

April 2026 E-Newsletter

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Candid Voices from the Saturday Engine

AAS Beacon · Episode

What Keeps You Here? Candid Voices from the Saturday Engine

Hello everyone!



This month's theme is **resilience.** And sometimes the clearest window into resilience isn't a polished speech or a project recap, but it's a few unscripted minutes with two students who didn't have time to overthink their answers.

Sarah Lee (Freshman, Fairfax High School) and **Lan-Nhi Nguyen (Freshman, Thomas Jefferson High School for Science & Technology)** have each been part of the Saturday Engine for less than six months. What they said, off the cuff, speaks to something that takes most people years to put into words. Below is their conversation, followed by a reflection written by **Nick Huynh** (**Senior, Langley High School)** and an AAS volunteer, who has watched this Saturday Engine long enough to recognize what it actually produces.

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Question 1: It’s Saturday morning and you could be sleeping in. Why did you get out of bed to come here today?

Sarah: Because I wanted to feel productive of my time because I usually don't do anything on the weekday, so might as well be productive on Saturday.

Question 2: When you are sitting at the office with the older students and mentors, do you ever feel like you're just faking it a bit?

Nhi: Oh, yeah. I feel like because I know that everyone's around me and watching me, you feel this pressure to have a certain personality. Or actually, no, it's not even my personality. It's just what I say. It feels like it's an answer. I don't know. I feel like people are watching and they're thinking and they're analyzing what I'm saying. So I got to say it. And even though I don't want it to be like that, it sometimes turns me into someone else a little bit. A little bit. I'm still there.

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Question 3: In school, everything is about your grades. Here we talk about character. Does that actually feel different to you, or does it just feel more like a slogan, like a preachy thing?

Sarah: I don't think it's that much of a difference because in both places, you're still learning new stuff that helps impact your future and whatnot.

Question 4: What's the most frustrating or boring thing that you have ever had to do here so far?

Nhi: I enjoy being here, and I don't really see things that way very often.

Question 4 continued: What about boring?

Nhi: Oh, low-key just coming to the office. Sometimes I really don't want to be here. Sometimes I just want to go home. I just want to stay home and sleep.

Question 5: Why didn't you just quit or walk away from it?

Nhi: Oh, because I know that there's so much I can learn here. It's my own problem that I'm not motivated, but just in general, a place where there are other people who also want to be here, I know that they will motivate me and inspire me.

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Question 6: If you had to describe the vibe of this office and the people around you to a friend or to whoever who doesn't know about you coming here or what's happening here, would you call this a school, a job, or family? Why and why not?

Sarah: I wouldn't call it a school, but I would call it a hangout. But you're still learning stuff for your well-being. But at the same time, you're still around people who are friendly and want to help you become a better person.

Question 6 continued: But you have friendly folks in school, too, right? What's the difference?

Sarah: Not everyone at school is friendly, but here, it's more comfortable to be around people here than school, in my opinion.

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What AASuccess Actually Does: A Volunteer's Reflection



Although many students could be sleeping in or doing other things on a Saturday, a community of students still show up to AASuccess, but why do they do this? It's a way to be productive, sure, but here at AASuccess, students learn to be more aware of who they are, their emotions, and how to develop lifelong skills. When students here decide to get out of bed on a Saturday morning, they are deciding to explore new avenues and grow in ways not possible in regular schooling.

You probably relate to this: sometimes, when at work, school, or social gatherings, you feel like you have to put on a mask and be an inauthentic version of yourself. Maybe the people around you are analyzing every word that you say, so you have to fake a personality and become someone you're not. AASuccess, however, gives students an environment to be more social without having to be inauthentic. A safe place where students can challenge themselves without fear of failure (often in socializing and public speaking) is something that is valued deeply here.

Diverging from the grades that students, teachers, and society often emphasize for school, AASuccess focuses on the character of the student. But what exactly does that mean, and is there a difference between school and AASuccess? No doubt, grades are important, and both places are similar in that they are vital to learning and future success, as one student says. However, AASuccess pulls students into developing real-life skills, being a leader and giving back to others while, in the process, living a more fulfilling and purposeful life.



Be honest, do you walk into school, work, AASuccess, always excited and happy to be there every time? Everyone has days where they don't feel their best, and it's normal to be frustrated or bored. Sometimes students do not want to go to school or even AASuccess because they are tired, bored, or want to sleep in. But, admitting this is important because one of the key values at AASuccess is honesty and transparency. In being able to accept and acknowledge the uncomfortable truths about yourself, you allow yourself to grow from it. Admitting is the first step.

Continuing with this thought, when students are frustrated and bored, why don't they just walk away from AASuccess? A student responded, quite introspectively, that sometimes the desire to walk away lies within one's own lack of motivation, rather than AASuccess itself. What keeps them going, on the other hand, is knowing how much there is to learn here, and that there are people here who are eager to learn as well and provide a source of inspiration. This feeling reflects the value of collaboration at AASuccess, namely the ability to work with others and share ideas/inspiration with one another.



