down south back up to the northeast to Philadelphia area.

Ryan Newman (03:59)

And how did you, how did you find school? I mean, was it a school hard? Was it easy? Cause you're moving from place to place. You've got different academic standards across the country. What was that?

Al Motley (04:08)

Yeah,

I found school easy but not engaging. I would say I was an average student in my K through 12 experiences. But one of the things I learned more recently as I look back at the data as I've gotten to the sector is that I went to, because of the work my dad did, I went to some of the most challenging schools academically in the country where they were under resourced, didn't have a high teacher-student ratio. So I found school and really

a place where I didn't have the right support that I probably needed, but also a place where I can just imagine. I was pretty quiet at that point. I was pretty to myself, but school was always fascinating to me. And then something where I knew, I always thought about the different pathways depending on if had different school experience. But because of that, what's the problem now? I would bounce to different schools. You'd almost start over really like Groundhog Day between the data, who I was as a student, the data, how information would process between schools.

And this is back in the eighties going into nineties as well. Then we're still seeing some of those challenges, but school for me was okay, the best, but I'm engaged in a really energetic and excited learner, but probably not as engaged as I probably could have been.

Ryan Newman (05:21)

You end up in the Northeast Harrisburg perhaps, Chester, and you've got to make a decision about where to go to college. How do you decide on Penn State and what's it like when you first step foot on campus?

Al Motley (05:29)

Wow, that's a great question. So I applied to many different places. I moved from Harrisburg, Pennsylvania. I was at the Aalto High School. And then my dad made the decision to move me back to Chester for my senior year, a place I hadn't been since age one. At that point, I applied to different schools and I was going to actually go to Hanford University. And then I was looking at Georgia Tech. Then I applied at Penn State because my older cousin was there. Her name was Rhonda. She was an engineer. She was a senior at Penn State.

She told me to apply. She said she had a good time and it was something that she really loved. What's interesting is that when it came to those financial packages, Penn State really stepped up at that point and really, I remember a really amazing ~ interview with a woman named Dr. Lee. She came down to Philadelphia. She interviewed me and really tapped into something in me that really, that I maybe didn't even see it myself at that time. And then she convinced me to come along with the Making Sense Financial. So I actually went.

decided to go to Penn State and never visited the campus. You had never visited? Never visited the we really... Exactly. It gave me a good word and also just making it feel safe and making me be able to take that leap as well.

Ryan Newman (06:31)

continue to thank Rhonda.

So arrive at Penn State, you're new to trying new things, experiencing new things. I'm sure your siblings back at home are missing their big brother out for sure. And what do you get involved in initially? What were some of the early formative experiences at Penn State?

Al Motley (06:52)

Penn State for me was, it was an eye-opener on what the world could look like. It was ~ between just at that point, we're talking about the late 90s, what was happening on campus, all these organizations, international appeal of students. So I immediately hit the ground running where before in highest K through 12, I was pretty shy to myself.

I unlocked myself in a way that I didn't even see coming. I was super involved. I joined historically black fraternity, Kappa Alpha Psi as a freshman. What that did was put me on a trajectory of just really, really embodying what leadership could look like for me and personalizing it. So from there I joined, I became the chair of the university park allocation committee to UPAC. At that point, we reimagined what it like to do speaker series and events and how to use the student activity field at that time.

I joined elected student leaders. So we were meeting with the university president at that time. I became the chair of IFC, the fraternity council. And then at that point I worked for the admissions office and it all culminated with, I think there was about an eight year run where I was on the cover of Penn State application in the early 2000s. And so for me, that balance of really social opportunities, connection, human connection, and also people in the diversity Penn State really brought.

was something that really set me on a trajectory of really feeling who I was, then the leader I could be, and then also what was really important to me where I would eventually go into my career.

Ryan Newman (08:22)

And so you have this amazing experience at Penn State, get involved in immerse yourselves in all sorts of things, really find your leadership stride. Now you graduate at that moment. Are you already thinking, I want to become an entrepreneur? Are you already knowing you want to do something with education? What were those early moves like post-Penn State?

