



## **The Inevitability of Human Diversity**

A conversation with Dr. Michael Riendeau, assistant head of school for academic affairs.

### **Sue Cranford, Director of Enrollment**

Michael, thank you so much for joining me this morning. It's great to see you. You and I have known each other now for almost seven years. I came from a school where I had been for Director of Admission for fifteen years, but I think you've been here a little longer than that.

### **Michael Riendeau, Assistant Head of School for Academic Affairs**

Yeah, this will be my 35<sup>th</sup> year this coming year.

### **Sue Cranford**

It's something I love to tell people when they come to visit the school, that we do have a good number of faculty who have been here for twenty plus years.

### **Michael Riendeau**

A lot, actually.

### **Sue Cranford**

I think that's unusual. I've never worked in a school where there were so many people who have stayed for so long, which is something really good for people looking at the school to know. But going back to thirty-five years ago, and this is something I've never asked you--why did you come to Eagle Hill? How did you find Eagle Hill? Or did Eagle Hill find you?

### **Michael Riendeau**

Well, really, neither of those things. When I finished my undergrad in English, I was looking for teaching jobs in Massachusetts, where there were no teaching jobs at the time. It's funny; my wife Mary Ann and I were just talking about this last night, and she was coming from New York, but we both sent out hundreds of resumes without any postings to respond to, and I think I may have gotten one or two interviews in the months from graduation through the middle of summer because there just were no openings.

Well, I should say first that I grew up about six miles from Eagle Hill School. My best friend all through high school lived just off the common in Hardwick, half a mile from the school. And all

that time, I did not know that the school existed here. Now, you have to remember that it wasn't quite like it is now. It was much, much smaller in terms of the physical footprint, and I guess I wasn't looking for boarding schools when I was in high school, but I didn't know it was here.

I'm doing a job search, and I get a call from a friend of mine from college who says, hey, I have this interview at Eagle Hill School. I didn't realize where Hardwick was, but I think it's close to you. I can't drive that far to work every day. Why don't you just take my interview?

So, I showed up for this person's scheduled interview and said, well, my friend isn't coming, but here I am. Why don't you interview me? Which Charles McDonald did. We walked around the campus for an hour or two, and he called me back the following day and offered me a job. I was absolutely thrilled that I could find a teaching job.

### **Sue Cranford**

Okay, that is an amazing story. I never knew that.

So here you are. You come to this boarding school, and you start teaching. And now, thirty-five years later, is there any way you can give us the Cliff Notes on how you went from teaching to being dean of academics?

### **Michael Riendeau**

I think most things about this school, at least in terms of philosophy, are exactly as they were when I got here in 1989, and I even the years before that. The physical campus has obviously changed a lot, and the overall size of the student body has changed somewhat.

But the idea is really the same: if you pay attention to each student, you can make a difference in how you approach whatever it is that you're doing in a classroom. Whether that's painting or literature or mathematics; it doesn't really matter what the subject matter is, but the luxury, really, for a teacher and for a student to really know one another, to really understand the learning habits and challenges and great talents and preferences of a student, isn't really available anywhere else that I know. It makes a huge difference to know an individual, not just to know a student. This is the thing that I think has changed a little bit over time here.

When I started, the object was really to have students come in and do as much work as they could do in a year or two and get them back into what was then often called a mainstream setting. They would often come in for a year, do some really intensive work, and go back to a public-school setting or to another private school setting. And the idea being, well, you sort of caught them up with that word remediate.

Remediate was the catchphrase, and the approach to special education was universal and is still pretty predominant in the public-school approach to students. The idea is that there's a problem, and you remediate that problem, you fix that problem, and then you get back to doing your regular schooling in an LD way; it was coupled with this.

I can remember people who had been here a long time when I got here, saying to us, I mean, I knew the tiniest bit about so-called learning disabilities when I got here. I mean, I knew the term. I ran home after talking to Charlie; he must have said LD a hundred times on our walk, and I thought, boy, this is really a big thing for them. And I went home and started reading more about things.

