

## ***Educating Students Through an Ethics Curriculum***

Meryl Selig, Karen Rezach, and Regene Nolan

Meryl Selig 0:04

Hello and welcome back to Voices in Bioethics. My name is Meryl Selig, and I have the great pleasure of interviewing Dr. Karen Rezach today. Dr. Rezach is a founding director of The Ethics Institute at Kent Place School in Summit, New Jersey. Kent Place is a nonsectarian independent school that educates girls from preschool through Grade 12. Dr. Rezach is a leader in primary and secondary school ethics education. She has been teaching and facilitating ethics workshops for students, parents, faculty, administrators, private organizations and others for over 20 years. She's also developed partnerships with the Hastings Center and Georgetown University's Kennedy Institute of Ethics, building programs for secondary school students. She joined Kent Place school 22 years ago as Director of the Middle School and also served as Assistant Head of School at St. Philip's in Newark, New Jersey. Furthermore, with a Master's in divinity from Yale, Dr. Rezach is an ordained Episcopal priest. And she continues to develop programs for educators to cultivate values and moral awareness in non religious ways in a variety of school settings. Whoa. So you have a fascinating educational, experiential history. Could you share some insight into your background about the path you've taken?

Karen Rezach 1:24

Thank you. And thanks so much for having me today. So I started my career as a teacher, I actually was a history and psychology teacher in middle school and high school. And along the way, I guess it had some fits and starts because I found when I first was in the classroom as a teacher, way back in my early 20s, that I didn't really have enough life experiences, I thought to be an effective teacher. I basically said, I'm still in the classroom, I'm just on the other side of the desk. And so I left teaching for a time and I worked for Pepsi-Cola, and the New York Times. And that was the most valuable experience for me, because I felt that I had finally left academia, and I lived in the, quote, real world. And so I think that that really informed my my teaching and my craft, because what I found in working out in corporate America was some people were more honest than others. Some people had a work ethic that was different from others. And I found myself constantly asking the question, "gee, I wonder who was a mentor for this person? I wonder who was an influencer for this person? I wonder what this person's educational experience was?" And so I think that that's what really led me back into education, where I have been for many years, eventually becoming a school administrator. But at the same time, I also pursued my passion, which I don't like to say religion, because I think that religion has lots of connotations that people can pile onto it, I really see, you know, each person as as having a spiritual quality. And for me, of course, I'm an Episcopal priest, so I'm Christian. But I wanted to study faith and spirituality on an academic level, and not just an experiential one, which is what led me to Yale. And so combining those two experiences of being an educator being passionate about spirituality and faith that led me to write my dissertation, which was spiritual leadership as a model of effective leadership for independent schools. The challenge, of course, is how do we bring a sense of spirituality, a sense of self into the independent school realm, when, of course, it's nonsectarian? And that's what led to the Ethics

Institute.

Meryl Selig 3:52

So would you say it's maybe the aspect of moral philosophy, that way of looking at ethics, that what makes people think the way they think and decide the way they decide? And what I'm hearing is that, and I would agree with you, is that there's a spiritual core in people whether or not it's aligned with the specific religion. We have something in us that gives us a moral compass, if you will, is that kind of what you're, we're getting at?

Karen Rezach 4:17

Exactly. That's definitely at the heart of it. What I found as an educator was that we were becoming increasingly more concerned only about what students produced, you know about the product. And what was more scary was that that's how the students identified themselves, or that's how students viewed their self worth as to what they were to become or what grade they got on a test. So I thought, no, it's not what you do, it's who you are, that really matters. And so how do we give students the opportunity to discover who they are? What is it that they value? And most importantly, you already use the word think, how do we get them to think and not simply react or respond but really think deeply and broadly about issues, about dilemmas, about their lives? And then how do they apply the values that are most important to them to any of those situations. And that's where the spiritual element comes in. Because students are given the opportunity to really think deeply about where do my values come from, you know, what are my life experiences? How would I respond in a situation like this? And why would I respond in a situation like this. And then the real where the real magic occurs is that when they're in these conversations in the classroom with their peers, they realize that not everyone thinks the same as they do. And not everyone comes to the same conclusions or makes the same decisions. And to me, that is really what a global perspective is. It's not just understanding the way different countries in the world work. But it's about understanding how the people who we live with and who we are surrounded with on a daily basis, each comes to the table with their own life experiences, and how those experiences inform who they are. And most importantly, how can you become an authentic person, one who really lives by those values, because it's one thing to understand what values means and values like, you know, respect, integrity, compassion, justice, equity, all of those things, they can really students can give you the definition for all of those, but what do they look like lived out that is really at the core of what we do with ethics. And and so then it's applying, of course, as the students get older, we talk about a variety of different ethical and philosophical frameworks. But with the youngest students, with the parents, with the teachers, we really talk about what is it that we value most? What is it that you value most? And how do you utilize them in making decisions that are of consequence.

