



Raymond A. Mason School of Business

WILLIAM & MARY

DIVERSITY GOES TO WORK PODCAST

EPISODE 26: ARLENE LIMAS – NONVIOLENCE INTERVENTIONS TO PEACE AND CONFLICT

Arlene Limas

Normalize mistakes and have conversations around intention. Just think about how that could change a work culture.

Phil Wagner

Hello from the halls of the Mason School of Business here at William & Mary. I'm Phil, and this is Diversity Goes to Work. Buckle up because we're getting ready to take a deep dive into the real, human-lived experiences that shape and guide our diversity work in the world of work. Should be fun. Welcome listeners to Diversity Goes to Work. Today, it is an honor to host one of the greatest athletes of our time. Arlene Limas is one of the greatest taekwondo authorities of the 20th century. She's a history maker, having been the first American and the first female to win the gold medal of the 24th Olympic Games in Seoul, Korea, in Taekwondo in 1988. And she has been breaking barriers ever since. She opened up Power Kicks Martial Arts Studio and now currently serves as the CEO of PAVE Prevention. Now, Arlene is going to take a little bit more time to explain her vision and the mission of PAVE. Broadly speaking, she works to provide training to organizations using a trauma-informed model to empower employees and organizations for better performance, stronger engagement, healthier work cultures.

Phil Wagner

Arlene, it is a true honor to speak with you. Thank you for the important work that you do, and thank you for making time to be on our podcast today.

Arlene Limas

Sure, Phil. Thank you so much first for having me. We've had some cool discussions already, so I'm looking forward to this discussion. As you said, I took the helm took the leadership position for a start-up about 16/17 months ago now at PAVE Prevention, which stands for Proactive Antiviolence Education. And our goal is I feel like I'm tasked with reducing violence in the workplace and imparting a skill set to employees to offset violence. And when I say violence, it's the full spectrum from toxicity and microaggression to full-blown physical events. I think now is the time, as the world returns to work and is looking for new and fresh and innovative ideas, now is the time to impart the skill set.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, I'm really excited to hear about that reimagining. In many ways, we're reimagining the world of work writ large. And I know you have some very creative applications of things you're asking professions to reimagine. We'll get there in a bit. But I have to tell you, I just have to sort of fan for a moment, and I'd love for our listeners to hear a little bit more. We share a mutual love for martial arts. It's part of my story, but it's obviously a huge part of yours. Can you share more about your experience in martial arts and the Olympics specifically? What an incredible story you have.

Arlene Limas

Yeah, I mean, I don't know much life without martial arts. I started when I was five, so that's, you know, 51 years of being a martial artist.

Phil Wagner

Wow.

Arlene Limas

So I don't have much memory without it. I started my brothers. I have four older brothers and two older sisters, but all four of my brothers did martial arts at some point of their life. And my father was a boxer, so we come by combatives quite naturally. And, yeah, I'm the baby. I wanted to do what they were doing, and they let me tag along in the beginning. And when I started martial arts, I was the only female and the only non-adult in the school. So I was more like a mascot than a true participant.

Phil Wagner

That's awesome.

Arlene Limas

I just was a sponge. I just fell in love with it. And then, a couple of years after I had started martial arts, then the Bruce Lee craze hit, and then martial arts schools became much more mainstream. And I think the light bulb went off for school owners that, you know, parents will do anything for their kids.

Phil Wagner

Yes.

Arlene Limas

So if we can create a curriculum that fits training for young people and makes it safer and more accessible, then it would thrive. And it did. And I think it's an incredible skill set to impart to young people. But so that's how I started. I started in Shaolin Kung Fu, not Taekwondo. So I was a Kung Fu artist first, and I still consider myself a Kung Fu-ist and found myself loving the competition aspect of it. Local tournaments, then regional tournaments, then national tournaments. Competition led me to the Olympic games. And that was just an

incredible experience to be able to participate in Taekwondo the first time it was included in the Olympic games, and then to have the success not only that I had but the whole USA team had at that Olympic games was just awesome.

Phil Wagner

That is fantastic.