Al Motley (08:40)

Yeah. One of biggest things that Penn State that happened was me, without having a lot of technical experience, going to the Center for Academic Computing and convincing a couple of the hiring team there to hire me as a computer lab consultant. So I would work in product lab overnight. I would have worked in all these different computer labs there. And without being able to technology, I convinced them that the customer service side, the people in the relationship side, would outweigh my gaps in technical know-how.

And they actually, they bought it, they hired me and I worked there most of my time I was there when I was at Penn State. That really unlocked me thinking about what it meant for technology to be a big part of supporting student success and what was happening. And at that time, Penn State was far ahead of like building really an ecosystem within the university or some of technical infrastructure. So with me just knowing how to use a door email and download songs on Napster.

Then in doing that, I was really problem solving in a way that I really just seeking information before Google, before AI in a way that really did that. So as I left Penn State, my first job was at back in the high school that I graduated from because I knew they were tad challenges in technology. And so I went to go work there for a year and it was challenging. And so that was my big first entree into the corporate world and what it meant to try to make change, but hitting roadblocks. So that really set me on a pathway because from there I went to Comcast and worked there. It really got that corporate experience. But then I had this itch in trying to figure out how I could have impact and do technology at the same time. So I then took that leap and really got a job at a, where at one point, when Matthew charter schools, when they had one school, but they were looking to expand pretty aggressively.

Ryan Newman (10:25) So what was it, Al, about having this interest in technology, but not actually knowing technology? What was it that really compelled you to really kind of lean forward and make

the case why they should hire you? What was that early instinct or vision that you had? Where did that come from?

Al Motley (10:43)

Yeah, that's a great question. I'm thinking for some reason I knew that the intersection of technology was going to be important. And I've always been curious. I did a program at Swarthmore College with the Smith Klein Beecham program where I just shadowed an engineer and a professor there. And he would talk to me about technology. That's where I played with my first Mac computer. And that really just instilled this curiosity, I think, that stayed with me in knowing how do we things more efficient, how technology can be really

useful to helping just either learning content or curriculum be supportive. So I'm not sure what it was, but I was steadfast on it. was unapologetic on it. And in a way that I'm just happy that I went down that pathway because with me getting access, that was really big. Didn't have that opportunity to really ~ capitalize off of it.

Ryan Newman (11:35)

Talk about this time at the charter school and the learnings that you had there and you talk about your time in corporate America. What was it about the charter school that really appealed to you and what were some of the greatest learnings you had that led you on your entrepreneurial journey from there?

Al Motley (11:49)

Yeah, it was at a unique time. Philadelphia School District was doing a turnaround portfolio. They were converting three to eight schools a year to charters in a very aggressive way. And then the Marashree Charter School at that time had one school, but they were going to add three schools a summer for second of years. So I look at that as opportunity to see what scale looks like, what does change management look like, and also how to build a team in a very fast, aggressive way. And also that school was really around how do you take a failing school in Philadelphia?

and really turn around aggressively with either teacher pipeline, good curriculum, then relationship building with kids as well. So I looked at it as having impact in the city I was living in at the time as well, because a lot of the kids were, they looked like me and they were really needing something to really get that spark and change that they were seeing. So I was really excited about that because that gave me really one of my first good opportunities around leadership in the corporate space, but also really learning about what it meant.

educate kids in the proper way technology can support that as something that supports the academic offers, the teachers, the administrators, and the work they were doing.

Ryan Newman (12:58)

Accelerate ahead through all of your work experience. What was the moment where you said, I'm going to do my own thing and where, how was tech address really born and where did it really kind of spawn from?

Al Motley (13:06)

Yeah, I say I'd been there for about five years or so. Then we started running these pilots to try to do some work around personalized learning at that time. And I just, once we started doing it and I worked with the teachers and the administrators to really build out this prototype and testing that, that really triggers something in me in a way that the creative side, most technology teams at that time were just sitting back in our tech team waiting for tickets to come in, help desk, keep the wifi up and fix computers.

But that didn't feel right. It felt like we had to engage sitting in classrooms, partner with the academic team in a way that we were really enabling their work. After I saw that pilot, I decided to take a risk and just leave that organization and go to a new startup and travel from Philadelphia to Newark, New Jersey every day. was driving, I was catching the train, but I said this new school was going to be opened up and really right across the street from City Hall in Newark.

