

# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

*with Beth Brodovsky*



## SESSION 055

### COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES AT A STUDENT CALL CENTER

#### WITH JAMES HANKS

**Beth:** Hello, and welcome to Driving Participation. This is Beth Brodovsky, and I am here today with James Hanks. James is the lead manager of Mississippi State University Bulldog Calling Center. James, thank you so much for joining me today.

**James:** Hi, Beth. I just want to thank you so much for having me on today. It's a great honor to be able to talk about something I'm very passionate about. I'm glad to speak with you today.

**Beth:** It's exciting for me to have James on today because James and I connected when he sent me a post through LinkedIn to tell me that he was a fan of the show and is one of our listeners and was learning a lot and was appreciating what we were sharing here. To me, to be able to create something that helps people learn is exactly what I'm trying to do so to get that feedback from James was so exciting and we got to talking and he told me a little bit about the work that he was doing, and I thought, what a perfect person to bring on with a completely new perspective that we have not had on this show yet because James just told me that he is still a student at the university and is just about to graduate in the next two days. Congratulations on graduation, James!

**James:** Thank you so much, thank you so much.

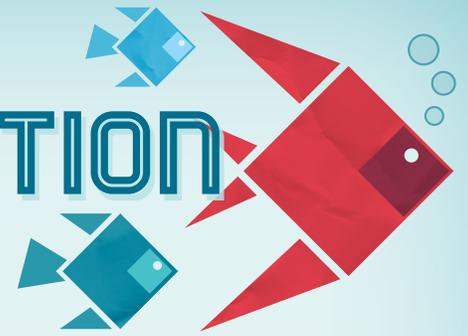
**Beth:** The other thing that's exciting is to hear about somebody that's at the very beginning of their career and the kind of things that you've been doing and working on over the last four years while you've been in college that's made you so passionate and interested in this world of fundraising that we're working in. Why don't you tell everyone a little bit about your path to doing the work that you do.

**James:** OK. I started out as an incoming freshman. My parents were "Hey, we need you to get a job."

**Beth:** Right, as they do.

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**James:** Yeah. I had a buddy of mine out here from back home, I'm originally from Memphis, Tennessee, and I asked him if there was any way he could give me a spot working in the Calling Center and started out as a freshman and I've been here ever since. I worked my way up the ladder to the lead manager, but starting at the lower level I was a student caller. It was a very wonderful experience because you get to hear a lot of experiences from a lot of older generations that have graduated before you so it was really cool to wander into this work, and originally I was a microbiology major so that wasn't anywhere near what I was working towards, but it came to be something I am genuinely very passionate about.

**Beth:** What major did you end up with?

**James:** Right now I'm in business interdisciplinary studies. It's encompasses economics, history and political science.

**Beth:** Interesting. As a listener of the show, I'm sure you know it doesn't really even matter what you major in.

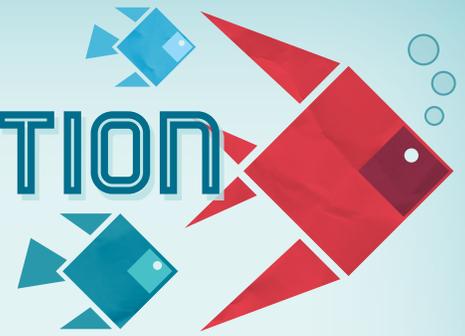
**James:** It's been a wide variety of marketing. I remember one of my favorite episodes is Lynne Wester. She started out as a foreign language major so it was really cool.

**Beth:** Right and that's so cool that you remember that and I think it's important that you know that. When I was taking my younger son on college visits, I remember we were at NYU in Manhattan and the speaker said, there was a room full of 120 kids and their parents and he said "Parents, everyone raise your hand if the job title that you have now matches your college degree," and there were three of us in the entire room of 120 people that raised our hands. Then he said to the kids "Look around and see how 25 years from now the specific thing that you study does not define who you are, so study something that will help you learn how to learn and will make you happy." I thought that's probably the best thing that anybody could tell these stressed-out kids right now.

**James:** Yeah, and that's very wise. I have a great advisor and they led me in the path and has been someone that's helped me throughout my college career. I owe a lot to her for helping me out.