Meryl Selig 6:53

In talking with you and listening to you, it seems like this is so fundamental to a child's education that I find it somewhat surprising that this The Ethics Institute at Kent Place was the first program of its kind in the United States. Listening to you realize how this is so crucial to helping young people develop into full human beings. And it's phenomenal what you've done at Ken Place. At the same time, I mean, I want to stop here, though, actually, and ask you, if you could describe how you build out the program and the different grade levels and what happens at each level, they seem very age appropriate. But you really are the founder of something that was the pioneer

program in this entire country, it just seems quite astonishing, not that you did it, but that something so self evident, has not had time, it's taken this long to happen. So I'll step back. And perhaps you can describe the program in any order you wish you the primary, middle, high school or the other way around.

Karen Rezach 7:52

Yes. So the mission and you know, like, you always say, you know, you have to be able to give the elevator pitch. But the mission is not just a pitch it was really very intentionally created. It's the mission of The Ethics Institute is to promote a practice of ethical decision-making in primary and secondary school communities. And what's really important about that mission statement is, first of all, it's not just learning about ethics. It's not just learning about ethical theories, but that ethics and ethical decision-making and really learning how to become an ethical thinker is a practice. And it's a process. And it's a, it has to be practiced on a regular basis. And not just in the classroom. But you know, on the playground, at home, in the dining hall, wherever you may be as a citizen of the school, the community, the society, the country, the world. So of course, as they grow, their horizons expand out. But the other really important part of the mission is that it's K to 12 communities. Because one of the things that I felt very strongly about from day one was that if we didn't include the adults in the students lives, the teachers, the parents, the administrators, the trustees, the coaches, that it wouldn't be as effective because we all need to be speaking a similar language, not that we have the same values we don't, but that we would be willing to engage in really thinking about things through an ethical lens, and that if the students were the only ones doing that and not the role models in their lives, that wouldn't be as effective. So it started with a an elective in middle school. I was the middle school principal at the time. And so I said I'm going to pilot an elective, an ethics elective. I utilized case studies, some that I found in different ethics programs, the CSEE, Josephson, I did a lot of research around what different people were doing with ethics. And so I found a case study or two and then I wrote a few case studies based on my experience as the principal, my interactions with students and teachers and parents. The students loved this elective, and they loved it so much that they asked if we could continue at lunch to have these kinds of conversations. I was pleasantly surprised. But what really surprised me and what really prompted me to keep moving forward with it was that I saw that it was accomplishing the goal of them discovering who they are as people. Because by being able to talk about something in the third person, especially for middle school age students, instead of having to talk about themselves, because developmentally, that's very difficult for them, but talking about, you know, the two friends who come into seventh grade, and now the one friend wants to branch out and have other relationships with more friends, who maybe don't want the original friend to be part of the group. I mean, it sounds very simple. But a case like that was what gave the students the opportunity to talk about what was important to them, how they would feel if they were one stakeholder or another in the case. And that's how they learned what was important to them. And then again, you know, I always have the students make a decision, because making a decision is oftentimes very difficult, but make a decision based on the value that's most important to you in any particular case or situation.

Meryl Selig 11:26

In listening to you it sounds almost like you're a teacher and a coach, and then having them repeat certain disciplines, thinking disciplines, they're building a skill, just as an athlete, you know, let's say it's tennis, try serving countless times, so you improve your serve. And if what I'm hearing you describe are cases that you present to the students that they can relate to every day.

Karen Rezach 11:49

Yes.

Meryl Selig 11:50

Very age appropriate, I find that extremely intriguing, because all middle schoolers face the kinds of circumstances that you just described, breaking into new groups of friends and understanding, hey, there, they're not like, my friends in grammar school or whatever.

Karen Rezach 12:06

I actually just got finished training a group of current high school students, where we are creating a new initiative around living in a virtual world, and you know, social media, and et cetera. And so one of the things that they want to do the high school students, they want to facilitate, create, and facilitate ethical case studies to use with the middle school students around issues of social media. And I was teaching them how to be facilitators. And so yes, it's kind of teaching. Yes, it's kind of coaching. But it really is facilitating a conversation. And the most important part of facilitating these ethical conversations is to be able to ask the right questions, and to really prompt the students to think more broadly, to think more deeply to create a safe space where people can have civil discourse. You know, really, as I just said to the students, you have to be the facilitator must be neutral. Because if you're not neutral, when you're getting students to really peel away the layers of the case, and I created a whole decision-making method that they utilize, then the conversation is dead. You have to allow the conversation to happen, and you have to steer it. And that's what I'm doing with the students, again, who are learning to be facilitators, but also the professional development workshops that we offer to not only the teachers here at Kent Place, but teachers across the country in different schools. And so that is actually how The Ethics Institute grew. Because from that first classroom, I created workshops for the parents, and then workshops for the teachers, and then variety of different programs, you know, teaching ethics in your advisory program, teaching ethics in your science classroom. And so they grew, and it grew, and it grew. Ethical issues in the admissions process. So in every area of the school, there are ethical dilemmas. And so I created all these workshops, that would, again, really feed and cater to all the different constituents in a K to 12 community. Going back to that mission, it's about everyone in the community. I think the thing that really advanced The Ethics Institute was the collaboration with The Hastings Center on the creation of the bioethics project in the high school.