One of the things that people said about students who don't fit very well with this return to the mainstream setting is, well, you have to learn to accept that you have a disability. You will always have that disability. It's a fundamental fact about you, and it doesn't change. You can cope with it. We can teach you ways to accommodate for it, we can give you special instruction or different circumstances, but you will always be a learning-disabled person. Which I have to say, then, I didn't like the sound of it. I didn't really know enough to argue about it, I guess, but the two things don't really fit very well together.

The idea is that you're this different kind of person and always will be and that with a little bit of special attention, we can get you back into a so-called mainstream education. So that has changed a lot. Our view of what it means to have a so-called learning disability is completely different now than it was then. The approach is not terribly different. The idea is that you learn about a student, you adapt instruction for that student, and even in the context of a class with four or six students, you're still focusing on each of those students as you make plans.

### **Sue Cranford**

So, Michael, you yourself, do you believe in learning disabilities?

### **Michael Riendeau**

I very often say to students, I don't believe in learning disabilities, and it's meant to be somewhat provocative, but to put them on notice about our approach. I don't believe in disabilities in the way that they are described in most of the popular literature for schools and for educators. I don't think that it makes sense to talk about somebody as belonging to a completely different class of people.

How can it be that there's something we can learn about a person in the course of a three or four-hour cognitive evaluation that tells us they're not the same kind of person as these other people. That, to me, does not make sense at all. And I guess to qualify that a little bit, it's not that I don't think individuals have vastly different skill sets or approaches or maybe even, although I'm reluctant to go too far this way, but maybe even different capacities at any one moment. The kinds of things that you would see described in those educational or psychoeducational evaluations can be helpful, but I don't think it makes sense to take those more or less empirical pieces of data and take a leap from that to say, at a certain point, you qualify as another kind of person.

I mean, that just seems so dangerous to me. If we look at the history of learning disabilities and special education, it's pretty clear that it's had devastating effects for whole generations of

people described that way, and some good effects. I mean, I will say that without the arguments that can be made from that, science resources wouldn't have been available for many of the students who have gotten into our public schools. But I just don't see why you have to take the step of telling a nine-year-old that she's completely different than everybody else and always will be in order to then offer somewhat different instruction.

**Sue Cranford**

Right. You've written about this. I've really heard not so much LD at EHS, but learning diversity, which I think you talk about a lot.

**Michael Riendeau**

The basic idea is just that it really is the inevitability of human diversity, the natural differences between any of us or among any of us, that explains why one type of instruction doesn't work for everybody. We would say from that perspective that what appears to be a fact about an individual is really a fact about the intersection of that individual's talents and challenges and so on, and a rigid set of standardized expectations that we take because we have taken a sort of standardized approach to education.

It's no secret that schools in the US, especially after comprehensive and compulsory schooling was instituted, has been built on a sort of factory model where the idea is you have to find out what's going to be most effective for the greatest number of students in your relatively large class and do that and maybe make some adjustments on the edges when you can. But the idea is to find the thing that's going to be most effective for the greatest number of students, which in that circumstance may be the smart thing to do. The problem is the circumstance, right?

So, putting thirty students in a classroom grouped by their age rather than by all kinds of other things: their interests, their talents, their challenges, their social relations. We pick age as if it is a really important thing about you. And we say, well, when you're fourteen, you'll be in this group of people, and here's what we expect of fourteen-year-olds in reading and writing and mathematics. Basic facts about human beings would tell us that it's not true. It's not the case that most people do most of these things in the same way, or at least not frequently enough, in closely enough related ways, that it makes sense to try to teach to that mythical mean.

**Sue Cranford**

I love the idea that you came here to work, and then because you like to learn yourself and you're curious, you started thinking about learning abilities and reading about them. Then you practiced it all these years with all these different kids for thirty-five years, and you didn't leave, or you might have left once.

