



# How To Teach Your Students Critical Thinking & Character with Carlen Charleston

## Prep Period Podcast Episode #02

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BRIAN: Welcome to the Prep Period Podcast! My name is Brian Bean. I'm your host, as usual, in today's episode I'm super excited we're going to discuss character education, as well as you, know how to promote critical thinking skills in any class. Our guest today the Executive Director of the ERASE Race, the American Unity Movement, and a former colleague of mine at Tomball Memorial High School where he led our Junior ROTC program after he retired from the U.S Marine Corps as a Lieutenant Colonel. A dear friend of mine Carlen Charleston. Welcome, Carlen. So first things first let's get our listeners a little bit more familiar with you. So here's a little bio on the great Carlen Charleston. Grew up in Prairie View Texas graduated from Waller High School in 1980. Side note I was two at the time so you are officially despite looking like a 35-year-old man you are quite old. Graduated from the University of North Texas with a bachelor's degree in computer science joined and served in the United States Marine Corps for 20 years. Thank you for your service. Retiring in 2005 to become a 12-year stint as a high school teacher so from one war to another right? Then he retired from teaching in 2018 to begin the non-profit for which you now serve as the Executive Director of the ERASE Race and married and grown children with two with two kids. Two- two daughters right?

CARLEN: Two daughters.

BRIAN: Yeah your heart is always gonna be in education and a little known fact I had to do some digging a lot of people don't know this you are the second-best barbecuer in all of southeast Texas.

CARLEN: Is Mr. Bean number one?

BRIAN: Oh, you've seen the pictures of the brisket Carlen. I tell you what that smoke ring was a thing of beauty. I don't think I'm ever going to do it again because I peeked and it's all downhill from there.

CARLEN: It's downhill.

BRIAN: Downhill. So, let's dive right in. So, right out the gate okay there's an interesting phrase that I've heard you use character education right? What does that mean? What does character education mean? How is it being taught in schools? Or is it even being taught in schools?



CARLEN: Yeah. So I had the privilege as a teacher coming in as a Marine and having a JROTC program and so one of the beauties of that was that we were able to tailor our curriculum kind of to our own desires, you know? So we looked at and one of the big things we have in the Marine Corps we have these leadership principles leadership traits and everything is kind of built around that platform. And so when I came into American public education then I realized that okay we really kind of teach Bloom's taxonomy at the number one level just remember things. And there's never this essence of why you should be doing it. What's the purpose in it? And all those things which was so fundamental to what we learned in the Marine Corps, that it's this character thing that's at the bottom of everything as the why. And so you had that "why" answered into how you would go about executing every mission, every task, everything that you were required to do? And so I kind of found that strangely missing. And so I said, "Wow!" So I began to infuse into our curriculum some of those things and we started having classes about how to relate to people, how to treat people, and why honesty and integrity is better than the alternative. Instead of just simply learning that I should be smart enough to make a lot of money and then just do whatever I want. That's a totally different realm. Because I always felt like in public education and the opposite of that was the character education was that if I gave you the gift of all this knowledge what good is it if you have some malevolent purpose for using it? You know? So we just so that was just always my philosophy and you know and I realized in public education that was kind of against the grain but that was the heart of my curriculum that I created and I still to this day believe it's the best thing that we've got going. And I used to tell them at Tomball Memorial when I was there I'd say every time the students come to my class I would say, "This is the best class you're gonna ever have here while you're at Tomball Memorial." And then they started saying, "Well Mr. Bean's class..." and then when I found out I went "Oh okay. this is gonna be one of the best classes." So that's the story of character education and why I do it.

BRIAN: Well it's so interesting because our two courses it sounds like the root the baseline of them both were kind of like look you're gonna get this education for a purpose. Well what is that purpose, you know? Your class and my class both were focused on how to make good decisions. I mean that's what it all boiled down to.

CARLEN: Yes.