Finally, what one word most accurately sums up what AASuccess is? Is it a school, job, or family? One student notes that it isn't exactly a school, but more of a hangout because you're learning new things to ensure your success while spending time with friendly people who want to make you a better person as well. It is difficult to fit this place into one category, but without a doubt one of the core values that AASuccess encapsulates is the ability to give back, as the student was getting at. Making not just yourself, but also other people become better is one of the distinguishing traits of the community here at AASuccess.

Nick Huynh
High School Volunteer

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A Legacy Built on the "Saturday Engine": A Tribute to Scott Plein



In our world, stories like this don’t just happen by accident but they happen for a reason. That reason is a shared belief that if you give a high school student a seat at the table, teach them the art of trust-based communication, and demand professional poise, they will change the world.

Looking back to 2010, AASuccess was still a "basement operation" at my home. We had the heart, but we lacked the physical foundation to scale our mission. That changed because of **Scott Plein**. As a mentor and a former board member, Scott was the one who pushed me to move into a real office. He saw that for AAS to be taken seriously; and for our students to take *themselves* seriously,we needed a space that reflected the professional world.



Together, we built the scaffolding of what AAS is today. While Scott’s time eventually called him toward new priorities and his incredible work at **Equinox Investments**, he never truly left the "engine" room. Even now, his sustaining donations of **$7,000–$8,000 annually** act as the quiet heartbeat of our Saturday operations, covering the rent and electricity that allow our students to gather, lead, and grow.

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The DNA of AAS: High Schoolers at the Center



Scott and I always agreed: the freshman year is where the journey begins. It’s when the GPA starts, but more importantly, it’s when the "AAS Family" trust is formed. We see this DNA in our history and our present. We see it in **K-Mi Nguyen**, once Scott’s mentee, who has blossomed into a successful professional and mother. We see it in the leadership of **Nini Nguyen** and the dedication of **Vihanh Tham**. These aren't just names; they are the living results of a vision that insisted on proper accounting, transparency, and a relentless focus on the "Saturday Engine."

Scott’s presence has been a hidden gem and a god-given blessing. His belief in these kids, even when they were just starting out, is why AASuccess continues to thrive.

Dave Nguyen
Life Skills Mentor & Board Member

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Continuing the Mission: White House Farm Foundation & Leopold’s Preserve



Scott’s commitment to "giving back" has always extended beyond the office walls. Through the **White House Farm Foundation (WHFF)**, he continues to bridge the gap between education and environmental stewardship.

- **The WHFF Scholarship:** Much like the AAS mindset, this scholarship focuses on empowering students who want to make a tangible impact on land conservation and sustainable agriculture. It is a reflection of Scott's own success and his desire to see the next generation lead with purpose.
- **March 21st: Volunteer Day at Leopold’s Preserve:** We invite the AAS family to see Scott’s vision in action at **Leopold’s Preserve**. This 380-acre sanctuary is a testament to what "hard work and poise" can create in the natural world. **March 21, 2026** is a volunteer day for habitat restoration. It is a chance for our community to join the White House Farm Foundation to do good for the very same community that has supported us.





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An Appreciation Note to Eden Center

On behalf of AASuccess, I am writing to express our profound gratitude for your steadfast support over the past 17 years of our work on AAS YouthCon. Since the first scholarship was awarded in 2008, Eden Center (www.edencenter.com) has been more than just a sponsor; you have been a cornerstone of our mission to empower the next generation.



Mr. Graham Eddy, Vice President & Associate General Counsel at Eden Center, provided his keynote speech at the AASuccess 2024 Gala

Your dedication to supporting our Vietnamese American youths via YouthCon has been transformative. The majority of our AAS students are of Vietnamese descent, and your consistent sponsorship has provided them with the resources to grow into purpose-driven leaders for more than 17 years. We are particularly proud of our annually AAS selected student management teams, young middle and HS AAS student leads, who have demonstrated extraordinary courage and commitment by choosing to lead and manage the complex YouthCon program for 17 years rather than seeking the scholarship incentives for themselves. This selfless dedication to "perfecting the act of giving back" is a testament to the character we strive to build through our AAS Life Skills "3H-3S-3A" methodology.

As AASuccess continues to evolve its circular learning ecosystem, we remain committed to developing "**character before credentials**". We are honored to see our community of support grow alongside our programs. In addition to the long-term commitment of **Ms. Nguyen Nguyen and Mr. Jim Kelman**, who have both stood by YouthCon for over a decade, we are thrilled to welcome **Dr. Kieu Le** as our YouthCon 2024-2025 sponsor, and now the Asian Pacific American Bar Association of Virginia (APABA-VA) as our new sponsor for YouthCon 2026.



To our Vietnamese American stakeholders (Cc'd) and friends of AAS, we thank you for your decades of support for the businesses at Eden Center, which in turn enables such vital community reinvestment. Together, we are creating a lasting legacy of service and innovation that will benefit our community for many years to come.