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**Beth:** You ended up taking on this role as a student caller, and I'm sure that you probably are not unaware that many people want to find every way that they can get out of calling strangers and yet you decided that you want to do this work. What was it that made you ask your buddy if you could get into this type of a job?

**James:** Well, one being my parents saying "You have to find a job," and two, I wanted to make sure that I was going to be able to afford more than ramen noodles for my time being here, and so it was something that was new to me and I'm always open to try any career path because fundraising has a wide variety of where you know what aspect you can do so I took it and I said "Hey, this is something that I really enjoy" because I really love talking with people and getting to hear good stories about past experiences at Mississippi State.

**Beth:** I'm curious. When you were a caller yourself, one of the things you and I talked about and we're going to be talking about on this episode is how do you create this environment of getting students in and training them so that they can get to the point where you are, where they think that this is fun and enjoyable and that they really enjoy talking to people? In the beginning though, it's not always easy to do it so what were some of the things that drove you nuts when you were doing the calls?

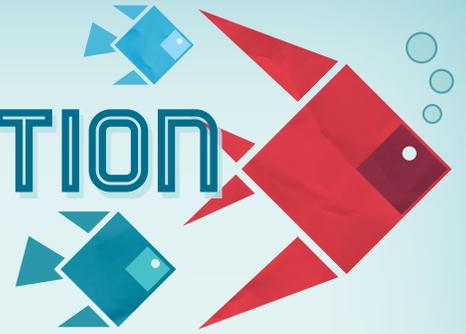
**James:** Well, of course you always have your nice people that you're going to talk to. You're always going to have some people that they kind of feel angry for being called because a football game may be on or the baseball game so if they've had a bad day, that's something that they may take it out on you so that was one aspect that kind of drove me crazy, but the majority of it was making sure that I kept a level head to make sure that all my studies or the stress of school was left at the door to make sure that I was the best student caller that I could be, to leave my anger at the door or stress at the door to make sure that I could be level headed to help not only myself, but the neighbors.

**Beth:** Wow, that's so mature of you. You came in and there's a staff structure that supports the organization, right? You have a boss of some sort, right?

**James:** Yes ma'am. Assistant Annual Giving Director. Her name is Kelly Conrad, she's been a great, great boss, a great person to work with. She's actually in the other room working right

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now.

**Beth:** That's a great thing to talk about. You've had to work under a great boss and now you're a bit in a boss role yourself. What do you think makes a great boss? As a student caller, one of the things you said that you've seen is that you can really tell the kind of things that make this a good experience for people and make the whole process run smoothly. What is it about the person who is in the role, the annual fund director, who is in that role of being responsible for these students, what are the things that make the difference between this going really well and this going really badly?

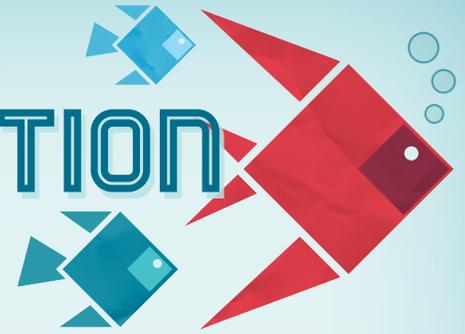
**James:** It starts off with the understanding that the majority of these students are the same way that I came in. They're new to this, a lot of them are freshman. A lot of our seniors are already gone, but a lot of people usually stay a couple of years as they enjoy the job, but a lot of these students that are coming in are working. They're freshmen, this is a totally new job to make some extra money so it takes being able to let them know that you're here for them, not just in a professional manner. Just how was your day to make sure that you're creating a positive energy to make sure that you can be here to help make sure that you can at least make them laugh or make you smile, to enjoy coming to work. We don't want any of our callers to come in and feel like "I just really do not want to be here." It's just trying to create that positive energy. I feel like that's essential for someone to gain the trust of the student caller so it just lets them know that they can have somebody to look up to when they're having a bad day, if they fail a test or do really bad on a quiz, they can come here and know that we're going to try to lift their spirits and make them smile.

**Beth:** Yeah, I can see that having trust and having the students respect the people that they work with and that they feel respected for the contribution that they're making can make a huge difference.