Could you describe that? That's a great segue to describe your relationship to The Hastings Center and maybe for some of our listeners, not sure what The Hastings Center is, and then you also have a good working relationship with the Kennedy Institute for Ethics at Georgetown. Would you mind touching on those two?

Yes. So The Hastings Center for Biomedical Research, they are a nonpartisan think tank, probably the most renowned in the world where they publish. You know, a quarterly review of various ethical issues that are faced worldwide. And I mean, it's much larger than that. But again, they they're renowned, and they are kind of the go to

in the world of ethics and bioethics. I had the opportunity to meet the person who at the time, David Roscoe was the president of the Board, I was introduced to him through someone who served on the Advisory Board of The Ethics Institute, because I did put together an Advisory Board to help develop the strategic plan and the mission. And you know, how The Ethics Institute actually grew. But so I met David and David and I had similar goals. And so David mentioned to me that, you know, The Hastings Center is a fabulous institution, a tremendous resource. But what The Hastings Center would love to be able to do is to educate the general community, not just the policymakers or the ethicists or people in the legal realm, about ethical issues, but you know, everyday people. So I said, well, that's great, because we here have all the everyday people, we have all the members of the community, and I would love to be able to partner with, you know, such a renowned, respected ethics institute that could really advance what we're doing here for high school students. And that's how it was born. So we're in the 11th year, we just celebrated the 10 year anniversary of the bioethics project that Kent Place school. Actually, we're in the this week and next week immersion program the summer immersion program for the students who were selected for next year, they learn about ethics and bioethics, and a number of topics and principles of biomedical ethics. And then they are required to write a scholarly paper on a topic that interests them. This year, the broad topic is gender and bioethics. In the early days, they were assigned a mentor from The Hastings Center. Now the partnership is with the Kennedy Institute. And so the students are paired with a mentor from the Kennedy Institute, and then they write this paper. But the main part and again, achieving the original goal of the bioethics project, is they hold a yearly and annual symposium about all the students here in the high school and people from outside about 500 people come, the 12 bioethics students, educate the community about whatever their topic is, whatever they've written their done their research and written their paper on so we accomplish the goal of educating the greater community about some of these issues that really impact all of our lives.

Meryl Selig 17:43

That is spectacular. I feel like it's the thousand points of light kind of thing, you know, but you're doing it 12 students at a time at the high school level.

Karen Rezach 17:51

Yes.

Meryl Selig 17:52

And really enlightening people, it's just just spectacular. Again, you're touching on something that has been has always been vitally important to people and how they develop a sense of who they are and their values, it seems even more appropriate for the very fraught times that we're living in right now. Every story and item that comes up seems to be completely laden with with moral and ethical quandaries and questions. And then we hear the stories about students' depression and anxiety, suicide rates, it seems to me that there's almost a crying need for this to spread and be picked up by other secondary schools, you know, more so than ever to give young people a way to make some sense for themselves. Are you seeing any, you know, increased interest in inquiries from beyond Kent Place where people there's some maybe increased demand from other people around the country?

Karen Rezach 18:48

There has been an increased demand, again, a number of inquiries every year from teachers who would like to teach bioethics. You know, it's a big commitment of time with the mentoring and et cetera. So I really haven't, well, no, actually, we partnered with a school in Newark one year where we simultaneously did the research and the students in Newark wrote a paper they didn't have the mentor from Georgetown. But some of my colleagues and I, we were the ones who read and edited their papers, and then they did presentations in their own school community about some of the issues that they researched. So there is a tremendous interest, there is a tremendous interest on the part of the students who really want to understand ways that they can think about some of these huge issues. For right now, you know, a few of the issues you mentioned, one, of course, is the increased levels of depression and anxiety among those who are 25 and under which is of tremendous concern. Artificial Intelligence is another topic. It really that really gets to the heart of what does it mean to be human and what is a person and you know, how do we how do we act and interact in a world that is increasingly becoming artificial? And what does that mean? You know, the whole issues around the virtual world beyond artificial intelligence, social media impact, awareness around social media, and again, social media is not going away. And so, you know, what are some of the I don't want to say new ways of living, but you know, how do we, because I just said this the other day, a 16 year old today is the same person as a 16 year old 40 years ago, but think about the amount of influences, influencers, you know, images, words, ideas that get thrown at them in any given day, via their phone. You know, I mean, they probably see more in a day than I saw in a year.

Meryl Selig 20:48

For sure.

Karen Rezach 20:49

But are we any different as human beings? So how do we think that they can handle that and they do all of that, of course, in isolation. They're by themselves, there really is no, you know, human interaction. And I think all of those things are, you know, contributors to some of the anxiety that the students have, that's what they share with me.

