

EB: Hi, I'm Ella Brady, and this is the UEPodcast.

Intro music

EB: This week, we are sharing a conversation between UEP student Bailey Hu and UEP alumni and current gubernatorial candidate Ben Downing. While attending Tufts in 2006, Ben ran for a state senate seat from his hometown of Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and won. After 10 years on the state legislature, he switched to a role as Vice President of New Market Development at the solar energy startup Nexamp. In February of 2021, he announced his run for state governor in 2022....

BH: Can you talk a little bit more about the kind of steps that you went through that made you decide to run for governor?

BD: Sure, so I left the Senate, when I term limited myself in 2016 at the end of the year there, and in my new role at Nextamp the role that I was in for the last four years.

BD: Especially that first two years that I spent a lot of the time traveling outside of the Northeast to help the company grow.

BD: And spent a lot of time in the Midwest and the Mid-Atlantic other states when we were trying to figure out who to partner with and where to grow and i'm a political junkie right, you know I would get to a state and I'd be meeting with environmental organizations and electrical contractors unions.

BD: And you know I'd want to do my homework on what was being debated in the state generally, and I would see all these exciting things going on right.

BD: On climate issues, but also on education issues on Anti poverty work, and I would come back excited and I would look back up at where I used to work on Beacon Hill.

BD: And more often than not I'd find myself disappointed right, and I would look that up and see little if any debate on those issues, and certainly not the sense of urgency that other states had.

BD: And you know, these were states that, while they had their own assets and resources didn't have the limitless potential that Massachusetts had, and yet they were doing far more with less.

BD: And that was really the seed of it, for me, more than anything else right -- was that experience.

BD: And then you know, having that experience repeat itself multiple times.

BD: And then you know just broadly thinking about the challenges facing Massachusetts -- I'm someone who's tried to stay involved and engaged, even outside of elective office.

BD: And, time and time again, I felt like Massachusetts wasn't approaching issues with the sense of urgency that we needed to and I think the sum result of that right are the glaring inequalities that COVID exposed and blew wide open that we knew were there before but what we're now seeing the results, just how frail our society is when only a few benefit from growth, when only a few benefit from you know from economic expansion.

BH: That makes sense. I was also really curious about your time as a state Senator. You first ran for office at a pretty young age, so what was kind of the thinking behind that campaign, and do you think you've grown a lot since then?

BD: I definitely think I have grown a lot since then, that was a different thing and that it was a first a far shorter campaign that was really a six to nine month run depending on primary in general.

BD: I was at UEP, I was in Grad school full time doing a little part time work on the side to help pay the bills and the State senate seat back home in western MA opened up and you know, it was a rare opportunity, all of the State Representatives announced that they wouldn't be running so it seemed like a rather wide open race.

BD: And I figured if all else fails, when I got back to UEP in the fall and people asked me what I did with my summer I could say, well, I ran for the state Senate and lost, what did you do?

BD: I figured out I at least have a good conversation starter to that topic, and then it, it turns out, thanks to the hard work of you know, a grassroots network family and friends, were able to win that race by 243 votes out of 23,647 that were cast not that you end up remembering those exact numbers or anything.

BD: And you know in in a race, where there was a 10 term former state REP who have gotten in and several other really good candidates and yeah it was that one really sort of came up out of the blue, and was

a really mad rush, you know, over the course of six or nine months there but.

BD: You know, it was a formative experience for me just like representing Pittsfield the Community that I grew up in, and you know the surrounding ultimately 51 communities was for the better part of the next 10 years yeah.

BH: Do you have any advice on maintaining work life balance, I mean that must have been quite a lot of things to juggle.

BD: Um no I -- I was horrible at it at the start, in that race, the first, you know the first few months, while you're trying to stand up a campaign which for a state legislative race is largely about getting the signatures to get on the ballot and starting to raise money.

BD: You know that period was incredibly difficult because I was back and forth between Pittsfield and in Somerville.

BD: And yeah I mean I had no good balance at that point.

BD: And and just generally right being a young candidate and then a young elected official.

BD: One of the great things about it is that you can throw your whole life into it right, you know I I get to wake up every day and think what am I going to do to try to make the community that gave me every opportunity in life, what am I going to do to make that a better place, and you know I can't imagine a better job than having that job right.

BD: But it can be all consuming right, and you know, especially for a state elected official it's an interesting job or a State legislative elected official it's an interesting job in that it's not really well defined it becomes, in many ways, it's defined by the people who are in the role and what they choose to focus on how they choose to do the work and I love being with people right like I love being at community events and meeting with people and listening to them talk about their community, just as much as research on topics informed my thinking on priorities, just hearing the day to day conversations with friends and family members neighbors constituents that had just as big of an impact on those conversations as any researched did right and and I love that I fed off that I felt like it kept me connected to the communities that I represented.