And the model was so exciting around teacher rotations, students really getting personalized learning plans and IEP for all. That really gave me, opened my eyes about what could be possible in this and really forecasted what some of the things we're seeing today.

Ryan Newman (14:17)

And so when you think about having that single point of entry in terms of Newark and then trying to build and scale, how did you take that one approach to what you experienced in Newark and then kind of broaden it beyond just that?

Al Motley (14:28)

Yeah, as I was traveling a lot then, I got my first taste to go on education conferences as well. I saw that a lot of the schools were so dependent on vendors and also schools and philanthropy can't do the investment in the technology, truly disrupt and change. We're relying so much on the market and

also the ed tech sector. So I saw so many gaps as I was talking to peers nationally. And what that really unlocked to me is that schools need more help. There's also.

the relationship between K through 12, and higher ed. There's this intersection there where there's connection, there's connection and need because they're all supporting each other, but they're still working within these silos and islands. So at that point, I had formed Techademics just for me to be as something that I actually formed it and sat there for two years. And really me thinking about when was the right time? What was the work I was going to focus on? But then.

I was doing that work and then we were expanded to Indianapolis. And also the biggest lever was my daughter was born in 2016. And I knew I couldn't travel as much. knew that I needed to really be there and really support my wife, Maria, during my, at that time. And that really pivoted me to become an entrepreneur because I just forced myself to take a risk. I was afforded that risk because my wife, Maria, she had a good job. She was able to be able to let me to.

have that flexibility, but I just dove right in at that point and then started doing the academics work in a way that really was trying to build off my work around the intersection between technology and academic and pedagogy and what's best for kids and learners and educators. And that really, that was the sweet spot. It seems so basic and simple and so common sense. For some reason, it just was a gap. had technologists using new technology, trying to work in education.

But it wasn't a lot of convergence of the two at that time. We were seeing a little bit more, but that really was what got me excited and decided to make Take That League.

Ryan Newman (16:33)

So we sit here today, what is the primary solution product slash service that you're providing to the marketplace in Techademics and what is the benefit to the customers with whom you're serving?

Al Motley (16:44)

Yeah, right. So I think that's evolving. Right now, and what we've been focused on is really being that strategic thought partner, being that advisor, consultant, a fractional chief technology officer, chief information officer for the social impact sector. That's schools, that's districts, that's charter schools, that's nonprofits, and also that's entrepreneurs in the different sectors.

I think that's around the technology that supports learning goes cross-sector because we're all lifelong learners in some way. So the work we're doing now is supporting them to really make sure technologies at the center of their work to meet the moment we're in right now, whether it be AI

forward or whether it be around data or really around growth. So we're doing that across three main areas, really advisory and strategic consulting.

We're also doing data work very extremely. So we're building data warehouses, we're building data dashboards, we're building data architecture. And really the most important part, we're focused on data culture and organizations. Like how to really focused on what are the changes you would make based off the data in your day-to-day work, right? Not just collecting data or bringing it together, but what are you going to do to change practice, change management? What's going to make a decision different with the data that you're presented to and how to make that sustainable as well.

And the last piece is we're really focused on building products, the products we need today for the learning we want to do and have learners at the center of that. So we have around 65 engineers across the world now, all across the U S virtually teams in Vancouver and Toronto team in, in other parts of the world as well who support this work. All trying to work across a cohesive team to build best practice and to.

solve problems here in the US, but also see how we can have impact internationally too, because the education sector has more similarities and things we need to solve for than their differences as well.

Ryan Newman (18:40)

And so you talk about meeting the moment, right? In this AI revolution, right? And we think about the evolution that's taken hold with respect to AI and what comes next with it. You we were in this period of gen AI, but then what comes next with the gentic AI? As you think about the role of education and the role of educating when in theory, with respect to some of these language learning models, the answer to any question asked in a classroom is at the students fingertips.

How do you think education needs to evolve to meet that moment? And what is TechAdvX doing to help the clients with whom you serve to really be positioned to be successful?

Al Motley (19:20)

Yeah, that's big question, right? I think the moment we're in right now is special. I know we all talk about AI and I'm another technologist talking about AI, but it's different because I think all the things that educators have wanted to do, people who build specific learning models, the classroom of the future you'd want to do, the way you'd want to engage with students, the things that we're holding it back, where change management is sometimes technical ability or tools that can make it easier, efficient, or lower cost.