**James:** Yeah, and I tell them all the time, when they feel like "How am I making a difference?" I say when you're walking across campus, when you see beautiful buildings and renovations going on, just feel happy that you are a part of that. You are somewhat a part of that even if you just put one brick there. That's one brick that you laid the foundation for, that you helped and you were a part of. A lot of these students here, they love Mississippi State University.

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They love what they do and they love everything about the university and to know wow, I'm really making a difference here, I'm helping provide assistance and scholarships for bringing top students so Mississippi State University can set the bar in the state of Mississippi. It humbles them. They really find it as "I really am making a difference here. I really enjoy what I do," and that's how to keep them on the page and let them know that without you, we wouldn't be where we are.

**Beth:** What kind of training did you get that you think might have helped you be able to communicate this so well?

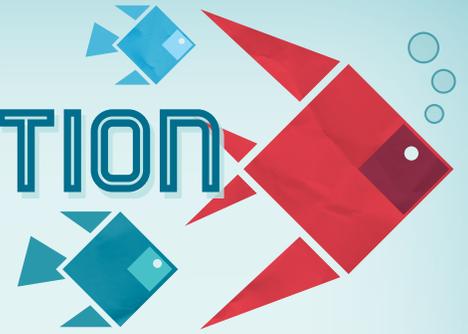
**James:** I had a great peer. She was awesome. She's now a development officer at the University of North Alabama, Miss Margaret Terry. She was a person that was similar to me. She started out as a student caller, worked her way up to manager and becoming the assistant giving director here and eventually became our director, and she just taught me a lot about just being able to relate to the common caller, because if you come in and you've never called and if you've never made a call and it takes you awhile to figure out the ins and outs, there's short cuts that some may take that you can find it and we just try to make sure that they're following the same path that she paved for me and believing in me and never letting me second guess myself and I have her to thank a lot for being where I am today.

**Beth:** What do you think makes a great student caller?

**James:** I think a great student caller is someone who takes pride in what they do. It takes awhile. Once you start seeing a caller come in freshman year and they stay here all their college career, which is what a majority of them do, you'll see the transition. You'll see the more they get more into Mississippi State, we provide them the scripts, and we've read those scripts so many times that we can say it in our sleep and we understand a lot of it and we just believe in what we do here. We like to create a family environment down here. Like I said, we try to keep it very positive in here so I tell them "Look to your left, look to your right. We're a family here and we're part of this Mississippi State University family and let's do what we can to make this the best university in the state of Mississippi," and we're working towards it, and that's what keeps them at the level that they are and you'll see them grow because we create a competitive nature down here as well. We play nightly games. It motivates the students so

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they can win the prizes.

**Beth:** All right, you have to tell me more about that.

**James:** That's actually something that we just worked on. Me, myself and a couple of the other assistant managers, we wanted to start a sponsorship program for the student callers. What that is, we would go around to local businesses and tell them that we will do marketing, social media marketing for them, provide their logo or clickable link to certain packages that they purchase to sponsor and it's really not even a purchase. It's just like discounted meals or a free drink because usually when someone goes into a business, they're not going to go in by themselves. They come in with friends or family so it's just something we wanted to help local businesses and help provide for the student callers to create a competitive nature here.

**Beth:** This is a really clever idea. The businesses, are they sponsoring coupons or giveaways for the actual students or is it something else for the student callers?

**James:** It's coupons. They give coupons for their business. It's like a coupon for a candle from a local store that we have around here.

**Beth:** That could be a prize that somebody could win?

**James:** Correct.

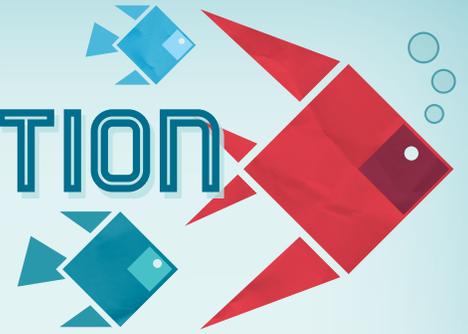
**Beth:** What kind of games do you play? What kind of things do you do so people can win those prizes?

**James:** We play war games. We have certain little games that we have down here that just gives the caller a sense to have fun down here and that's what creates that feeling of friendly atmosphere. Some nights we'll have team games where we'll play Risk or we have Jenga where one person will come up and pull a piece and the next person will come up and pull a piece and we have a point system. Just little things like that. Elementary style games. They have fun with them.