BD: So yeah I was not great at the work life balance and that's something that's you know significantly different now right, you know Michaela and I are married, we have two sons.

BD: It is a, you know, that work life balance was tough enough before I decided to run for governor and I don't pretend it will improve now but uh you know we're lucky we've got a partnership and I'm lucky to have found someone in Michaela another UEP grad and a very accomplished one herself.

BD: Who, you know, we have an open, you know open line of communication to work through.

BD: To work through that balance it's not a static thing there's no there's no one place, you get to and say okay yeah my work life balance is perfect right now it's always adjusting and you've got to be able to communicate that and work through it and and always remember what's important, which you know i've said to my campaign said to Michaela at the end of this regardless of the outcome, I want to be able to look back at the campaign on election day in November 22 and say you know, say that at that moment, I believe I am a good dad and a good husband, a good friend good brother good son.

BD: And that the campaign that we've run is one that we could say was run with integrity.

BD: And that you know tried to raise the debate and our aspirations for Massachusetts.

BH: Yeah and what are some of your what are some of those aspirations, I know that clean energy has been a pretty big theme of your work.

BD: Yes, yeah, so I think there are a couple of key areas that I want to focus on right.

BD: Economic and racial justice issues and then and then climate change right and you know that's everything from trying to get at the persistent wage and wealth gaps in Massachusetts trying to reduce regional inequity right.

BD: We have a really imbalanced state economy where greater Boston which has its own inequities within but greater Boston relative to the rest of the state is a far stronger economy.

BD: Then, those in the Berkshires in the southeast part of the State up in the Merrimack Valley, you know out on the Cape right, you know it's you know, in the central mass and pioneer valley regions.

BD: Right like there is this real imbalance and we've got to do a better job of strengthening those regional economies to take advantage of their lower cost of housing, you know, high quality life in those areas with great infrastructure.

BD: And so that economic and racial injustice trying to try to attack those in the multi-faceted way that you have to and then climate change, again, another multi faceted problem, but one where, you know Massachusetts has shown, has the capability to to really make significant progress on clean electricity on transportation.

BD: On you know transitioning away from gas and other heating oils, we have a lot of work to do, but there's a huge opportunity and a lot of jobs we created in doing precisely that.

BH: And when you think about these kinds of core issues, do you think that your experiences at UEP influence how you approach them or think about them?

BD: Yeah, yeah I think I think they have you know I came up after a few years working on Capitol Hill in Washington, and you know that was as an obvious statement right like a hyper political experience right, you know, it was a good experience and that you know I grew up you know white Irish catholic guy way Irish catholic democrat in Massachusetts right like I hadn't you know, been in even a political debate, where I was in the minority in any way right so to be in Washington, at a time where Republicans were in power was the first time I sort of looked around, say, well, if we got to do something I've got to work with other people, how does this work like it was just a different experience for me.

BD: But also, it was one where you see everything through the lens of politics, it was very much so, you know, a transactional sort of experience.

BD: And then to come to UEP.

BD: You know, it took the blinders of politics off for a little while and was you know a much, much more at what is the what's the optimal solution and how do we work to actually try to get to that right, it was just a it was almost jarring for me how different the conversations were, and I think it challenged, a lot of my

assumptions. It kept me from only ever focusing on the, you know, on vote totals and politics and raw politics and thinking about you know sort of that bigger picture that that greater you know sort of purpose and vision we're trying to work towards while also you know, in the most UEP form right keeping you grounded and you know i've i've tried to draw on that experience over time and I think when when I have done my job right, whatever that job has been, it's been finding that balance between the two sort of that you know, the ability to have a broader vision and then the ability to bring people together to take the practical steps that move you closer to that idea that you want to work towards.

BH: Yeah what's an example of a time when those things lined up for you, whether as a state Senator or something else?

BD: Yeah.

BD: So one good one would be, you know, more on the social policy side of things, but I was the Senate lead on the transgender equal rights legislation in Massachusetts.

BD: First time the straight out lead second time worked with my colleague, Senator Sonya Chang-Diaz on that bill, along with a variety of representatives and advocates outside of the State house.

BD: And you know that was one where Massachusetts sort of was at the forefront on so much of our hate crimes laws that gender identity wasn't captured as a protected class under our laws and so we had to go back and insert that and there was a lot of misinformation, a lot of hateful rhetoric and a lot of fear mongering on that.

BD: But I had a lot of colleagues who struggled with the issue and weren't sure that it should be a priority, weren't sure it would be something that we should take up.

BD: And I spent a lot of time in conversation with those colleagues, you know hearing them out, trying to address their concerns, make sure they understood the legislation.