Thank you, Eden Center, for being the primary foundation that helps build future leaders, many of whom have come back and/or pledge to support the community that had supported them.

With deepest appreciation,

AASuccess

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AAS Volleyball Tournament

Good morning everyone,

Our group including **Leo Tran, Marvin Pham, Mason Le, Aashee Balani**, and **Jacob Wong**, are excited to share that our project, **Net Impact**, is officially underway.

Net Impact is an upcoming volleyball tournament fundraiser aimed at supporting local charities that help connect underserved children and teens to sports and recreational opportunities.

This upcoming April 25th 2026, from 10:00 AM - 3:00 PM, we will be hosting a friendly outdoor volleyball tournament open to all skill levels. We encourage you to invite your friends and family to play or spectate. Registration will open in the near future for both individual players and teams.

Anyone is welcome to join! We encourage you to invite your friends, family, school teams, and clubs to play or spectate. Players may sign up **individually, or as a group** using the registration link below. The sign up deadline is **4/23/26**.



In the meantime, we would appreciate your help spreading the word and filling out the interest form below.

Register Form: https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfack7ybesP3odWk6ldmx5_8yubVd-p1VcB-3YiBGGrdxwxPg/viewform

Thank you for your support, and we look forward to seeing you at the tournament!

Best,

AASuccess Net Impact Team

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Color of Justice: A Seat at the Courthouse

On **April 18, 2026**, the **Fairfax County Courthouse** will host **Color of Justice**, a program built specifically for high school students who want to see how the legal system actually works, not from a textbook, but from inside a real courtroom.

Students will watch a live mock trial performed by members of the bar association, then step into the role of jurors themselves, deliberating in breakout groups alongside sitting judges and practicing attorneys. Lunch is included, and the day wraps with open time to meet, ask questions, and connect with legal professionals directly. It is a full day designed to demystify a profession that can feel distant and intimidating for young people who did not grow up around it.

This is exactly the kind of experience we look for at AASuccess: real exposure, real conversations, and the kind of trust-based communication and critical thinking that no classroom simulation can fully replicate.

We are proud to bring this opportunity to our community through our ongoing partnership with the **Asian Pacific American Bar Association of Virginia (APABA-VA)**. Their commitment to opening doors for the next generation of leaders continues to align beautifully with everything we stand for.

If you know a high school student who would benefit from this, whether your own, a neighbor's, or a friend's, please spread the word. Registration is open through AASuccess. Use the link below to sign up or pass it along.

Questions? Reach out to us at **information@aasuccess.org**.

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YouthCon: Nearly Two Decades of Empowering Community Impact

Since 2007, AASuccess has hosted the YouthCon Scholarship to empower innovative students to solve community issues. The program has evolved from academic essays to providing students with real budgets to turn their "passion into action" through local philanthropic projects.

A Legacy of Empowering Youth (2007–2025)

17 Years of Tradition

Since 2007, the program has fostered leadership by "perfecting the act of giving back."

From Academic Writing to AI Innovation

Prompts have evolved from community paragraphs to harnessing emerging technologies like robotics and AI.

Real Budgets for Real Change

Finalists have historically received budgets up to **$1,000** to implement local neighborhood improvements.



YouthCon 2026: Passion into Action

The 2026 Challenge

Use a $300 budget to develop a project that encourages others to take action.

Application Window: Dec 1, 2025 – Jan 18, 2026

Eligible DMV middle and high school students must submit an anonymous 500-750 word essay.

$6,000 in Total Prizes

$3,000 for 1st place, $2,000 for 2nd, and $1,000 for 3rd.

YouthCon 2026 Milestones

January 18, 2026: Application & Essay Submission Deadline

February 14, 2026: Oral Presentations for Qualified Applicants

August 2026: AASuccess Gala & Project Results Presentation

www.youthcon.aasuccess.org

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Put Your Support Where the Action Is

This month, we are giving our community a more direct way to invest in what you see happening at AASuccess.

Rather than a general donation, we are inviting you to direct your support toward a specific project or student lead. A contribution of **$100 to $500** goes directly to the initiative you believe in most.

Choose where your support lands:

- **Volleyball Tournament** — A returning favorite that brings our broader community together while giving students real-world experience running a public-facing event from start to finish.
- **Student Project Leads** — Five of our students are currently running their own projects, applying everything they have been learning directly into the community. Your contribution can be designated to support the work of: **Mason Le, Hannah Nguyen, Tyler Le, Hillary Nguyen**, or **Sophie Pham.**

These are not symbolic roles. These students are making decisions, managing timelines, and learning what it means to follow through. Your investment helps them do it well.

To designate your gift, email us at **information@aasuccess.org** with the subject line **"Project Support"** and let us know which project or student lead you would like to support.

Donate online: **https://aasuccess.org/donate**



Donate online: AASuccess.org/donate

AASuccess: Perfecting the Act of Giving Back
6521 Arlington Blvd., Suite 502, Falls Church, VA 22042
www.aasuccess.org
A community without boundaries, built on the principle that when we invest in character development alongside competence, everyone thrives.

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