BRIAN: And I would tell my students the exact same thing. I'd be like look you know you're here in education at some point in time to help you get a better job so you can make more money. Well, okay. What are you going to do with all that money? Right? And so my course is all about making good decisions and it seems like your course was all about the way you built it was all about why those are good decisions.

CARLEN: Exactly.

BRIAN: And understanding the difference between a good decision and a bad decision.

CARLEN: Yes. Yes.



BRIAN: And it's interesting as you talk you know. I challenge any listener or any teacher out there to defy what you just said right? No one's going to argue how important character development is within you know the upbringing education of a child. And yet you know obviously in a course like ROTC it seems like such a natural fit like that would be not only just an underpinning but an actual core concept is we're gonna address this openly and specifically. Right? But how, you know, how do you do that in other classes? How does a science teacher do that? How does a math teacher do that?

CARLEN: Yes and we and we've talked about and I had the benefit I happen to marry the right person. My wife is a lawyer but her mom and I say we're gonna make a movie about her mom. Her mom was very big in public education. She she lives up in well she was just recently living up in Louisville, Louisville Independent School District. She just moved down here she kind of retired around us. But man she taught that big time she talked about the how all of the courses needed to have these principles inside of regular courses so much to the extent that I started asking her and inquiring her just recently in the last year talking about what is the process whereby we go to the state legislature and the school state board of education and infuse into the curriculum characters. So I came up with a marketing aspect for it call it *Character to the Core* how we put that into those uh other classes. Because in science and math all of those things have a very good purpose and people have to be able to relate that to why you're learning these things and the good that you offer to humanity by learning these things. And so it not only answers the question of why is this so significant but how you can take that and use it for the good of others and for society. Because you know a lot of the strife that we're facing in our country right now is because people simply acquired knowledge and power for their own use.

BRIAN: Yeah.

CARLEN: And they didn't understand that, "Wow, when I was learning science, when I was learning math, it was so that I could solve some of these problems that we've got in the world." And so that's the issue. And I think it's you know like you did the beautiful job of taking that I mean I remember I was really telling the principal at the school one day I said, "Can we have an after-school program where the teachers get to go and sit in other teacher's classes?" You know, because I would have loved to just sit in and and not only thought about the things and here's what you did which was so huge. And I got this, I didn't get this from any of the teachers or the principals. I got this from your students. Because your students were so overwhelmed with what was going on with their learning and with their development then they would communicate that to others. That's the way a public education system should work. But the beautiful thing that you did was you had them come in and increase their thinking beyond what you were teaching and that's what I mean about the critical thinking when they when they would come in and say, "But then he created this" and and "I was thinking if we could do this" and "I suggest that we add this," so they're they're pushing you. And you know, you're getting better. You're and that's great teaching that's great education. And so that's how I think we got to do it.



And so we've got to have teachers who are thinking that way. How can I take this scientific principle and make it much deeper so that the kids can think?

BRIAN: Yeah, you know, as you talk it the my mind went to some business classes that I used to teach. And embedded in the one of the line items of our standards and objectives was business ethics. We'd have to address business ethics things like that. When you think about it okay if every class that they take at some point in time has theoretically the potential that that could help them in a job right? That's the whole point. That's the whole point. To contribute to society. Well then in every aspect of every course there is a business ethics underlining somewhere, right? When you're teaching a science class and a biology class there's there's a lot of business ethics that could be applied to the way biology scientists are applying their trade. Right? So wouldn't that be interesting if if any teacher out there stopped and took a step back from their regular curriculum and talked about okay what role does a good character have in the information that you're learning? What could you do with this that could cause problems? And what could you do with this to solve problems?

CARLEN: That's right.

BRIAN: And do that with you could do that with any course. That's fascinating. Carlen I hope we should let's go let's get that law passed. Let's get that in.