But the phone is not going away. Again, the virtual world is not going away. So what do we need to do to have empowered, aware, and students who can ethically navigate a virtual world. So that's, you know, one of the other areas that we're really focused on right now. And that's of tremendous interest to the students. Also, the students once they finish the bioethics project year, they're very interested in continuing and continuing maybe their own research and continuing to be a part of bioethics conversations. I have two students this year who have created a bioethics podcast, called Thinking Out Loud, and they're going to launch that next year so that they can have conversations with their peers about issues in bioethics that are important and relevant to them. And so there are a number of ways that we're going to try to expand what we do here at this school around bioethics and invite other students, other schools, other teachers to become part of that conversation. That's, that's my next phase of the bioethics project.

Meryl Selig 22:19

Well, I certainly hope that everyone and anyone listening to this podcast will first of all, go to [kentplace.org](http://kentplace.org), and read about how robust the program is. It's beyond impressive, almost astonishing. But then hearing your energy, I

guess, it's not as astonishing as you might think. But also, as a grad student at Columbia, Voices in Bioethics is an activity that branched out from the bioethics department at Columbia University, I would hope that we at Columbia and in our group can work with you all in the future and help to disseminate not only what you're doing, but to support what you're doing. It seems absolutely, I don't know, more crucial than ever, that people younger than ever, are helped to learn to think this way. And understand there's no right and wrong, not usually there's a right and a right.

Karen Rezach 23:16

Exactly.

Meryl Selig 23:17

Instead of having an emotional reaction to things, which we all do. But I, as you know best, in middle school and high school years, that emotional reaction is often the very first one and it's overwhelming. So the fact that you're trying to work with that and mitigate that and have the students stop and think and understand their processes. I feel like it's a movement that that that needs some evangelism, if you will-

Karen Rezach 23:44

Yes, yes. I agree.

Meryl Selig 23:45

-to bring back the religious aspect. Do you have some ideas about how this model could be adapted more widely?

Karen Rezach 23:56

Well, I do think that there are so many skills that the students learn, that I think should be adopted more widely. So maybe every student is not going to engage in such in depth scholarly research and write, you know, a 25 page paper to be published. But what they can do is, first of all, they can be given the option to pursue an area that interests them. That's one of the main pieces of feedback that we've gotten over the numerous surveys that we've done with students who have gone through the program that for the first time in their lives, you know, they came to a class, and the road in front of them was totally open to them. And that, you know, we're going to give you, you know, we're going to teach you about, again, ethics and bioethics and seminal cases and ways to think or not think and decisions that have to be made. I have a wonderful partnership with Atlantic Health Systems, which is the hospital system here in this part of northern and western New Jersey, where they get the practical application as well. So students are invited to ethics committee meetings, and they get to hear, you know, actual medical practitioners talking about these very, very difficult cases, and how do we go about making an ethical decision when there really are lives at stake. And so giving other students the opportunity to, you know, venture outside of the classroom, to again, choose a topic that truly interests them, and then have an expert in the fields or experts in the field to guide them, to help them to develop their thinking. You know, the students develop

critical thinking skills, speaking skills, discernment skills, presentation skills, all those types of skills that they will use for the rest of their lives.

Meryl Selig 25:50

Absolutely.

Karen Rezach 25:51

But you know, what the number one skill that they learn is their ability to think, and think more broadly and think more deeply. And so that model in giving students, you know, not, here's the syllabus, and this is where we're going to wind up in 10 weeks. But here are the topics. Here's it a main topic. And here are some ways that we're going to be thinking about it. And I want to know what you think I want to know what you think are the ethical questions. I want to know, you know, who you would like to hear from. And so putting that, you know, I mean, there's, believe me, there's structure, and there are rubrics, and there's all of that, that's traditional in education, but what's not traditional, and what's great about the model is that not only are they learning but then they in turn become the teachers. And that's what you learn most is what you teach best. So it becomes a part of them.

Meryl Selig 26:49

I have to say I am so inspired listening to you, I don't know whether I'd like to be a middle school student again, and start early at Kent Place, or go out and work with you. It's so so vitally exciting and inspiring. And I think any of us who look at the next generations coming up certainly want want to give them help them have the tools they'll need to thrive and not be bowled over by all of the issues and challenges indeed crises that they're facing, we're all facing.

Karen Rezach 27:20

Well, I'm excited because in the coming year, we are going to accomplish one of our main goals at The Ethics Institute, which is to bring ethics into the youngest grades, the primary school. And so we have created a whole program called BEE ,the BEE - be ethical everywhere B-E-E, it's the acronym for Be Ethical Everywhere. And it is the story of Beatrice, the Ethical Bee, there is a whole storyline catered to with an accompanying big books illustrated. And so you follow the exploits of Beatrice and her friends and Queen Mabel, and she gets herself into different situations. And it's a chance for the youngest children to start to think about values and how do you make tough decisions and one of the things that you need to be thinking about. So we've created the whole curriculum around it, which is very interdisciplinary. And we're very excited. We have piloted this, not only here at Kent Place, but at other schools for the past three years. And we've made the edits and the book is going to press in July. And so we're looking to do the final launch. I'm sure there'll be more edits. But the final launch of this in the fall.

Meryl Selig 28:45

It's a publication or the curriculum, what is?