**Beth:** Right because it's exhausting to just pick up the phone and dial after dial after dial.

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**James:** Yes, it gives them a chance to compete against their neighbor.

**Beth:** It's nice and sound like what you're doing is you've made the competition to be when everyone is together, you didn't make the competition about the results of what they're doing so they're not competing to see how many dials that you made that night or how many successful gifts that you got. You've been able to inspire this competitive nature, but you've separated it from the outcome of the work that they're doing.

**James:** Yeah, and sometimes we do have that like who ever has the most credit card dollars in the night or whoever has the most matching dollars of the night. That's a way to remind them because sometimes we do coaching forms on them to make sure that their calls are top quality and they're going through the proper amount of asks, ask levels and making sure they're following the script and they're actively engaged and enthusiastic about the call. When we create that type of competition, it makes them remember to often do credit card asks or it reminds them to ask for matching.

**Beth:** That makes sense, yeah.

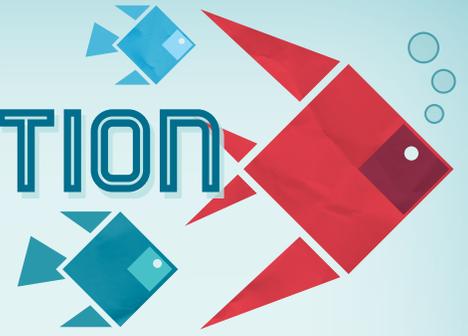
**James:** Yeah, it's just something we like to use as a reminder because going through the call, you're trying to make sure you're touching base on every aspect of the script and you want to make sure that they're remembering the little things because like matching because that's going to be free money through the door and your credit card dollars, that's instant right there to be processed.

**Beth:** Right. So smart and it sounds like what you're doing is you're figuring out in advance what are the strategic things that are important for the school and then you're gamifying it for the kids to make it fun, but through the idea of making it a game, it hooks into their brains and makes them focus on that. It sounds like you're using really smart strategies in a way that people don't feel pressured or negative or that they're constantly being corrected about what they're doing.

**James:** Yeah, and that's completely, you hit it right there because once they feel like they're not actively engaged in their work environment, they're not really going to go out of their way

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to try to sound enthusiastic about it so you want to make sure they're positive in what they're doing and having a good time, but also making sure that they're doing what they're supposed to do as a student caller.

**Beth:** Absolutely. Now you have moved up. What type of a role do you have now? What things are you responsible for?

**James:** I make sure that if any problems that we have with our computers are taken care of. I process credit card information because that's something that not just your average level student caller really can deal with because it's such sensitive information. I make sure that student callers, when they come in the door, I've been a part of the hiring process, of interviewing, and hiring and training the callers, just to make sure that we touch base on the understanding, the terminologies that we have for our software in the Calling Center and they understand it's going to be hard at first. Some of them that come down here are shy. They're not really used to being on the phone and talking to a complete stranger so we just try to help them get over that hump and we correct any mistakes that we see on coaching forms, and go over that with them. I like to make sure that they understand every aspect of the script so they're not struggling on it or making it a disadvantage for them. I pretty much do it all.

**Beth:** I help people get over that fear of rejection. I know many people twice your age struggle with picking up the phone and making a call to a stranger mostly because everyone is either afraid to be rejected, or there's this feeling that someone is going to rip your head off or yell at you or something. How do you get people your age to just move past that and do what needs to be done?

**James:** I tell them sometimes because usually the people that they're calling, the alumni, I tell them "It's not like you're going to dinner with them. You're not going to see this person." I tell them not to let that one person ruin your time when you call because you're going to talk to an alumni, and they're going to share the same major as you. We have a wide variety of majors stemming from engineers down here, business, arts and science majors, philosophy and so it's a wide variety down here what we have at our Calling Center so I tell them, you're going to talk to that alumni who went through the same degree program that you went

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through. They're going to explain to you how you need some guidance because they're there for your disposal and they're going to enjoy talking to you because they enjoyed their time at Mississippi State and wish they had somebody that could have told them what they're telling you.