**Michael Riendeau**

I did leave once. I left for one year. I had been married a few years. We were thinking about starting a family and building a house, and I got an offer from a relatively nearby public school for almost twice as much as I was able to earn here. And I felt like I just couldn't. It would be

irresponsible not to pursue it, right? And so, I went off to this very nice small regional school where my classes were relatively small, twenty students, or I may have had a class of eighteen students or something, which then was a really small public school class.

And I mean, immediately, the differences were shocking. On my very first day at that school, I was walking down the hall, and a chemistry teacher across the hall, said to me, oh, the school was so much better when the students walked one side of the hall and the faculty walked on the other, as if the separation from the students, even in an eight-foot-wide hallway, was really the most important thing. And I thought, wow, that's interesting. And a series of things in the first month or so there made it really clear to me that this was not the right thing for me. And I should say, had I started there at twenty-two, I probably would still be there because you can manage to do a lot.

There's a really interesting educational theorist who just recently died, actually named Tom Skirtick, who, I mean, is just a brilliant guy and a great friend of this school for many years and was for a long time the chair of the special education department at the University of Kansas. He talks about a thing that he calls loose coupling. The reason that education can work at all, given the constraints that we apply in large school systems, is that there's a loose coupling between the teacher and the expectations for that teacher.

So, you can shut your door and do what you want, and virtually nobody will know. And if it's working, everybody will be happy about it. And that kind of slippage between what's expected and what you actually do, and the decisions that teachers make on their own is what makes it work at all.

Now, of course, the thinking in public schools is often exactly the opposite of that, which is if we could only make teachers be more faithful to a teacher-proof practice that we've developed at some university or somewhere, then it would be more effective. But it's exactly the opposite.

### **Sue Cranford**

Well, that's interesting because when we walk around, families also really love that everything here is glass. So, loose coupling, you can't really do that. You can't do loose coupling because we can see what's happening. And sometimes families say well, I don't understand, kids with attentional issues, how can you have all these classrooms that are open and wide? And I say, well, it actually is better.

### **Michael Riendeau**

It is. We had a lot of discussion about that before we made some of those changes, and many, many teachers were concerned about it for that reason, and I think we're all sort of protective of what we're doing, and it's hard to be on display all the time.

But for students, it has worked completely, and I guess in a sort of unintuitive way. We used to have those little windows, we used to call them archers windows, that tiny little slit in the door that you can just sort of stick your face in and look in or out. Students walking between classes

or on their way from one place to another would stick their faces in that little window, and everybody in the room would turn and look at them because they were making an event out of it. And the same thing with admission tours.

People would come by, and if the door was closed, you had to open the door and interrupt or peer through that little window. And eliminating that, I would say for the first week, it was a sort of novelty that people were looking around, and after that, everybody forgot about them. And the fact that somebody walks by or stops outside with two or three people on a tour is a non-event.

### **Sue Cranford**

You also wrote the piece on the [Adjacent Possible](#), which I love because I think part of what we're doing here is watching what others are doing and then participating in it or collaborating. I'll never forget one day I went down into the makerspace, and they were making red blood cells. It just so happened that the makerspace teacher had seen the class studying red blood cells and invited them to come down and actually make the red blood cells in the makerspace.

So, obviously, you didn't stay at that public school. That happened to me, by the way, at a different school. I've worked in a few very traditional schools. I would say traditional because I guess that's how they would label themselves. More of the, oh, you come into 9th grade, you have to take algebra one, you have to take this, you have to take that. You don't really get a lot of choices, which is totally different than what we do here. But I remember a couple of my colleagues left to go to a public school because they were going to make twice or three times as much. They came back so fast because they just couldn't do what they wanted to do in those environments.

### **Michael Riendeau**

I should finish that a little bit. I was at that school for around a month when PJ McDonald said, why don't you just come out for dinner one night and talk a little bit and talk about some of the things he was hoping to do here at Eagle Hill.