Karen Rezach 28:48

Both. So there's the book, the big book, Beatrice the Ethical Bee, but there, actually, we our music department created two original songs one for the kindergarten and one for the first grade, about Beatrice the Ethical Bee and then about the decision-making methodology. But of course, it's age appropriate. And the students you know, it's again, there's, there's lots of art, there's lots of manipulatives, they create a hive, they create a garden. And as they learn the different values about you know, responsibility, about respect, about honesty, you know, all of that, the garden grows, and their understanding of, you know, values and how to make decisions, and sometimes you don't make the right decision. And, you know, what do you do when you don't know what the right decision is to make?

So it's a very exciting book. It's a very exciting series, as I said, it's K through 2 with all the accompanying professional development, teacher training, you know, lesson plans, extensions for lesson plans, art projects, science projects, history projects, all of that. So it's taken us about three years to create.

Meryl Selig 30:03

And would this be available to educators anywhere in the country?

Karen Rezach 30:08

Yes. Anywhere in the world, actually, yes.

Meryl Selig 30:11

How will you get the word out about it, it seems spectacular to me.

Karen Rezach 30:15

I think we're still trying to figure out the marketing strategy. I said, it's so funny, I was never, you know, I was an educator, you know, a school administrator and not a book publisher. So that's still what I refer to as a work in progress, and the marketing of it and the distribution of it. So we're very excited because, you know, we hired a very professional illustrator, the final book is, is near completion. And the characters, and this is our second iteration of it, we are maybe even third, but the characters are just so I think endearing and accessible to a diverse group of students, which was the other thing that we wanted to make sure that, you know, regardless of who you are, where you live, whether, you know, whatever, that you would find something in Beatrice and in her friends, that would help you to, you know, discover your values for yourself. So, you know, it's in an illustrated book for the youngest, it's in case studies for, you know, the middle schoolers. And in the high school, it just takes on, you know, much higher level bioethics project being an example of that.

Meryl Selig 31:26

This is so inspirational, truly, and I'm ready to go out and be a curriculum salesman as soon as we end this podcast.

Karen Rezach 31:35

Oh, great, thank you.

Meryl Selig 31:37

Seriously, I thought I was into bioethics, but I'm thinking this curriculum is really spectacular, and certainly pulls at the heart for marketing people to get out and help this really see a very broad horizon and be picked up by other programs. Karen, you've been extremely generous with your time, I would hope that we can direct people to the [kentplace.org](http://kentplace.org) website, they can see how to contact you.

Karen Rezach 32:06

Absolutely.

Meryl Selig 32:06

Yes, and be very impressed with the robust program that you and your colleagues have built and your parents have built. And the students have built. We look forward to actually interviewing one of your alumna in a couple of days, and we will be doing a follow up podcast to hear the story and the experience of of one of your ethics graduates. So we look forward to adding that on as well. Karen, thank you so much.

Karen Rezach 32:34

Thank you, it's been a pleasure.

Meryl Selig 32:36

Thanks again. Bye, bye.

Karen Rezach 32:38

Bye.

Meryl Selig 32:40

Hey there. Welcome back to Voices in Bioethics. We're continuing our conversation and our look at ethics

education in primary, middle, and high school. Now we've invited Regene Nolan, an alumna of Kent Place school and also an alumna of The Ethics Project at Kent Place. Regene is going to share her experiences and perspectives with us as a student ethicist. And here's a little bit about Regene. Regene Nolan is a recent high school graduate and alumna of Kent Place school. During her sophomore year at Kent Place, Regene participated in The Bioethics Project. The Bioethics Project is a program of The Ethics Institute at the school in which students are encouraged to engage in scholarly research on ethical theories and principles. Ultimately, presenting original projects that contribute to the field of ethics. As a Bioethics Project scholar, Regene presented her research project entitled "Selection of the Best Possible Child: should relative morals and opinions determine the next generation?" I think we're going to talk about that in a little bit, Regene, sounds so interesting. She explored the complexities of utilizing genetic testing during in vitro fertilization to select embryos based on the presence or absence of both disease and nondisease traits. During her undergraduate years Regene continued her education in bioethics with a focus on ethics in health care. Regene earned her Bachelor of Science in Biology in 2021 from Northeastern University and is currently working as a medical scribe where she continues to expand and develop her understanding of biomedical ethics in real world settings. Wow Regene, pretty exciting. Well, we're going to scroll back a little bit in your personal history, and we'd love to know what attracted you to the ethics program and then The Bioethics Project in particular.

Regene Nolan 34:39

Sure. I'm not even sure if it was one thing that attracted me to the program. Honestly, I throughout my life, I've just been curious about everything. And I remember while attending Kent Place seeing these presentations put on. They would happen annually and everyone was invited to attend and you could see the most fascinating projects every year from other students. And I just remember wanting to be a part of it myself and finding out what it was really about. At that time, I think my understanding of ethics was really just, you know, the trolley problem and things like that. So you know, very standard, basic, what everyone kind of knows the surface level of ethics. And I just wanted to know more. And the theme that year where I would have applied was about the genetic self. And that seems like a pretty great intersection of things I wanted to get into. I had already known I was interested in, like medicine, health care, learning more about that. But also, having now applied ethics to it just seemed like something I really wanted to be a part of. And so I applied, I interviewed with the staff who were going to be running the entire project, and I was very lucky to then be able to be a part of it.

