

Max Delsignore: Philanthropy is a multi-generational experience. On the Northern New York Community Podcast, we will have conversations with people of all ages, who carry a belief in making the north country a better place through the spirit of giving. In this episode, we will visit with Jeff and Brenna Ginger, two north country natives and school educators who demonstrate and believe in the importance of philanthropy in the region. We will talk about the role of millennials and their influence on philanthropy and also on the future of northern New York. Jeff and Brenna will also share their first experiences in giving back and why instilling core values of philanthropy in their children is important. Before we begin our chat with Jeff and Brenna, we must thank WPBS-DT and the Northern New York Community Foundation for their support of the Northern New York Community Podcast. Their partnership makes these conversations possible. Go to www.wpbstv.org and www.nnycf.org to learn more about both organizations. Now let's kick off our discussion with Jeff and Brenna. It's great to have you both here.

Brenna Ginger: Thanks for having us Max.

Jeff Ginger: Thank you, Max.

Max Delsignore: Oh, it's a pleasure. I want to kind of open first with just the general question about philanthropy and kind of in the general sense, what compels you both just to give back to your community, be it a charitable contribution or even volunteering.

Jeff Ginger: Brenna and I lived away for a while. We did master's degrees in London. We had some substantial conversation about where do we want to live in our adult lives and where do we want to raise our children. One of the decisions we made when we decided to move back to northern New York was that we wanted to create the culture that we wanted to live in. In comparison to big metropolitan areas, resources are fewer in northern New York. We thought if we miss it, if it's something that we love, then we want to help create it. In many ways, if you live in a small community, where you give helps to decide what becomes important culturally.

It provides opportunities both for us selfishly and hopefully for the community as a whole philanthropically.

Brenna Ginger: Especially raising our children, deciding to raise our children here, it's multi-fold in that our children watch the growth of the community in a positive way, and we also get to foster the experiences and promote the experiences that we would like our children to have. Our son, who has just turned seven, especially has really taken off with this. I'm very proud of him. He will give all of his meager savings away, so we've actually had to talk about worthiness of cause with him and deciding what the right thing is to give to.

Max Delsignore: Is there is a specific example that you can share where your son, he picked something out and the two of you were just very proud because he did pick something that was worthy?

Brenna Ginger: Well, this past Christmas with the Salvation Army kettles, he will not pass a kettle without rummaging in his pockets or rummaging in my purse or something. We threw him a birthday party and he wanted to give me money to give to his friends for coming, so we had to talk about like, "All right. That's not really appropriate." Yeah, so he sees. Then also rooting in the community is really important. You're more attached, or at least we find that we're more attached to a community that you give to.

Max Delsignore: I want to ask a little bit about how you decide to give back, either individually in the things that you support or are passionate for or as a couple, what those conversations are like.

Jeff Ginger: Well, we've done both. Most of the time we have a couples' conversation before we do any giving, not always. Sometimes I'll come home and Brenna will have sent some envelope off in the mail, and she'll let me know that she gave to some cause today. I remember the first time as a couple that we chose to give. It was probably seven or eight years ago, and the Samaritan Auxiliary was raising money for a respirator that would

go into the neonatal unit at the hospital. When I was born in the late '70s, there was a new respirator technology at Samaritan that was used to help keep me alive as a newborn. My mother had shared with me when I was younger that I probably at the level of prematurity that I was I may not have lived without that technology, so I felt a personal connection to that cause. We discussed it, and so that year was the first year that we gave to that cause. It had personal importance. It felt real. It felt like something that would give back in a tangible way.

Brenna Ginger: Then later our twin daughters were born early and needed neonatal care, so it just sort of re-enforced the importance of that for us.

Max Delsignore: You both touched on values a little bit and the experience of your children seeing mom and dad begin to demonstrate philanthropy. Jeff, in the case of your parents telling you about the scenario at Samaritan, what happened when you were younger, to the question of where those values come from, is it your parents? Have there been other influencers?

Jeff Ginger: I think there are endless influencers at various points in my life. I can think of a couple ground breakers. The biggest was when I was 24, when I was getting ready to go to the master's program in London, I had a professor of mine from undergraduate create a scholarship for the sole purpose of helping me go to graduate school. It was unexpected, it certainly wasn't asked for, and it was a vote of confidence that I may have needed and certainly appreciated at that point in my life. That individual has given countless times throughout his life and has shared those stories with me. I don't think they've been shared with a lot of people, but he felt it very important to share his philanthropic history with me. That's probably my greatest influence in regards to giving.