### **Sue Cranford**

He was head, he was the head. He'd taken over for Charles. Okay.

### **Michael Riendeau**

I came out and talked to him, and we kept doing that night after night for a while, and several people joined and we shared lots of ideas about whether we'd like to adjust this or to do more of that, and I thought, I really wish I were still there. And he said, well, why don't you just come back? Maybe a month into being at the school where I was, I had agreed to come back here the following September.

### **Sue Cranford**

I'll never forget something you said to me about Sophie. My daughter Sophie attended Eagle Hill, and she came in from another private school and, just like you said, she was a student who

had been tested and been told, you're dyslexic, you have ADHD, you have dyscalculia. You're never going to get rid of these things, but you're a smart kid, you'll be fine in life. You just have to get through school. I don't know if people said that to her directly, but I think that's pretty much what she felt.

And when she came, she didn't have much confidence at all, as you know. But you said to me once, maybe a year after she started, you said I think I've almost figured her out. So, the teachers here are actually trying to figure out each kid. I wonder if there's any way you could explain more about what that means.

### **Michael Riendeau**

Well, it's figuring out each kid, but it's also continuously figuring that out and sometimes figuring it out in different meanings. In my view, none of us is a unitary sort of person, right? There isn't Michael. There's Michael in this circumstance and in that one, and there's Sophie in her writing class, and there's Sophie in her math class and so on, and Sophie with these other students, in her math class or with those students in another math class, and all of those things make a huge difference.

I remember when PJ was doing his dissertation here, and he was doing a study that was really targeting just one student's experience. He did a series of interviews with teachers about that student and other teachers, dorm counselors, parents, and so on. The results he got were so incredibly different, one person to the next, about the same student.

You would never have identified their descriptions as being of the same student at the end of that. And it's because there are so many things about human beings that change from time to time, from place to place, from one circumstance to another, and there's a great line from a guy named Jal Mehta at Harvard where he says, "a school is really about solving a puzzle every day."

It may not be exactly the quote, but the idea is that every day, there has to be this kind of innovation that responds to what's happening right now, not to what you expected to happen or what happened yesterday. It's really going to be solving that puzzle over and over and over again.

And that's certainly true of a class of six students. You sit there, and things look one way on the first day of the class, and you'll recognize by the end of that week that you were completely wrong about one idea you had. Or what looked like recalcitrance was really fear, or a lack of confidence, or what looked like a lack of confidence was really boredom.

Or there are just so many things that you have to figure out day in and day out that it's impossible to do that, in my view, with very large groups of students. And there are two things about that that are important. One is how many students are in my class. I'm working with these six. That's one thing. Another is how many students are there at our school. And this is often the hardest thing for people who aren't here to get a handle on that.



It really matters that even though I'm not working with you in class, I know enough about you that when I show up to help vet study hall, I have a sense of how to do that with you. And that gets difficult beyond the size that we are 215 students or so.

**Sue Cranford**

I agree. And I think it's the perfect size because it allows us to have so many things for kids to do, all the sports and the extracurriculars and the clubs and all those things. But it also allows us to do exactly what you're talking about.

There's the mindset of what we're creating, what you're creating. And when you have your faculty, and people say to me, well, how do you train your faculty here. How do you do that? My answer is always, well, there's a very established culture here which you just have talked about over thirty-five years. Teachers learn by really by doing.

**Michael Riendeau**

There are formal elements to it. I mean, we spend a week at the start of every year together, right? Some part of that is a really basic understanding of the school for the few new faculty each year. Some of that is really practical stuff about how systems work here or what time curfew is or all of that sort of stuff. Often, there'll be one or two bigger themes that we're focusing on because the faculty, as a whole, has an interest there or feels like we have a need to look at a particular idea. But that's a week; it's forty hours or fifty hours of time spent together on this.