Arlene Limas

And it's just opened up. I mean, we know that sport teaches us so much, right? It gives us such preparation for real life. Yeah. I mean, just to have all the gifts that not only sport but martial arts and sport together have given me it's been an incredible experience.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. And it's so exciting to speak with you again. Just true history-maker in our presence. I think many people switching to sort of the work that you do now. Many people might be surprised to link up martial arts and a commitment to peace and nonviolence. Right? So, like kicking, punching, the art of what you do, it seems silent, right? But the work of PAVE and the work that you do very much echoes this deep commitment to peace and nonviolence. Situate those together, link those together a little bit for us. How do you see those going hand in hand?

Arlene Limas

I think once a person feels very secure in their own abilities, then their defensiveness and their quick reactions, they mellow a little. You know, I used to constantly have these discussions with parents who would say, my kid is aggressive and, you know, he's prone to fighting in school, and people keep telling me to bring in the martial arts, but it seems counterproductive. And I would just say the more confident your child is in their ability. There's no need to fight for it. Then it's just I'm comfortable. I can walk away from this clearly. I don't need to engage in a fight because I'm comfortable in it. And I think there's a different swag you have, and your approach to de-escalation is different. As a martial artist, I know for me that is de-escalating a situation, walking away from a situation. The confidence that I have because of sport and martial arts just allows me to do that time and time and time again. And I think it's a skill set everybody should be gifted to be able to do that. As martial artists, we're constantly we know the concepts of when somebody pulls you, you push, and you let them come. You know what I mean? The concepts of working with energy and when you take that idea of working with energy and put it in other practices, it just makes so much sense.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. We got together, our first conversation that you and I ever had was around victims and survivors of domestic and sexual violence. And so I was wondering, can you situate this work, martial arts, and nonviolent prevention within that conversation too? As this airs, we're heading into Domestic Violence Awareness Month, and your work speaks to that, I think so, soundly. So I was wondering if you can link those together for us.

Arlene Limas

Sure. I think one of the main things that our training, PAVE programming, and where we're rooted empowerment self-defense. I think one of the things that gets overlooked is how much this training and this skill set allows people to heal and regain trust in their body, trust in their intuition, trust in their physical strengths. And I think that's what martial arts also gives people. It allows them to start trusting themselves and their skill set, and their abilities. And sometimes that comes in the shape of a student that comes in and drops 75 pounds because of the training. So that's a physical metamorphosis in a sense, right, but then there's also the person who just feels more confident in their own skin, and they know they can protect themselves in certain senses, in certain scenarios. So I think the healing portion of what martial arts and empowerment, self-defense, and paid programming bring to situations it's a huge benefit that sometimes doesn't get all the airtime that it deserves. But really, I think as people come out of traumatic events, there really is a sense of trust that they have to redevelop. Trust in their own decision-making, trust in their intuition, trust in people. And I think training along the lines of martial arts, empowerment, self-defense, and working through trauma-informed scenarios and exercise really allows people to regain that power again.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. And I think that's the angle even for today's episode. We bring on a lot of folks who do DEI consulting or organizational management consulting. The work that you do with an organization and using that trauma-informed model, I think, is what really differentiates PAVE prevention. And I think in so many ways, what you're doing is you're asking folks to just sort of reimagine what's possible, right, reimagine what's possible with your body. But you also do work on a larger level, just reimagining occupations. I know you are doing some work in Oakland, reimagining law enforcement and a few other areas as well. I'm wondering if you can speak to that work because I think would be of particular interest how you're bringing that trauma-informed model and really sort of disrupting the norms of long-standing professional acts and activities. Do you mind sharing a little bit about that with us?

Arlene Limas

Yeah. We're very fortunate to land some really meaningful work in Oakland. And we're very proud of the programming we put together for this opportunity. The city of Oakland and the community in Oakland, like a lot of communities, they made their voices known that things needed to change around law enforcement, and there needed to be some conversations had. And out of those conversations in Oakland was born a community responder program called MACRO Mobile Assistance Community Responders of Oakland MACRO. That's a mouthful.