Since then, I've created a scholarship in his anonymous name at Watertown High School, which is where I was a graduate and taught for a dozen years. Annually a gift is given in his name as a way for me to both appreciate him and to pay it forward.

Hopefully by the time we're done giving, in that instance at the end of my life or hopefully long after that, we will have far exceeded the original gift out to others.

Brenna Ginger: The pay it forward thing is really huge for us. People have been very kind to us. There are a lot of negative aspects of humanity, but you often find what you look for. If you're looking for the positives in others, you want to recognize the positive gifts that have been given you and then the best way to say thank you is to give them to someone else.

Max Delsignore: To go back to the original question just for you, Brenna, those influencers or maybe it's your parents, those that really instilled some of those values. Who really stands out in your mind?

Brenna Ginger: Well, my mother used to go to homeless shelters and the Salvation Army and extend holiday invitations. She would just ask strangers if they wanted to come to holiday dinners. She felt badly. Holidays continue to be very important to her, and I think that she feels badly if they're not recognized in others' lives.

Max Delsignore: Now both of you are steeped deep in education with your careers. Brenna, you're an English teacher, correct?

Brenna Ginger: Correct, yes.

Max Delsignore: Watertown City School District.

Brenna Ginger: Yes, indeed.

Max Delsignore: Jeff, you're a principal at Mannsville Elementary School, part of the South Jeff School District.

Jeff Ginger: Yes.

Max Delsignore: How do you instill some of these values that have either been taught to you or you've learned along the way?

How have you instilled some of those values of philanthropy in your day-to-day work as educators?

Jeff Ginger: I think, for me, the giving often is not monetary. Just being nice is, I think, the secret to philanthropy at some level. It's what do I have to give, whether that's time or some other finite resource or financial help or a listening or inspiration. What do I have to give others to help today? Sometimes that turns into philanthropic pursuit, and sometimes that's just helping those around you with your time and energy and sweat and tears and whatever else.

Brenna Ginger: Also, if that becomes your focus, opportunities present themselves every day, and you simply honor the opportunities. I think that also I have six classes of kids every year, and if you form a good relationship with others, they're able to ask you for things. I want that. I want people to be able to say, "I need this." Whether it's a band-aid or a tissue or a banana or a hug, sometimes people just need to have their needs honored. I think that that's the best way for me, at least, to demonstrate quote unquote "philanthropy" is just being available to others.

Max Delsignore: Working with the younger generation, what tools or lessons does that demographic of young people need to prepare them for the value of philanthropy, no matter where they live? You hope some of these folks kind of [inaudible 00:09:47] you have, but if they don't, what do you hope are those key takeaways?

Jeff Ginger: The message I would want to share with young people is the idea that you don't need to give large amounts in big, fancy ways. As Brenna stated a little bit ago, you look for opportunities that mean something to you. What I always say is give often. I don't think we have to give a lot. In the shared responsibility of philanthropy is the message I would want to share or have people understand is that many small contributions make very large impacts if they're done correctly. If there's a focus and if people give when they can, what they can, eventually the goal is met. If you give nothing, we get nowhere.

Brenna Ginger: Well, and Jeff kind of touched on this earlier, it's the vote of confidence. If you give your time or your resources to some kind of pursuit or a foundation or a goal, you're saying to that person or that foundation, I believe that you can make a difference. It can be a dollar, it can be an hour of service, it can be anything, but we tend to isolate ourselves and then when someone reaches out and says, "Hey, I recognize what you're doing, and I believe in it," sometimes that's just the boost that we need to work that extra bit harder that will make our cause successful.

Max Delsignore: Is there an act of philanthropy that you've seen with your students that gives you hope for the future or perhaps maybe even inspired one of you to give?