But really, that goes on throughout all of every school year here that we're having those conversations, that your faculty mentor is dropping by your classroom, your department head is visiting. I and the other academic administrators are visiting classes every day. In that way, it is less formal but more pervasive. It extends to conversations at lunch in the dorm and late at night.

**Sue Cranford**

Right. It's not just teachers going into their classroom and doing their own thing. It's not that it's pervasive. That's a great word.

**Michael Riendeau**

People expect them, or I don't know if they expect them, but often ask about sort of proprietary practices like what reading approach do you use? Or what math system do you use? I tick off the number of things that people are familiar with and use all the time.

But none of those is really the answer to that question. The answer is really about having a professional teacher with a serious interest in education and the ability and the resources to explore ideas when they are helpful and mean.



One of the things I said in the opening orientation for parents is another thing that I learned from Tom Sitrick; is he knows schools really need to be adhocracies. They need to be places where you do things because you figured them out at the moment, given the actual circumstances that you have. Not some ideal circumstance or some mythical meaning, but the real circumstances there. He says adhocracy develops when the knowledge and tools for doing a thing are completely unknown. There are lots of interesting examples about NASA and so on.

Parents look at me a little funny when I say that they're completely unknown. I mean, what do you mean? We're paying a lot of money and sending our kid thousands of miles away from us to go to a place where you don't know what you're doing.

But I think it's true in this way. I don't know what I'm doing with this group of students with whom I haven't met yet. They ended up on my roster after a long, intricate scheduling process. But I've never met with that group of students. Even if I know every one of the students in the class, I haven't had them together for this content in this subject matter before.

And I would even go as far as to say that each day, there's something new about that. Anybody who's been a teacher or a parent with kids visiting will know that dynamics change completely when you add or remove one person from the mix, right? Everything changes. And that being in a position where you have the trust of the school, the latitude, and the independence to make decisions in your classroom.

Here's a terrible example, but many years ago, I had a group of, I think all boys at the time, a really small class of four boys who, for whatever reason, had been scheduled into this survey class. A really old-fashioned kind of class, right? But a perfectly good class. And we get started, and I can see they're begging, begging, begging. Can we just read some Shakespeare? And I'm like, do you get, like, the class is called *American Literature*? Eventually, I thought, why couldn't I mean, what do you mean? We have this interest. We're dying to read that play. Why would I say no to it? So, I came up with some sort of ridiculous rationale for doing it, but the true rationale is, let's do a thing that's worthwhile for you to do right now.

### **Sue Cranford**

But I think what you're saying is incredible. I mean, maybe it's because I'm an educator, and I'm also the parent of two children who, quote, unquote, have learning disabilities, but the idea of having a blank slate is so beautiful. It's that feeling that, okay, you're not putting me into a machine.

You're really taking the lead from the student in a way, like, not from, oh, this is a methodology that I'm going to put onto you. I think when students come here, they do have a blank slate in a way because they get to recreate, they get to transform. And we use the word transformation a lot.

### **Michael Riendeau**

I had a student three or four years ago, an advisee of mine, who, without saying anything to me, for the first time in his life, without telling his parents, went and auditioned for the play, and none of us would have expected him to do that. And now, it is the thing four or five years later that he's completely focused on as the thing that he wants to do in life.

None of us would have seen something in the testing or known something about him from school reports that would have pushed us to suggest it. But being able to see that little bit of interest, the theater director noticed it and started working with him. And then, the other students working in the set building and design classes caught on and worked with him.

**Sue Cranford**

Do you think that if you had asked that student when he was being admitted, do you dream about being in the theater? He wouldn't have said no.

**Michael Riendeau**

My best guess is that it happened because the roommate was going out for the play, and he walked down with them and saw the sign-ups and said, wow, okay, fine.

**Sue Cranford**

But kids here have the room and the space, I think, to be able to do those things where they don't always have that.