CARLEN: And that's the key. And that's the key to and at this point because I was talking to like I said because I came the Marine route you know I went to college, it was computer science. And so I didn't have the educational institutional background from college. And so when I came into public education I went, "Don't they learn this? Didn't they get this taught in the education that they get in college when they get a degree?" And you know they get these masters and they get a Ph.D. Don't they get this taught? And for the most part people were saying, "Well no. That's not really what they're teaching." You know? That's not so you don't have teachers in these classes thinking that way that I've got to pass this on and get my students to think better than I'm thinking.

BRIAN: Absolutely and they get buried in the standards and objectives that they've got to cover for their jobs on the line. And they're sitting there looking at this giant list and be like, "When am I going to do that?" And so to find a way to integrate that into what they are teaching. And it's not like it's that difficult. It's just you've got to it's got to be you know present mind, right? So, let's kind of dive down that rabbit hole a little bit right? You mentioned the term critical thinking right? And I think that that comes into play not only as the teacher when they're developing their lesson plans etc. but also for the students when they're going through the different courses. There it just seems like such a critical role in education this idea of critical thinking skills it shows up everywhere. And you know, in your military background obviously. I mean I'm guessing a very potent perspective on how important critical skills or critical thinking is in that application. So why is it so important? Or I wish I had a better way to all of our listeners are like spit it out Brian! It's like it doesn't seem like this is getting taught anywhere else but schools. And yet it's not being taught in schools at an adequate enough level and we're all just being thrown into the



real world to figure it out ourselves. So how can they increase that, how can our business teachers, how can our marketing teachers, the people who are probably listening to this podcast, how can they intertwine and integrate critical thinking skills into their curriculum more?

CARLEN: Yeah. And let me tell you kind of and I think it's and this is what I think needs to happen and it is that people realize first of all that I need to think broader. I need to think deeper. I need to think wider. I need to think more vastly. And and I'll explain I think how I came to this evolution of course early in my life. And you alluded to the military background. We had had this thing when I was in officer candidate school and it was called small unit leadership evaluation. And here's the beauty of what you I think what you were doing in public education the same thing that I was doing you know the grades your a b c or d don't matter as much as the learning that takes place. And so we had in the small unit leadership evaluation, I realized that I now was scarred by the marines or however you would determine it. Because that small unit leadership evaluation at the end of that 12-week period of training well you know the ultimate test you have to pass is that called SULE one small unit leadership evaluation you gotta pass SULE. And they built this thing up as silly because it was a huge thing and how do you prepare for it you? Really don't. All you do is you go through the physical the physical frustration that you face in officer candidate school, the running and all that stuff, the obstacle courses and all this. You sit in classrooms and you gain all this knowledge but it's all for the purpose of SULE. One, if you get through SULE then you've achieved what's necessary to become a leader in the Marine Corps and SULE was a thing and it's really there's no grade. Here's what happens. They give you a situation, "Okay you're up candidate Charleston." Candidate Charleston comes up and they say "Here's a rope, here three pipes, and here's what you've got to do. You've got to get your whole team: you and all four of your men across to the other side without going into that water that's down below. Here's your here are your tools." You've got five minutes to come back and briefly on how you're going to execute that mission. So you you begin thinking you go I mean how do you prepare for that you know how you don't study you know because you don't know until you get there the situation that you're going to face that's why critical thinking is huge. Because in life we don't really know the situations we're going to face. We know there're going to be problems. We know there're going to be obstacles. And whatever education that we're getting all these backgrounds that we have whether it's in science, math, history, all this knowledge that we're gaining is so that we can be prepared to then apply all that Bloom's taxonomy. Synthesize the information. Get together you know? And then analyze it, then evaluate, and then create a solution. And so our teachers then need to understand that that's what all this knowledge is for. That's what they're preparing these students for. And if these students you know yeah that grade is a consequence of them being able to apply that and learn that and all that stuff. So yeah, you got to have these grades. But that's what we're charged with doing as teachers in the public education system and we've got to be critical thinking at this point to come up with a way that we can keep doing that. It's like an iterative process where the more you think about these things the more you think about these things and come up with new ideas and ways to do it.