Meryl Selig 36:04

Yeah, indeed. So is the was The Bioethics Project, a subset of the ethics curriculum in high school?

Regene Nolan 36:12

Yep, absolutely. So we had The Ethics Institute at Kent Place. And it's, it's this really amazing thing that I think should be a part of more schools. We had a, like a solid ethics program, even if we didn't have, you know, specific classes for it, you could be part of the Ethics Bowl team. And that was a high schoolers who would come up with ethical arguments and sort of debate them with other Ethics Bowl teams at other schools. And like just having this dedicated institute to teaching students about ethics and how to engage with the world around them in a way that dissects the constant ethical dilemmas that we encounter. As such an amazing thing that I hope becomes

expanded to schools everywhere. But The Bioethics Program was another subset of The Ethics Institute. And this one was like, specific to our school, students would be able to apply, attend the project. And it was this, it was like a multi-semester thing throughout the school year. So we had summer classes where you learn the basics of ethics, you know, so we had a foundation to go off. From there it kept building, we would be able to hear from guest lectures, we got to go on many field trips, to learn more about all the components of ethics, ethical concepts, principles, and then from that knowledge, build it into our own research.

Meryl Selig 37:54

That is spectacular, truly, truly a well rounded curriculum. And what an amazing experience to have when you're in high school. Clearly, we will talk about this in a bit. But clearly, this has changed the way you're looking at your career and yourself going forward.

Regene Nolan 38:09

Absolutely.

Meryl Selig 38:10

Um, how could it not? Now are there mentors in this program? Is this, does The Bioethics Project include a mentorship program?

Regene Nolan 38:18

Yep, so The Bioethics Project was actually a partnership with The Hastings Center in New York. So we would have mentors from The Hastings Center, like after we were moving forward in the curriculum, and we're trying to generate our own research topic, our mentor would guide us on how we wanted to phrase an argument, how we could convey what we wanted to say, all sorts of things. And it was really helpful, because these were older people who were, you know, pretty accomplished. They knew what they were talking about. And they were sharing that knowledge with us. And I mean, I at the time, I was maybe 15 or 16. So that's like to be able to have a dedicated mentor, helping me figure out how to even conduct research, how to put all the words I wanted to say into something that was actually coherent, was something that was so crucial, and just a great experience to have at such a young age where it's like, that's those are formative years. And as you said, like that experience later, helped shape who I am today. So I think being able to give that experience to kids in high school, you know, having one-on-one mentorship, crafting something together is just such a phenomenal experience.

Meryl Selig 39:42

Indeed, and in fact, it begs the question about how this could be expanded beyond spectacular institutions like Kent Place. And I certainly can't expect you to expand it nationally. I don't know are you aware of at all have other programs like this? Is it something you've heard of? Or is Kent Place pretty unique?

Regene Nolan 40:06

Um, honestly, I think, I mean, fortunately, and unfortunately, I would have to say that Kent Place might be unique in that aspect. We are definitely, you know, lucky to have an entire dedicated institute towards ethics. But personally, I'm not sure if I know of other institutions, I mean, at a high school level that have such a robust ethics program. And I mean, again, I'm I was lucky to go to Kent Place and be able to experience this, but it's definitely something that I would hope is able to be expanded to, if not every high school nationally than most. Because having that ethics education at an age where, you know, you're not quite be you're not quite released into the world at large yet. But you know, that's what everything is gearing you up to, having that foundation of how to understand the people around you, beyond, you know, your sole perspective, but knowing how to internalize someone else's perspective, and understand, like who are stakeholders in the situation, why is something happening the way it's happening. I think, you know, high school is the best time to start crafting that education. So I hope that there are institutions out there and I'm just not aware of them that have something like Kent Place.

Meryl Selig 41:32

Indeed, while you are a wonderful advocate and spokesman for this, and I love the expression you used when you're not quite ready to be released into the world. It's a beautiful image. Actually, if you think about high school students, especially you know about to graduate and indeed be released into the world. Really, it's a wonderful image. Thank you. Yeah. So we could go back and talk maybe just a few minutes about your research project, because there's more and more assisted reproductive technology going on nowadays. And it seems your paper addressed genetic testing at the embryonic level?