Phil Wagner

It is a mouthful.

Arlene Limas

The way MACRO is set up. It is a team of two. One is an EMT or paramedic-type background, and then the other is a community representative or someone who has come out of the

communities that they're serving. And we were fortunate enough to win the training opportunities. So we have trained two cohorts of MACRO Responders. We were so honored at this opportunity, but really we were like, oh my gosh, this is such important work. We've really got to dive in and put something fantastic together. And I think we did. And we focused a lot on things that I don't think people would check the box kind of training would have presented. And I think that's why we won the work. But we did a lot of work on communication styles. Think creating workplaces that people know each other's communication styles and know how they like to be communicated with is really important. You wouldn't think that in violence prevention, but when you're talking about microaggressions, it definitely is violence.

Phil Wagner

For sure, for sure.

Arlene Limas

So we did a lot of work about communication styles. We did a lot of work on resilience and self-care, which, again, you don't normally think about this in a responder capacity, but you know, you got to put on be able to put on your mask first before you can put the mask of the person sitting next to you. So you have to take care of yourself. So we created a fantastic check-in policy and check-out policy for yourself and for your partner. We did a lot of work on what it means to be adrenalized, how to acknowledge when you're adrenalized, how to acknowledge when someone is adrenalized that you're trying to interact with, in addition to all the other things like situational awareness. And we really put together an incredible program, and it's showing, it's showing its value. The last statistics I heard of from Elliot Jones Jr., the Director there, over 3,000 incidents responded to, that's 3,000 incidents that the police aren't going to, you know.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Arlene Limas

And they are coming home safely, which is the biggest thing. Right. That's the most important thing for us. And we're just very proud of that work. And it looks like it's already being valued. The Oakland Parks and Rec have reached out to us about training their park stewards program. We're hoping to have the opportunity to train Alameda County's Library staff there. So I think that this template is going to show its value again and again and again.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, I love this, and I think, again, it's reimagining what's possible, reimagining what we know as the norm because these are certainly not normal times. PAVE prevention utilizes evidence-based trauma-informed programming. And you've spoken to this, but your real goal here, I think, is to empower employees, particularly on your web presence. I mean, you bring it back to that every single time. This is about empowering individuals and then cultivating safe

work environments. In this conversation for DEI practitioners, why should we consider safety, trauma, violence within this broader realm of issues that we're dealing with in DEI leadership? How might those actually play out in a work environment that would be of importance to people like us?

Arlene Limas

Well, I think, first and foremost, we need to acknowledge the elephant in the room. And the elephant in the room is that on a daily basis, people are being impacted by violence. Directly, indirectly, one step removed, third person, removed. We are being impacted with violence. So we know that we have coworkers that may be struggling today because it's the anniversary of a family member who participated in violence against self, took their own life. So it needs to be part of the discussion if we're going to get the most out of that employee or at least create a culture that the employee feels comfortable discussing this or talking about it. So that's just one example of violence impacting us. Right. If I grew up in a community that was riddled with gun violence, and then it's an anniversary of a friend who I lost to gun violence, or maybe there's an occurrence in my neighborhood that's gotten a lot of publicity, I think we need to acknowledge in the workplace that I might be triggered and I might not be hitting on all cylinders that day.

Phil Wagner

So does this apply even to just this sort of broader social context in that we are a society now seemingly inundated with violence? I mean, the level of gun violence in the nation is just at a catastrophic level. Is this just we all carry in everyday threats or fears about that violence too? Does that factor in?

Arlene Limas

Phil, I would argue yes. I would argue yes.

Phil Wagner

And certainly for a person of color, a few months ago, we had the shooting in Buffalo, right? So if it hits in certain community lines or certain intersectionalities, that might factor in more saliently than others. But I think that's really profound because I think, again, you can argue this is kind of a society riddled with violence everywhere you look.