**Michael Riendeau**

Yeah. And teachers have the autonomy to make decisions about those moments when they come up. Not that we always get it right, but I think without that autonomy, you have a kind of teacher-as-technician arrangement where virtually anybody could walk in and be that teacher.

If the directions are robust enough, anybody can follow them. And I don't think it's really about that at all. It's not something secret about the method. It's something of a genuine connection between the teacher, the student, and the subject matter that makes it possible for them.

**Sue Cranford**

Tell me one more thing, because families ask me this all the time. They come to look at Eagle Hill. And by the way, some families say to me the same thing. I didn't even know a school like this existed. I think that makes me incredibly sad because I guess I would say the same. And I think every school should be like Eagle Hill. But even schools that are trying to be like this, there are so few of those schools like this. And so, my question really is, like, families will say, well, what makes you know it? And I know that's hard to encapsulate, but in your mind, in your view, what is it that makes.

**Michael Riendeau**

I think it's not a terribly momentous answer. It's just that we have a few really basic good ideas, and we work really hard to follow them every day. And that, to me, none of that is replicable in a kind of top-down way. It's all about, I mean, you said it earlier that there are so many people

who have been here for so long. I think that's true because the circumstances for being a teacher here are, in my view, pretty close to ideal.

A lot of latitude to make decisions to follow, an interest in developing a new course because two students, you know, are dying to do this thing. You have the resources to do it. You have the trust of the school and the parents and eventually the students to make those changes and try out something.

But none of it's a secret recipe. It's just that we keep at that every day, day in and day out. And I think that happens because the person who comes in the door very quickly recognizes that just doing something that's good, that is justifiable, is not enough. It has to actually be working.

And if it's not working, you should try out something else. And in most places, I think the conclusion that is reached in those circumstances is, well, this is the gold standard of reading instruction, and I'm implementing it absolutely perfectly.

So, the conclusion is that if this student can't fit in here, is there something wrong if this student isn't succeeding? Because we're giving the best possible prescription methodology. Right?

We try very hard not to get into that spot, to say, well, if it's not working, it's almost always because we haven't tried the right thing yet, not because we don't have the right student in front of us. It seems like a ridiculous thing when you look at it that way, but it's the way most schools look at most circumstances.

Another thing and it's a tiny thing, but it's really important. I have many times been amazed, and still, even recently, how important the tiniest thing you do with a student is. They'll come back ten years later or twenty years later and say, do you remember when? Half the time I honest to God, I don't remember them. I remember the student, but I don't remember this tiny interaction that seemed meaningless to me at the time.

So, but you have to be so careful about every moment. I think for most of us, most of the time, what you're doing really matters.

**Sue Cranford**

I know. I think that's the key.

All right, well, you've been really generous with your time, but I have one more question.

Every time I go on a tour, and I walk around with families, which I love to do, and I barge into your classroom, you always like to ask the student the one question, which is...

**Michael Riendeau**

If your parents left you alone and your teachers left you alone, what would you do with your time?

**Sue Cranford**

Exactly. So now, what would you say to that answer?

**Michael Riendeau**

Oh, God.

**Sue Cranford**

What would you do with your time?

**Michael Riendeau**

Well, I mean, my first answer would be to read, for sure, because I love it, and I think it contributes to every part of your life, emotionally and morally. The way to do that thing that you don't know how to do yet is to go read about somebody who's done something like it. I mean, that's one thing that I have said a lot of times here to people when we're stuck about something. I don't know, somebody's done something like this, we can just go read about it. It does seem to me if you have a book related to whatever your notion is, you can figure it out, and that would be the first thing on there.

What else would I do? I'd plan a big dinner party, probably. I'd have my sisters and brother and their kids, and our whole family is very close by, and so very often, there'll be twenty people there for dinner on Sunday, including people from here. That's probably what I would do.

**Sue Cranford**

That sounds really good. I'd like an invitation to that! Well, thank you, Michael. It's been so great.

**Michael Riendeau**

You're welcome!