BRIAN: I love that you know. And it's interesting because as you're talking you're you give an example from the marine corps right? But I'm finding the parallels with my personal finance class and my teaching model and the parallel is very simple. And I think this is something that



teachers get caught up on a lot. And it's it's a product of our training I think that oftentimes teachers end up hyper focusing on teaching students the process from getting to a to b. When I think a lot of times you need to step back and be like the most important thing isn't how they got there. The most important thing is that they got to be so instead of and there are some processes that we need to teach because that's some of the that's the purpose of some of the subjects. But I think they're in more cases than I think most teachers realize you could go to a student and just pose a problem, give them some tools, and then say I don't care what the solution is. I just care that you get me there right? Like in my class I would tell them I don't care how you become financially successful. I just care that you become financially successful. How you did it is up to you, you know? And that's why I sold grades you know? Out of context everyone listening is gonna be like, "What?" We don't have time to explain the whole teaching model but you know I did the same thing in science. When I was teaching science I remember my favorite unit of the entire year teaching physics. And we're going through simple machines and things like that I would give the students a a problem. I'd say, "Okay, you've got a burglar. He's trying to break into your house and he's coming through either the door or the window you've got." And then I give him parameters like, your job is to immobilize without causing harm. Immobilize the burglar till the cops show up and you have to use at least five simple machines to do it and create you know goldberg machine kind of Tom and Jerry.

CARLEN: You gave them a SULE. That sounds like a SULE.

BRIAN: Yeah and you just say, "Okay, go work in a team for a week and come back and present a working model of how you're going to do it." And the trigger mechanism is the opens the door and then they'd have all these different things that happen. And then a net falls or or whatever right? But those kind of things. I think you could do that in any subject.

CARLEN: That's right. Yeah.

BRIAN: Any subject if you combine the things we've talked about, if you combine the character, the why, that kind of stuff, the business ethics, you go to your "I'm a business teacher, I present a business ethical problem, I give them a few tools to say work, and then okay go come up with a solution. How would you solve this? What would you do?" And then get out of the way.

CARLEN: And get out of the way! And you know and the reality is I mean because we've and that's why I think we've got so many real-world problems that you know you could just throw those things out there I think probably got high school students who could solve some of those right now if we turn them a loose and didn't leave them inside of the structure that keeps them contained so you don't think outside of the box. And so yeah you're exactly right.

BRIAN: Well I think the statement of "You're exactly right" is a great and no, we'll just end on somebody saying "Brian, you're exactly right." I love it! Thank you so much for coming onto our show it's been such a pleasure.

CARLEN: Oh I enjoyed it, I enjoyed it immensely.



BRIAN: So I want to just say thank you again to Carlen for coming on to the to the program. You know besides just being an inspiring man I think he is so spot on with his approach to education. Particularly I love the way that he connected you know critical thinking skills with the concept of character education and how much those two can play off each other. And it really begs to the idea of why why do we why are we teaching this? Why do students want to learn this? It's one of the most common questions that teachers have all the time from students. You know when are we ever going to use this? It doesn't matter what subject you teach you've probably been asked that question before. And I love the idea of using the exploration of critical thinking skills through a kind of a problem-based approach to really dive into the character issues. Because even if they might not use that particular thing you're teaching they'll use those skills and those skills are transferable to so many different areas of life. And so I love that concept. I love the idea of teachers saying, "Hey, you know, what here's a problem here's some tools. I don't care how you solve it. Go and do. Come back and let me know what you did." I love that. I think it's a better way to teach and something that I would advocate strongly for. So, with that we'll call it a day. If as always if any of you or if you yourself, if you know somebody that would be interested in being a guest on our show please reach out to me at [brian.bean@stukent.com](mailto:brian.bean@stukent.com). That's Brian with an i, Bean just like the vegetable [@stukent.com](https://www.instagram.com/stukent). Thank you very much.