Regene Nolan 42:13

Yes. So as I mentioned before, during our summer course, we were able to hear from guest lecturers who were bioethics scholars experienced in their fields. And there was one session that we had that brought up a particular bioethicist, a paper that he'd written, which ended up being the paper that I sort of based my entire project around, and it was Julian Savulescu. Julian Savulescu is the bioethicists and his paper was "Procreative Beneficence: Why We Should Select the Best Children." And so his viewpoint throughout that article was that there's a moral obligation for prospective parents or single reproducers, anyone who's going through in vitro fertilization to select embryos for future children that would have the greatest chance at having the best life, which does sound like a really great principal, who doesn't want their child to have the best life possible. But it also went beyond and was exploring the idea of using preimplantation genetic diagnosis to select embryos, not just based on disease traits, so you know, if genetic testing is done, and Embryo 1 might have a possibility of developing Tay Sachs disease, choosing against that embryo, but also he proposes that in the future, if we're able to select for nondisease traits, as well, like intelligence, we are morally obligated to select the embryo that would have the greatest intelligence essentially. So my argument was that I don't think that we should be morally required to select the theoretical best child, because it's all so relative. A child, you know, it's not really general. And one of the examples I ended up using was a court case about a deaf lesbian couple, what they were doing was selecting an embryo that had the potential of developing deafness. You know, the child would have been deaf, and they felt that that was something that was essential to them because they were both deaf, and they didn't feel that they would be able to effectively raise/connect with/give the best life to a hearing child. And that became a

court case because it was, it was seen as something that was wrong, like morally wrong to select a child who would have a disability, and that that's something that definitely would have gone against Savulescu's principle, because they were not selecting a child who would have in his mind the best possible life. But again, that's why in my title, I talked about relativity of morals. That child would have had the best life with that particular couple, because they all would have been deaf. But you know, in the world at large, would the child have the best life? That's more debatable. So it's it's such a complex topic to get into. And there was so much to talk about, actually, when I made my presentation, I ended up having to cut it significantly because I was going well over my time. Because it's really this, there's so much to talk about, you could talk about it for days.

Meryl Selig 45:38

It is riveting. I mean, it is a far reaching topic, as you discovered as you were doing the work. And for writing and presenting your paper as an aside, at Columbia in the bioethics program, the graduate program, reproductive ethics is taught and we go deeply into Savulescu's argument. And it truly I mean, it slides down into eugenics, it's goes in all kinds of directions about inequities, you know, all the things that I'm sure you touched upon. Should we really build a better race of humans? I mean, that's it's very scary talk and very scary thinking, even though it starts from a place of, of idealism, in a sense. How interesting too how philosophers take positions. And you can see how there are so many different ways to go from that, what an amazing experience, but yours was at least equal to maybe even more robust than how we covered it in graduate school. So you're well prepared, Regene. Very well prepared, indeed. So I was also going to would love to know like, did you find certain aspects of your program challenging? You know, at the time you thought, whoa, I really have to kind of buckle down on this or it seemed like there was a hurdle you had to cross? Did you do recall anything like that?

Regene Nolan 46:57

I do. So going into bioethics was something that was pretty different from anything else I'd done before. In bioethics, really, the core principle is that there isn't one right answer, because you have to take into account every other factor all the stakeholders, and it's not right versus wrong. It's right versus right, because everyone can be right in their own way. And that was just so different from everything else that I had been doing in school up until that point, because you know, in your math classes, there's a right answer. In science, biology, chemistry, there's a right answer. It's yes or no, one or two. But it's a whole other things in bioethics. And so trying to teach myself to shift into that mindset, to understand that, you know, it's, it's very relative, it's fluid, that you have to take everything into account and still not come to a concrete answer was particularly challenging. And especially having to do all of that, from a very subjective point. Later on, when I got to writing my paper, crafting my presentation, just taking a stance on something and trying to argue it and also educate was different, because also, the other papers that I'd written at that time, were more objective, you know, removing myself from it, just presenting the hard facts. So trying to teach myself an entirely different way of thinking was definitely the hardest part, the most challenging part of being part of the bioethics program. But it's, it was also the most rewarding, because now that's a mindset that I still carry with me to this day.

Meryl Selig 48:47

Absolutely. And sadly, the world we find ourselves in right now is absolutely loaded with issues, questions,

responses, how we react to news and what's happening, events in the world, you know, you really get we have a huge opportunity to practice our ethical muscles, if you will?

Regene Nolan 49:06

Right.

Meryl Selig 49:07

Because it is it's a discipline, and you have to keep working at it to you apply those principles, the critical thinking, and the right versus right, and trying to respect other people's viewpoints. It seems like what you're describing is, and have learned is just critically important. Right now, in our society, we seem to have, you know, a lack of that, right? People aren't necessarily thinking critically or patiently or compassionately about where other people are coming from. It's, it's tough to deploy, I will say, great to talk about and how important that you learn that early on and therefore have a longer lifespan in which to practice and refine your skills, if that.

Regene Nolan 49:53

Absolutely. And that's why I do think there's such a benefit to having programs like this more widespread, because the students have today not to say a cliché, but the students today really are the leaders of tomorrow. And being able to connect with other people and understand their viewpoints, understand why they feel the way they feel. And you know, even ultimately, changing your own viewpoint or adjusting your viewpoint, having the skill to do that is something that is it's hard to develop as an adult, it's it's hard to do it as a as a teenager even. But that's I think, when you're most open to having that change in viewpoint, because you're you're still developing your own thoughts, opinions, ideas, so to have at that time, education on how you can connect with others. What is the who is involved in the situation? And why are they involved? Why do they feel the way that they do? That's so critical to then going on, you know, growing up, going out into the world, going into college, going into a career and having intelligent, meaningful, thoughtful conversations with other people where you are able to not just speak your opinion, but to listen to other people and really listen, internalize what they're saying. And then, you know, be able to view the entire thing as not just the part but as a whole.