Brenna Ginger: Again, it's not monetary, but I was very impressed with some of my students this past year. When I just sat back and kind of watched their interactions, they're very, very kind to each other, very giving and sharing. Again, it's not monetary. It's a snack. It's a pat on the back for a kid who failed a test. It's just kindness. I think that that lays the ground for further contribution, whatever that might be. These kids are going to be professionals. They'll make decisions about where to spend their money. This sort of sets them up to seek out people who need help. There was one child in one my classes very obviously struggled socially, and a lot of the kids who tended to be more social absolutely scooped him up. It was just wonderful to see. I think that that's step one.

Jeff Ginger: At Mannsville this last year, I watched an amazing thing take place. We have a student who suffers from a debilitating illness, and she's looking for a cure. Our student council each year does a hat day fundraiser to raise money for a particular cause. Of their own wishes, the student council voted to take up one of our other student's personal pursuits of fundraising. We were able to raise over \$1,000 in a day in our little elementary school. It just look a little bit of awareness.

We had a six-year-old student decide that she wanted to raise money for a national foundation, and the student council

decided to advertise that. We were able to do enough, again, to make a pretty substantial contribution, I think. Again, that came from the mind of a six-year-old. Sometimes I feel like, we mentioned our son, young people are a great inspiration for giving because they do it so willingly and they believe better than we do as adults that they can make real change in the world. Somewhere you lose that, that idea that I all by myself can change the planet. You start to get jaded as you get older, and kids don't have that. I think if we can pay attention to that and maybe take inspiration from them a little bit, we can do that.

Max Delsignore: To that point, what was it like to watch some of the staff and faculty and other adults in the building become inspired by the act of a six-year-old with a vision?

Jeff Ginger: If time is the resource during the day that we covet the most, that we take care of, especially in the work world, it was fun to ... We stopped and had a celebration after we had done the fundraising and after we had drummed up the attention. The teachers were talking to their classrooms. One of the motivators is I promised the kids if we raised to a certain point that they could take me to the bleachers and shave my head. Maybe that was my contribution. That had to happen. After I put the option out there of the shaved head thing, I think we had some teachers throwing some bigger bills into the pot just because they wanted to see if I was really willing to make a fool of myself for a cause.

On the morning when we did the celebration, we had all of the students from our building in the gymnasium. On Fridays, we sing I'm Proud To Be An American. We do The National Anthem, and then on Fridays they do Proud To Be An American. Unsolicited, unexpected, no adult expected it, every student in the gym from pre-kindergarten through fifth grade started singing the song. They might do that in their own classrooms. In fact, I know that they do often, but when all of them all at once started singing, and we knew that we were there to celebrate such a cool thing, the giving piece and just the community spirit that was there, and I don't think there was a dry eye in the room. The students weren't

crying. They were just doing what they do, but the adults were really emotionally affected.

Max Delsignore: Everybody was kind of reacting in the moment, students and adults. I mean, just given the magnitude of a moment like that.

Jeff Ginger: Yes.

Max Delsignore: Good example to see just in the times that we live in too.

Jeff Ginger: I agree. I agree.

Brenna Ginger: In our 24 hour news cycle, it's so easy to get down or depressed or have negative feelings about human nature, but when you look around, again you find what you look for, and it's pretty nice.

Max Delsignore: To another example that you gave together as a couple, the Six Town Community Fund effort through the Northern New York Community Foundation, the charitable purpose of the fund was to support programs and projects that are going to impact the southern Jefferson County region in the six towns that it encompasses, and it's going to be a resource that's available to these communities in perpetuity. You are likely the youngest donors to that effort and very early on it was something you committed to. Why did you decide to give to something like that?

Brenna Ginger: It's where we raise our kids. It's our community. It's our home. Again, you could really argue that a lot of philanthropy is a selfish pursuit because, again, you're voting with your time and your resources as to what you want to see flourish. I taught in the South Jefferson School District early in my career. Jeff's an administrator there now. We know the community. We know the families. It puts a really personal face on need and on community. Again, we decided to live here, and we want to see the community flourish.

Jeff Ginger: For me, everything Brenna said is spot on but also that early effort for a new fund was what really caught my eye. There was an opportunity early on where we knew that our donation I think it would be doubled. Someone was doing a matching donation. At that point, we said, "Let's give what we can possibly give," knowing that the more we stretched, the more we stretch when things were matched. For us, in deciding what to give early on, it really had more to do with that longer term impact, and you used the word in perpetuity. To me, that is very powerful. It's the reason some of those funds, many of which the community foundation helps to manage, have such lasting impact locally. The idea that-

Brenna Ginger: And it's observable. It's direct.