I'm so excited because I think we can actually build, it can create a reset right now on the infrastructure, on the tools, and actually the way we teach and the way people want to sit and learning in a way that's disruptive. And it may disrupt some of the things that people do in this room. But I think it, I think if it's done correctly in the right support and the right ecosystems around it, it can be really effective. think the biggest thing is making sure that there's a foundational ecosystem of data that flows between all of our organizations, all of our tools that's really built around a public utility versus just these fragmented tools that are supporting a sector that is around how much money you can raise or how much, the tool you can create that's really driven off of revenue. And business is good and may have an accessible tech company, good, but there's certain things that are foundational like highways.

Like there's other architecture that are like policy around energy ratings and the star rating system that needs to be there to tether us all together and innovation will actually accelerate. So my hope is that the AI tools and some of the technologies built off of that will allow us to accelerate good learning environments where data flows very fluidly, where teachers and professors have access to all this holistic data in context of the students that they're really supporting.

So they know how to resource them better. know how to engage in relationships and they really can focus on vacuuming connection based on what the technology can do for them. So what we're doing for that is to make that happen as two ways. One, we're trying to raise the floor for organizations so their tech ability can meet the moment right now because so many organizations, their data is a mess or they don't have the right leadership in technology or they have...

the right culture because they're afraid to because of the risk they can take to build these tools. So we're trying to help build that tech agility for organizations, nonprofits, schools, universities as well. At the same time, we're trying to build those products and prototype what the future can look like too. We just released some research in partnership with the Learner Studio last week that talks about in this call, what's the future tech stack we need for Learner-centered futures. And that's really, if we were to break down in...

remove all the walls and everything that we know about the tech stack for learning, SQs, higher ed, K through 12, and workforce, what will we build right now with technology? I think it's a lot different than what we would right now. We wouldn't have a SIS system or LMS over here or a graded book or a portfolio over here. We'd have more unified systems and tools that really center that learner and what they need and broaden learning outcomes in the classroom, out the classroom.

If my daughter is on doing Girl Scouts or basketball, those skills are coming back to be tracked to show she see the value of that, how it leads to her attaining her goals. We're trying to be that partner to support all these different sectors and entrepreneurs to really be able to meet the moment because of the urgency that we have right now. So.

Ryan Newman (22:58)

What would 10 year old Al Motley, that's oldest sibling, kind of second in command next to dad, getting thrown into Chester as a senior in high school, you get a little older. What would that Al Motley say to this Al Motley today about what he hopes you provide and solve to give him a future the way that you're providing for so many today?

Al Motley (23:02)

Yeah.

Great question. Well, if could time travel, I'd say investing crypto first. Two, think my family and my dad, I think always talked about the value of education, but I think talking about it, but also knowing how to do it is two different things, right? So being able to lean in and be able to do those early kids for 12 years, even there where there might've been not the best learning environments.

still lean into and really have agency to get what you need as a student. I tell myself that and not just be in the room, not be one of those other students and really don't do enough to get by because you can just do that, but really push yourself to be, maximize your potentials early days because I see how when I got to Penn State and my peers in the different environments, how that matters, right? And how that really helps. But then also just stay the course, be positive and also just really learn a lot of those experiences and moments you have. So think that's some of things I would share.

Ryan Newman (24:21)

Well, as we sit here today, I can't help but thinking that there are a lot of people that would be awfully proud and the work that you're doing is really benefiting so many. And then I would just like to personally say that I want to thank you for your commitment. There's so many people that can see a future in technology and go in one direction that doesn't necessarily provide that social utility piece. And it's really clear to me how evident it is to you how important that social community piece is.

and how you've been able to maintain that alongside of your tremendous technology prowess. So congratulations to you and on behalf of all the communities at TechademicServes, thank you for all that you do.

Al Motley (24:59)

Awesome. Thank you, Ryan. I appreciate it.

Ryan Newman (25:03)

That was Al Motley, founder and CEO of Techademics. This episode was produced and edited by our executive producer, Katie DiFiori. If you haven't already, be sure to subscribe to Dare to Disrupt, wherever you listen to podcasts, and look out for next month's episode. Thanks for listening.