Arlene Limas

Yeah. And then you have cascading traumatic events, right? This new phenomenon that we're almost overwhelmed. Unfortunately, we're dealing with a pandemic. We're dealing with the financial crisis. We're dealing with everything that's being thrown at us on a daily basis. It definitely is something we need to approach differently if we are going to provide healthy, safe, productive workplaces. But not only that, for the people who care about their bottom line. If we're going to improve our bottom line, we have to improve the culture of our workplace and start acknowledging that this, unfortunately, is impacting our employees. So we need to have these discussions. We need to create better cultures, more communication. We need to a good

friend of mine. I swear I use this ten times a day. We need to normalize mistakes and have conversations around intention.

Phil Wagner

Absolutely.

Arlene Limas

I mean, I just love that quote of hers, Julie Harmon. Normalize mistakes and have conversations around intention. Just think about how that could change a work culture.

Phil Wagner

I've heard you in the past talk about this is sort of a domino effect, right, that all of these things stack on top of each other, stack on top of each other and the felt consequences, particularly to those individuals. But in this context, the employee is not even just performance, but it's a suppression of passion or engagement or imagination and creativity and commitment. And so I think all of those have direct applicability to our listeners, people who are leading in the world of work, to say, okay, this trauma-informed model is a model that is certainly worthwhile for our efforts.

Arlene Limas

Yeah, definitely. And I'll share with you this is why I think I'm having the impact, and I'm ringing on people's ears with my message like I am the success that I'm having. It's because everybody can see it when it's an athlete. So in the sport of Taekwondo for a while, and some may argue still current day, we were riddled with predatory coaches, a system that didn't protect our athletes, and you could see it. So when I give you the description of an athlete that's on an upward trajectory, winning everything, and then all of a sudden, bam, they're not able to make weight, they're missing workouts, they're not quite as focused in the ring, or they've lost their passion for what they love, the sport that they love. And then you find out, man, they're underage. They were in a relationship with their coach, or they were being abused, or they were assaulted, or God forbid, they were raped. And then, of course, it makes perfect sense why their production, why their performances suffered, why they couldn't focus, why they couldn't make weight. It's the same thing happening in the workplace. That's the athletes workplace, right? The field of play is the athletes workplace, but that's happening in hospitals, in the hospitality sector, so we see it. When I give that description in an athletic form, it makes sense all of a sudden to people. They can see it. Oh yeah, I see how that could happen. And then, when you couple that with a system that doesn't protect the athlete or doesn't protect the employee right. Then you have things like someone who comes forward, and that athlete loses everything. They lose their funding to pursue their dream. They lose their health care. They lose their financial security. If they're a resident athlete at the Olympic Training Center, they've now lost their home. It's the same thing. Now you just take that picture and put it in the workplace, in the conventional workplace, not the sporting workplace. And you see the parallel.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, absolutely. Now, does your work really explore just those outside occurrences of violence and how they impact people when they clock into their nine-to-five, or I think a lot of people might be surprised at the data on the prevalence of workplace violence? Specifically, do you do anything with violent workplaces? Is that how does PAVE do anything in that capacity?

Arlene Limas

Yeah, I mean, we're imparting the skill set to offset microaggressions, to have discussions, and set boundaries around toxicity. And when I say microaggression, sometimes people kind of scratch their head, you know, microaggressions, it's not only the off-the-cuff inappropriate joke or the off-the-cuff racial comment. It's things like things by omission, you're not invited to meetings, or you're not included on projects, or microaggressions cover a lot. And there is also research that I think I read it was something like 17 steps happen before there's a physical violent event. So imagine if we're given that skill set at work to offset it at the third one, the third little incident. Yeah, we are definitely imparting one. We want to help people heal from things that are happening outside of their workplace that they could be bringing into the workplace. But we also want to give them the skill set to deal with things at work as well. So we say at PAVE, you know, we give you the skill set to prevent we give you the skill set to react in real-time, set a boundary. No, I'm not comfortable working for another weekend. Can we have a discussion around that? And to heal from violent events. So the full spectrum of that, and I think that's really where it strength lies because you can't just hit one side or the other. I think it's going to take that full holistic approach.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, absolutely. And I see how all of those things start to sum to something even more consequential. I think there's something like just under 500 fatalities due to workplace violence every single year, 20 some thousand workers impacted by nonfatal workplace trauma. And so, again, if you can address this at level three instead of level 17, I think you're also impacting much more consequential outcomes than you may ever realize. So tell me what PAVE then does specifically, like, let's say I'm like, okay, this is a lens that I want to take. This is a programmatic effort that I want to partake in. I want to bring this to my organization. So let's say I call you, Arlene, and say hey, I need you to come in and start doing some stuff. What is your programming look like? What's your model for actualizing change within organizations to lead to a healthier world of work?