Jeff Ginger: Some examples, I know that some of that Six Town money has already been used for some summer music series. It's been brick-and-mortar type opportunities but also some cultural events, things that bring the community together in spirit as much as with infrastructure. I also like the idea that depending on what the grant requests look like, the community gets to decide where do we want our finite resource, where do we want to place those resources this year or where is the need greatest within that geographic space?

Max Delsignore: So that breadth of impact was really something that caught your attention and felt meaningful to you.

Jeff Ginger: I'm also excited every year to see where that money ends up. It's fun to watch the growth. I'm sure that those are some pretty interesting and exciting conversations deciding where are the priorities.

Brenna Ginger: It's a snowball effect too. The more you get the community together, the more they want to get together. There have been some cool parent and child activities that I've taken the kids to. You meet other families, and then you're more willing to do it again. The more it happens, the more it's likely to happen in the future. Then one of the reasons we decided to come back here

and raise our children here is the close knit nature of the community. If my kid steps a toe out of line, I'll go to the grocery store and hear about it from somebody. I know all the moms at soccer practice. That's really nice. If we were still living in a major metropolitan area, I wouldn't trust my kid to go in the playground by himself. It's just different and-

Jeff Ginger: I don't think you do now.

Brenna Ginger: No, I don't really, but it's the whole fostering of that closeness.

Max Delsignore: Mm-hmm (affirmative). I was going to ask the question about what you love most about the north country, but I think you answered it, Brenna, or at least the primary point of the why for that question. To touch on something we discussed earlier before the interview regarding Ralph Waldo Emerson and your admiration for him as a poet, as a lecturer, there's one quote in a previous discussion we had about gratitude that Emerson said that has kind of rang true or is I think part of the philosophy that both of you share. Could you share that as part of this conversation?

Brenna Ginger: Sure. First of all, when we met Jeff made it pretty clear very early on in our relationship that if this worked out our first child would be named Emerson, and of course I'm an English major, so that kind of-

Max Delsignore: It worked out pretty well.

Brenna Ginger: Yeah. That worked out well. Our son is named Emerson. I'm probably roughly paraphrasing here, but it's something along the lines of practice gratitude because the universe is continually conspiring in your favor.

Jeff Ginger: I think in respect to that, one of the best ways to say thank you is to give. Again, that's all kinds of giving. We literally put our money where our mouths are in that respect in time and effort. I think it's very easy to look out at your world and be critical

of what it isn't, what it doesn't give you or how it's not meeting your expectation. It takes courage to want to make change.

In many ways, for me, we have a young generation right now, you mentioned millennial generation before, but for all the criticism of a certain generation that might be there, there's certainly a willingness and almost a personal need from people our age and younger to influence and impact their world and to take responsibility for causes that they believe in, in whatever they may be. I think there is a message about philanthropy for this younger generation. They can make all the change they want in small bits and pieces if they do it together. The internet world uses the word crowdsource for information and for ideas and how many times do people put out in a Facebook post or whatever, hey, to my mommy friends, I need help with ...

Max Delsignore: [inaudible 00:22:57].

Jeff Ginger: The same method is absolutely usable in terms of raising money. It's the GoFundMe phenomena is what it is. That will be, I believe, very powerful in coming decades for youthful generation to put some oomph behind their efforts.

Brenna Ginger: Speaking to Jeff's earlier point about taking inspiration from the younger generation, the message remains the same, but in order for a message to be communicated, it has to fit the criteria of the current situation. If we tailor this message of giving, of empathy, of putting your money where your mouth is to their standards of communication, then we're going to be a lot more successful. I think that there is almost a danger in the authoritarian, top down, finger shaking, you need to do this. That never works, but if we say, hey, here is a positive way to form a community, whether that's online, whether that's digital, whether that's physical, if we teach community formation and we teach empathy and we teach awareness, we're going to be a lot more successful.

Max Delsignore: To wrap up, I want to kind of stick along the same topic. Thinking about our generation, we're all kind of in the

same age here, what would you say to somebody in our peer group or a colleague that maybe hasn't had a chance to really experience philanthropy yet? Maybe they've thought about it but have yet to clear that hurdle of doing it for the first time. What would you share either as advice or insight just to encourage them to demonstrate or participate in the experience?