Meryl Selig 51:26

Wow, beautiful. Absolutely. And clearly the program and the project left in a very indelible and wonderful imprint on you, absolutely. So how was this, how were the ethics students appreciated by students who hadn't gotten into the ethics program? Did you find other students interested in it? Is it something that you think attracted people's admiration as well as curiosity to students who didn't get in the program when you were in high school compared to those who were being ethically trained, if you will?

Regene Nolan 51:59

I would say yes, I always felt, you know, beyond even my own circle of friends that other students were invested,

like, actually invested in what we were doing. And especially when it came time to present our research, I felt that they were interested in what we were saying. And I think it's something that hopefully changed them in the way that it changed us as well. Because when we presented our topics, our research projects, we presented it, not just to other bioethics scholars, but we presented it to the entire student body, it was something that was we had a bioethics symposium is how we called it. So it was an entire day's event, where everyone was able to go to the different presentations, whichever one they chose, and they can engage, they could ask questions at the end, you know, we could have discussions. That's something that we intentionally built into our presentations, you know, time for the audience to ask questions to further their own understanding of what we were trying to convey. And I mean, part of why I believe this is something that other students internalized, and then, you know, made their own is, you know, there was a there were always students signing up every year. And you know, so we're presenting to students in our own grade, and grades above us and grades below us, everyone from all grades, you know, you would have people applying year after year. And, you know, often you might have someone saying, oh, there was a particular aspect of the presentation that I saw last year that I wanted to delve into deeper, or that I looked at from another perspective, and I want to be able to explore that. And I mean, even if we had different topics every year, ethical principles at their base are the same, you know, you have your, you know, justice, equality, autonomy. Those are things that are present often in different situations. So, I definitely do believe that everyone was invested, looked at positively the work that we were doing, and in some way felt that they could be involved and wanted to be involved.

Meryl Selig 54:18

Thank you. You know, we just spoke with Dr. Rezach. And she described her evolution as not only a teacher and an administrator, but the founder of The Ethics Institute at Kent Place now we have you absolutely as you know, an example of the outcome of her decades of work her work and as well as other faculty members and students. So it's quite exciting to look at it from one perspective, which is our first portion of the podcast and now yours. So we're coming to the end of our time together, Regene, I'm sorry to say but we'd love to know how this experience has informed your plans for your future your near future your longer-range plans, how you've embraced this and folded this into who you are and where you're going.

Regene Nolan 55:06

So it's definitely something that has, as I've mentioned, shaped my mindset, how I view the world, how I view my interactions with other people, I mean, socially, professionally, every aspect of my life. When I went on to college, I was able to take another course in ethics. And as you mentioned, in my bio, this one was more focused on health care, which is an interest of mine. So carrying what I learned in my time, as part of The Bioethics Project into that class, was definitely something that benefited me that benefited my discussions with others as we were going through topics. And it was so rewarding to be able to apply what I already knew to novel situations. So in I mean, the class was moral and social problems in health care. And so being able to dissect things that I see in my everyday life, and apply these concepts to it, you know, underprivileged neighborhoods that aren't able to access the same resources as other neighborhoods, and what all is at play there, and how things can go beyond the hard science of medicine of, you know, biology into what else is a factor in affecting people's health, and, you know, learning about social determinants of health, how social factors inform health care, inform the individual health and foreign population health was, absolutely, I think that's the biggest takeaway that I've had. I still think about social determinants of health, how, you know, you can have people in neighborhoods that, you know, they might



have poor health outcomes, specifically, because of the way that the neighborhood is constructed, you know, living in food deserts, not having access to the same education materials as other neighborhoods that might be in wealthier communities in less diverse communities. So like, there are so many factors that can play into a single situation.

Meryl Selig 57:20

Certainly the pandemic has put this into a kind of a highlighted situation, the social determinants of who got help, how they were helped, who was affected most severely by the pandemic. It really has brought the idea of just been around for a while looking at the social determinants of health and realizing how important they are. But it really has put a focus on that. So it is one of the things where people with your kind of kinds of interests will certainly find more and more opportunities in which to apply those interests and your energy and your intellect. Regene Nolan, this has been wonderful. We could talk for probably hours, I will say that people like you give all of us cause for great optimism for the future.

Regene Nolan 58:07

Thank you so much.

Meryl Selig 58:08

So carry on, we wish you succes. Keep going keep growing and learning and doing good things. It's been an absolute delight and from Voices in Bioethics, I thank you.

Regene Nolan 58:19

Thank you so much for having me. It's been such a pleasure being able to share my experiences and hopefully informing and inspiring others in the future.

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