Arlene Limas

We're heavy on assessments, so we have designed and developed a set of assessments. One that the individual employee takes around assertiveness, empathy, things like this, we're able to give feedback on. Second is the what we call our Employee Experience Survey. And that's an organizational assessment that gives feedback to the organization, to the company, on, you know, indicators on violence in their workplace, you know, what type of culture do they have around toxicity and aggression? So we feel it's very meaningful. There is nothing like that out there from what we can tell and what we researched. I think it's going to be very impactful as

we start gathering more and more data with that assessment. But we use those assessments to then tailor our training for each of our clients. The scenarios are customized that we go through, and we are heavy on scenarios because we just retain information differently when we're adrenalized. So if we can run people through scenarios and then have discussions after, it's just a different way of learning. And we'll hold on to those lessons that we've learned at a higher rate and a stronger rate. So then we impart our training. We circle back to make sure that training in three months, in six months, and nine months, and we're able to give scores from those assessments. And then, okay, we improved, we're showing an improvement, and then circle back with other training where it's needed. We also have a managerial or C suite. It's not necessarily an assessment, but it is a questionnaire on, okay, now let's sit at a table and let's discuss what you have that's working and what we feel we can change or tweak or add or offer that can improve culture. So it really is a holistic approach. It's all stakeholders. And that's how I think meaningful change occurs. I think it's something it's just like sports. You have to create muscle memory, right? If I want to improve a certain kick, I have to create a technique and muscle memory that allows me to kick correctly. So I don't think this is a one-and-done, which is what a lot of violence prevention training is. I think it's something that has to be continually strengthened, and new things may occur, and then they have to be added into the plan. I think it's got to be evergrowing.

Phil Wagner

Yeah. How do you battle within the assessment framework? How do you grapple with folks who might be a little reticent to share their experiences? I imagine it's probably they're not so hesitant to share it with you as they are. Ha ha. Could this be identifiable information that gets back to my boss and puts me in an awkward position because I've ratted things out? I think this is something we often really have to grapple with when we do any assessments in DEI work writ large. Have you found a solution or any ideas for how you address that?

Arlene Limas

I mean, the only thing we've done, and again, this is out of my realm of strength here.

Phil Wagner

Yeah, for sure.

Arlene Limas

But the people that we have brought in to develop our assessments and develop our platform, we never see their emails. We never see their names. They're given a number, and they can access their scores via a number. So it's very important to us that they feel safe, that that information is protected, and there's no way that we can circle back with this and that they can be pinpointed or questioned or worse. Right.

Phil Wagner

Yeah.

Arlene Limas

We're hoping that we are putting a lot of time I'll share with you, Phil, we are putting a lot of time in our communication plan on how we communicate what those assessments are and what they mean and how important they are and how protected the people who take them are. So we have put a lot of thought into that and, of course, all the top security measures that could possibly that we could possibly put in. Because if someone takes a leap of faith with us and says, okay, give me this data on violence and toxic culture in my workplace, in my company, we don't want that ever to be used against them. We want that information to be used for good and not to be weaponized against them. So it's very important to us that we protect our clients and we protect the employees as well. So this is a full spectrum that we've given a lot of thought to.

Phil Wagner

No, I think that's important, being ever mindful of vendors that you liaise with and also ever mindful of security and protection and privacy. I think as we continue to move from the place of data-driven change-making, got to really look at the integrity of that data. And so I appreciate you sharing there. Can you talk to us a little bit about how you measure that change? You mentioned this isn't a checkbox. This isn't a one-and-done. That's what really sets you apart. So as you implement that tailored programming, when and how do you come back to say we've accomplished our mission? This is a certifiable nonviolent workplace. Does it end in that outcome? What is the outcome?