Jeff Ginger: My question for that person would be what are you passionate about? That question transcends political belief, socioeconomics, gender. If you can say out loud this is what I'm passionate about, it makes it very easy to look for a cause to support.

Brenna Ginger: Additional to that, self-examination in terms of what has been given to you, again with the gratitude thing. We have all experienced gifts. Sometimes we don't slow down enough to really recognize what someone has done for us or the opportunities that have been afforded us. Again, transcendent of socioeconomic, educational, or any kind of political or gender role, we've all received gifts. We need to be humble enough to look for that and recognize it, and then say, "Okay. What do I have, what can I do to give it to others?" Again, it doesn't have to be monetary. It can be time. It can be just recognizing someone. It can be looking at someone and honoring them. I think self-examination is really, really important in that.

Max Delsignore: You shared some really good examples for either yourselves or some students that you work with who have clearly demonstrated giving back and doing it either locally or even on a larger scale. To think about this area and given that your roots are probably here I would say, you're probably going to raise your kids here-

Jeff Ginger: [crosstalk 00:26:20]

Brenna Ginger: [crosstalk 00:26:20]

Max Delsignore: -I would say if I was a betting man. The importance of philanthropy and giving back to the future of this

area, what would you kind of say in terms of what that may mean for this community, philanthropy and giving back?

Jeff Ginger: I want to do clarification first for a minute.

Max Delsignore: Sure.

Jeff Ginger: Are you asking if I think there's a certain cause or a certain area where the need is greatest?

Max Delsignore: The values of philanthropy and giving back and folks doing so locally.

Brenna Ginger: I was one of these kids, and I think we all were at some point, I look at these teenagers who they're ready to fly. They want out. They want out of their parents' house, they want the big city, and I was one of those too. I lived all over the place. We lived in London together for a while. I encourage that. I think that's really important. You don't know where you want to be unless you sample, unless you experience other places. Inevitably, most of them come back. They end up here. There is a temptation to express almost contempt for where you grew up, like, "Oh, well, you know, I'm blowing this popsicle stand. I'm out of here."

Even then, this place raised you. You are shaped by your hometown. You are shaped by where you're from, and it is important to recognize that. There's a reason that you have hopes and dreams, there's a reason you have a college acceptance letter, there's a reason you have a job, there's a reason that you're a good person, and that's because you had a community that raised you. It is important to give back to that community, even if you move far away. That's the reason we give back to our collegial institutions. You send them back donations to help those kids that were just like you coming in that may need assistance with books or housing. It's just important to recognize the factors that have shaped your life.

Jeff Ginger: I don't know how to answer that any better.

Max Delsignore: [crosstalk 00:28:17]

Jeff Ginger: Yeah. I would echo all of that. It goes back to one of those first points that we made, which is if you want a certain community, if you want your home to be a certain place and you want it to have a certain feel or if there's an area that we want to strengthen, then we have to go do that. It's no longer-

Brenna Ginger: No one's going to step in and do it for you. If you wait for someone else, it's not going to happen.

Max Delsignore: Good place to wrap up.

Jeff Ginger: Perfect.

Max Delsignore: Jeff and Brenna, I'm glad that you were able to share some of this exceptional perspective, being active participants in this community. It's meant a lot not certainly just to us but obviously those that are around you and the citizens that you live with. This area is certainly better with you in it, and I hope that what you shared will inspire others across all generations to give where they live.

Jeff Ginger: As [crosstalk 00:29:06]

Max Delsignore: Thanks again for being a part of the podcast.

Brenna Ginger: Thanks, Max.

Jeff Ginger: Thank you, Max.

Max Delsignore: Special thanks again to WPBS-DT and the Northern New York Community Foundation for producing each episode of the Northern New York Community Podcast. Every interview is easily accessible and always free, whether it's online or on your mobile device. Find us on iTunes, Stitcher, Google Play, or other podcast platforms. Check out our podcast website as well, which features interview highlights, transcripts, photo galleries, and much more. Just go to www.nnypodcast.com. Thanks again for tuning in to our conversation with Jeff and Brenna Ginger. We hope you'll join us again and continue listening to the Northern New York Community Podcast.