**Beth:** You match up your caller's major with the person that they're calling?

**James:** No. It's just that we ask every major of every donor, we ask every alum that we call in our script why did they choose the major?

**Beth:** That's a great question. It's not just "Hi, give us money."

**James:** No. We want to build that connection. We want to build the connection with the alumni. We don't want them to think that we're just calling for money. We want them to know that we care about what they have to say. We want to hear what they have to say and what they explain to us and we want to hear their experience because a lot of the time, you'll hear a lot of great stories about "I was there during the time we beat Alabama in the football game," and you just say "Wow, that's awesome."

**Beth:** You don't say "Wow, you're really old!"

**James:** No, oh no.

**Beth:** In your experience or in the student's experience, is there one question that you ask that always seems to get people talking?

**James:** How did you end up in the degree you're in?

**Beth:** OK, that's a good one.

**James:** Yeah, and they explain "Well, my dad was an engineer," or "I did special education because I really wanted to be a teacher and my mom was a teacher," and you just hear a lot of different stories. "My dad owned a business. I'm wanting to make sure that I have a proper

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business foundation to be able to run the business for him.”

**Beth:** Do you have a favorite question that you like to ask?

**James:** I like to ask, especially if they were in my degree program if they are recent grads or old grads, how did they enjoy their professors. How did you enjoy your classroom settings? Everybody has those “Oh I hated it,” or “I enjoyed it.” I like to get connected on that level to see what was it, because I love learning so it’s an amazing experience to be able to hear about certain professors because a lot of them are still here.

**Beth:** I would bet that the people that you’re calling like love to hear “Oh you’re on campus right now. What’s happening now and you know the same person that I know,” and I would say it’s like when you do go to make a cold call and people have that wall up like “Who is this? Who are you? Why are you calling me?” and the minute you can put anything that connects you, that just dissolves away the minute “Your mother told me that I should call you or we have the same major.” You can make any little connection that makes it just melt and the whole tone of the conversation changes.

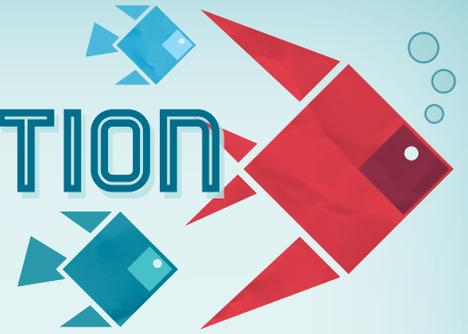
**James:** Yeah. Any conversation, it can turn to a positive. They can accept it or not, and that’s why when we go through our coaching form, when we make sure that they are establishing that connection that they are actively engaged, that they’re not just saying “Well, what was your major.” We want to make sure they’re saying “Wow! So what was your major? Can you tell us about some of your favorite classes? Do you recommend this professor? Do you recommend going this route?” and if they’re actively engaged, I mean they’re going to hear what else you might have to say and not feel like you’re just cold calling and that you’re just calling for money. You’re just calling to get some money out of me. No, they actually wanted to hear my side of how I experienced Mississippi State.

**Beth:** Really?

**James:** Yeah and so it’s a really great experience, it’s a really great time to be able to talk to somebody that went to a university that you love and you attend and you get to hear about their experiences.

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**Beth:** When you're doing these calls, how many calls do you think you've done over your career? Thousands probably, right?

**James:** Yeah because we have a computer program and they just go directly to the next call so you could have, some people work all day down here for extra hours and they'll call up to 500-600 people in a day.

**Beth:** In one day?

**James:** Mm hmm.

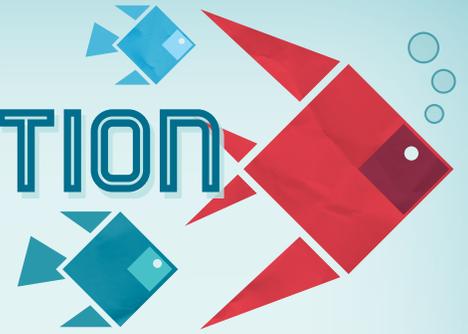
**Beth:** In your experience from watching all these calls through, are there any tips that you could give someone who is listening who is maybe working on a script about the things that when you're talking to somebody lead to a gift as opposed to the calls that end up ending without that?