Arlene Limas

Well, I mean, in a perfect world, my friend Phil, in a perfect world, we're back here in five years or three years, and the term PAVE compliant or PAVE compliance officer is normal vernacular. I mean, everybody is comfortable with that. But yeah, that's how I envision it. I envision it either an HR person being completely certified under PAVE prevention and being able to do continued learning there or a PAVE person is now being brought into the HR department and finding innovative and creative ways to continue this training. But as we now see LEED stickers on the front of buildings that say it's been built in clean and thoughtful ways and it is sustainable, maybe someday, maybe three to five years, there will be a PAVE sticker that is on the bottom of a web page when you go to seek a job there. But that's how I envision it. So we'll see. And for me this is a bit of a Trojan horse for me. Phil, I'm going to come clean, right? I know that when we instill this, we impart the skill set to an employee at work. They're not going to leave that skill at work, at their office, at their desk. They're going to take that skill set with. So they're going to be able to de-escalate it in their home. They're going to be able to share those skills with their family members. They're going to be able to take it in the communities which they move within. I mean, it sounds corny, but this is the effort to make the world safer, not just the workplace. Although this is where I'm getting my foot in the door.

Phil Wagner

No, I think that's great. And again, I know we can get catastrophic in our present realities. I know the world has always been a complicated place, but my gosh, look no further than the past three to five years and all that we've experienced in the realm of violence nationally, locally, globally. So I think this is the perfect space for your work to come in and drive impact and change. One more question for you. As this episode plays out over DV Awareness Month, and we speak directly to victims and survivors or particularly their supervisors, I'm wondering, since so much of your work is in this area, can you speak directly to leaders and managers providing insight on what they might do in the here and now? Right here? Step one to begin to be more mindful of creating organizational environments where maybe victims and survivors can thrive, but just workplace environments that are safer, happier, healthier. Any insights for leaders and managers as we conclude today?

Arlene Limas

Be engaged, be kind. You know, I mean, lead by example. It sounds corny. Grandmaster Jhoon Rhee put it in his student creed. He's the father of American Taekwondo might for right. How do we lead by example? These are just easy things. And yes, it can have an impact from top down. So I think that's important. Having leaders that engage with their employees and with their workforce and how they engage with their workforce, leading by example, doing what you can to create an empathetic outreach is really important.

Phil Wagner

That's so powerful. This has been a great conversation of all I know of Taekwondo. I know that very much. It is about the art or way of doing something, and I'm so thankful for the art that you're bringing into this, the thoughtfulness you're bringing to this, how you're changing the way that we are thinking and being about the business of the world of work. So, Arlene, my friend, thank you for your insights. Thank you for all you do. Quick final question. What can our listeners do to support you or to continue to contribute to you and PAVE and the great work that you're doing?

Arlene Limas

I mean, please, first and foremost, any opportunity like this where I can share what we're doing, give us a ring, shoot me an email, I will be there. So anytime, I think that this is my strength to be able to share ideas this way, so I'd like to take advantage of that. So anyone who puts me would care to listen, I will talk to them. And second, if this fits into your scope, if you know a boss or if you know an HR professional, or if you know a company that is ready to take this step in this innovative approach, please reach out. We'd love to hear from them. I have my own podcast, Disrupting the Dominoes. You can subscribe to that. We have some fantastic guests on that. It has been a really fun thing for me to engage in. We have a newsletter, so, yeah, we'd love for you to be a part of what we're doing.

Phil Wagner

Awesome. Well, listeners, thank you for tuning into our episode today with Arlene Limas, again, one of the greatest Taekwondo athletes. I know, her bio says of the 20th century, but I'm just going to say of all time, truly building a legacy far beyond the Olympics, far beyond just one dimension. I still appreciate the work you do. Thank you for being here today.

Arlene Limas

Thank you, Phil.

Phil Wagner

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