**James:** It takes building that connection, asking those key questions, to actively engage your prospect in what you're trying to talk about and what you're trying to explain to them because we like to go ahead and establish that connection first and then we like to provide them the really good bullet points that we have that our development officers upstairs have compiled for us to be able to tell the college graduates, for instance the college of engineering, we are the top 13% nationally so we take pride in that and we explain that to our engineering donors or engineering prospects and they get a sense of "Wow, that's awesome!" We're really setting the bar here. It's something for the college of education can say "We just partnered with a local community college here for our 2 + 2 program to allow tuition reimbursement and help to provide more teachers for the state of Mississippi."

**Beth:** Oh, see now I especially love that one because that's not just like a general stat that somebody could just look up on their own. They're only going to know that because they had a conversation with you about a detail about something that's happening right now. This is new, have you heard this just happened. It really does make it feel like it's worth being on the phone talking to you to get that little current piece of information.

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**James:** Yeah, and they get to see first hand that “Wow I really want to be a part of this. Yes I would love to make this donation to the college of education,” and that creates the sense of like they’re believing in what we’re doing so other corporations that want to invest in research endeavors, they see that they have alumni there actively believing in what we’re accomplishing here so we want to be a part of that as well.

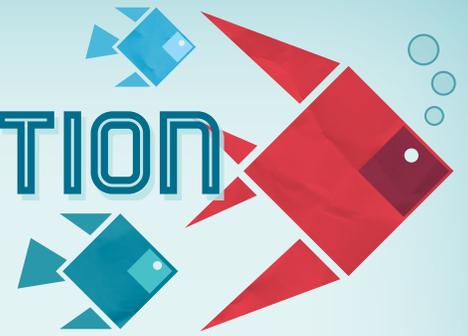
**Beth:** That’s great. The other thing that through talking to you that I feel like I’m hearing is that the staff, the paid staff, you’re all paid, but the development staff at the University seems very connected with you guys. It’s not like you’re just left out down there in an underground room to dial for hours and nobody even cares about you. It sounds like the people that you’re working with take a truly mentoring role in your lives there.

**James:** Yeah, and we actually had a week, like a whole week for everyone upstairs for our foundation for the foundation side and the alumni side to just come in and explain to the student callers what their active role is because a lot of them say they came up through an internship and they just ended up becoming a development officer. This was not something that they planned, but they enjoyed and love now. Communication directors come in, we have marketing come in. We had our alumni association head come in and just explain what they do and they gave the student callers a sense of like “Wow, I never knew you could do that,” and certain marketing majors were like “That’s something that was very informative. It’s very cool that they would take the time to come speak with us and let us know what they’re doing in their role here at the Mississippi State University.”

**Beth:** That’s really interesting. It sounds like what my niece told me. My niece went to Penn State University, which is also a large state university and there’s 40,000 students that go there so it’s a huge school, it’s a huge campus and one of the challenges of a large campus school is finding your group and how do you bring that vastness down to a small group of people that make you feel like you belong someplace and it sounds like what you’re saying is that to me before we started talking was “This is your work study job.” When I was in college, my work study job was to shelve books at the library and go get the director of the library his hamburger at the deli across the hall. A library is a place where you get physical books, just so you know. We checked books, we had to stamp them so we checked books in and

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we checked books out and you just worked your shift with two or three other people. What it sounds like your staff and your group together, you sort of advanced student workers are doing is you're sort of turning this into your campus group, your community, your place and it's so much more than just a job.

**James:** Yeah, I love everything about every step that I've taken to become the manager here. I enjoy bringing in new callers and training them and showing them what I'm passionate about and they see that and that's why they're so eager to, if they need any help, they know that they can come to me and I will go over anything. If they say "I just can't really figure out how can I get to that third ask," or "I just can't really figure out how I can get a credit card donation. I keep offering it, but I can't get it," so we just go and tweak everything so I enjoy being able to help make sure that we're making the difference here and we take pride in that. I preach that to them all the time, like "Don't ever think that you're not helping make a huge difference for the university," and they accept that as like a challenge. We've got to do this for our university.

**Beth:** I'm curious. You've got all these students who move through the program and graduate and move on. What sort of life and professional skills do you think a student gets out of working in this role that they take forward with them into their careers and into their lives?

**James:** It allows them to establish communication skills. A lot of students, a lot of people think that kids are so into their phones or they play around with their cell phones, yet here they are actively engaged with talking to people because a lot of people when they come in for the job, even myself when I came in, I was shocked because we were calling strangers and I was like "Oh, are they going to hate me or are they going to listen to me?" so it helps break that barrier and it helps you figure out how to work in an environment because some kids come in who have never had a job. This is their first job. It allows them to gain experience working with others.

**Beth:** I have to say personally I feel like having a job at that age that you get hung up on, that at that stage of life to have something to practice getting over that fear of rejection and knowing that if somebody yells at you or hangs up on you, like it's not a disaster. You just

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pick up the phone and build that skill, to just get back on the horse and do it again and do it again. Being able to do that and figure out that it's not the end of the world before you even start your career is going to be such an asset. I wish I'd learned that!

**James:** Yeah, and it just makes you ask questions. It makes you to where you're not, when we ask those questions about how did you enjoy your time here at Mississippi State and they're so eager to share. It's just being able to talk to that person and it's really cool. It's just really, really cool when they hear something like that from someone who just really loves what we do.

**Beth:** Graduation is in two days. What's next for you?

**James:** I've had a couple of people, a couple of companies that were interested. Nothing official yet. I'm staying positive and hoping that someone gives me a shot to continue on doing what I love.

**Beth:** That's my next question. Do you want to stay in the world of development and continue to do this type of work?

**James:** I do, I do. My dream someday is to be a development officer for St. Jude.

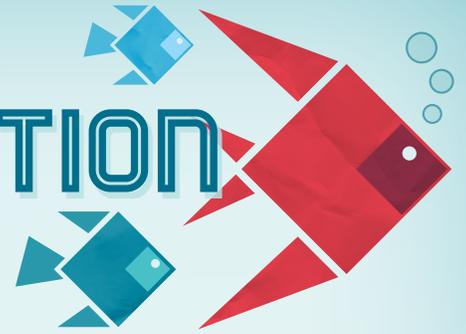
**Beth:** Really? OK, so you just put that out there in the universe. Maybe St. Jude is listening. I'm a firm believer that when you say and actually verbalize what you're going to do that it does help manifest things in the world.

**James:** I hope and I'll tell you that I won't stop until I get an opportunity to continue on making a difference because that's the main thing. I just want to when I leave this earth, I just want to know that I made a difference in at least one person's life.

**Beth:** I think that you are amazing. Your parents must be incredibly proud of you and for everyone that's listening who needs a smart dynamic kid, James, why don't you share your email address.

# DRIVING PARTICIPATION

*with Beth Brodovsky*



**James:** My email is JamesHanks12@outlook.com.

**Beth:** Thank you so much, James. This was fabulous. It's been so great talking to you. I think it's incredibly valuable to get people on this show from. I mean I've had people from associations and colleges and schools and traditional nonprofits and consultants and I've had a lot of people on that are experts and really, really well rounded in their careers, but I really believe that you don't have to be 20 or 30 years into your career to be an expert. Nobody knows better about what it takes to do the job that you're doing now than somebody exactly in your position at this moment in your life right now and to have people that are at different stages in their career here and connect back in with where they were at your stage. I bet many people who are listening started out in call centers and doing the kind of work that you do, it's great to remember what that was like and how it feels to create the role of the community that you've worked so hard to develop. I'm so glad you've had this opportunity while you're in school.

**James:** That's it and I've loved every minute, and I thank you so much for this opportunity. It was an honor. It was amazing to be able to speak with someone that I've listened to for so long and gained a lot of knowledge from. A lot of what I've learned and how I think about fundraising comes from what I've learned listening to your podcast.

**Beth:** Oh, James, thank you so much. It really makes me feel great to know that I've had that kind of impact and to be able to connect with you directly is such a pleasure. The reason I do this is so that all of the great ideas that are happening and working for people inside of organizations that we can get them out there to share with other people so that we can all learn and do better. I can't tell you how much stuff I have learned. I've been in this field for 26 years, and I have learned so much from all the people and from you today. Thank you so much for joining me. It has been a pleasure. I really appreciate it.

**James:** Thank you so much and it was a pleasure to be able to speak with you as well. Thank you so much.