BD: And, and then ultimately right, we had to get all of the provisions that were included in that bill, it took two efforts, right, one got about 90% of the bill but left out 10% that was really important around public accommodations and then we were able to come back two or four years later, and have to double check were able to come back and get the the remaining public accommodations component.

BD: And you know the negotiation there, the decision to not take the full bill but get the majority of it, so you get the first protections in place and then continue to build off that work and get the rest.

BD: You know, to me that was sort of the you know that's the best of some of the UEP thinking, I would also say just generally like the work on climate that i've been a part of.

BD: Every step in stage along the way in Massachusetts there has been concern about the cost of action on climate change in particular the cost in electric bills and energy costs just sort of generally.

BD: And everywhere along that way right, you know I think the UEP sort of moniker right like that "practical visionary" -- right -- trying to think of.

BD: "All right, I have this vision of where I want to get us to".

BD: But also thinking, what is the what's the practical steps that we have to get there, what's the message that's going to connect with the broadest swath of my colleagues and voters.

BD: Right, and you know for some universes that's going to be focusing on economic development and on jobs, in some it's going to be a focus on public health.

BD: You know there's going to be a focus on environmental justice and trying to think about how you build the coalition that not only supports one piece of legislation, but supports the ongoing effort that we have to undertake to build a clean energy economy right to dismantle, you know dismantle the worst of fossil fuels and bring in the best that clean energy has to offer.

BH: And then, when you shifted to Nexamp did you feel like it was kind of like a continuation of those themes or was it kind of a really big mindset changer?

BD: I think it was both a continuation of those themes and a really big mindset to change.

BD: You know, in the Senate, I was effectively my own boss team of six, you know I set the agenda, I had someone who would keep an eye on my calendar, and you know pull me back when I would overextend myself which I sort of want to do.

BD: You know, you were in control of very little other than your schedule and your priorities, but you were involved in lots of things and I think one of my strengths is that I am good at seeing how lots of things connect with one another, one of my weaknesses can be that I try to do too many things right, because I see how they all connect together, and I can get stretched too thin now in you know working at Nextamp on the one hand, it was a continuation, because my role was rather vague the beginning, I was sort of this utility player who is there to help on business development, when we were expanding, but in many ways, I found myself interacting with policy professionals from other companies right because many, many you know sort of more established companies would send their policy leads to enter into a new market because there's a significant policy and regulatory side of that.

BD: We entered it more from a business development project development perspective, and I think that served as well, it certainly served me well, because I had I could bring the policy understanding and then I was able to develop the business and project development understanding.

BD: You know, it was different the work of the Senate was very peaky right, it could be incredibly busy, and then you know incredibly quiet and even when it was quiet, it was busy, but it was a different thing right where like busy debating things on the floor quiet, you know back in the district, you know at coffees and conversation hearing from voters, constituent services -- that work.

BD: I found the work at Nextamp was consistently busier and more demanding and, in that there is just never there was never a break and some of that was just where the company was at right, you know when I joined there were about 45 employees between 250 and 300 right now.

BD: But uh you know one of the things too that you know, at the end of my time in elective office.

BD: And this is one of the reasons why a term limited myself in the first place was you know you're doing events for the 10th the 11th year in the row at some point, you know, you're getting yourself in a rut a little bit.

BD: Nextamp was this and remains this incredibly dynamic team right now that's growing trying to figure out how to scale how to make clean energy accessible to everyone and provide solutions to customers and to residents, where they are in a simple way.

BD: You know, it was just a great learning experience for me on how organizations grow on how to manage people and how to manage my time.

BD: Yeah I loved the experience. I loved what was similar about it to my previous work and I loved where I had to go through some growing pains and learn a lot now.

BH: And are you hoping to get some carry some of those lessons into your role as a governor?

BD: You know I think what I would take from my time at Nextamp bright was the flexibility that the company showed right, I think, too often the state government, with the best of intentions, its solutions end up feeling bureaucratic and top down.

BD: You know Nextamp, you know, at its best, the solutions we developed were organic, were dynamic and were flexible and and I think the state government would do well to be much more dynamic and flexible and.

BD: Listen -- they are two radically different things, when your state government right, you have a much broader responsibility than any one private company.

BD: So it is a bit apples and oranges, but I think there are lessons there that are critically important, I think there are lessons about how you empower employees, how you trust employees, how you, you know, and not just you know sort of give people the solution and say hey go implement it, but help get the buy in on the solution, no matter the you know sort of the universe of stakeholders you're working with.

BH: Shifting gears a little bit I guess I'm curious to know whether you feel like there's more opportunity to kind of think bigger in terms of solutions, right now, I feel like there's a lot of talk about it, but I don't know if you see that yourself?

BD: No, I absolutely do. I wouldn't be running as I didn't believe that right, I think there is an opportunity to think bigger about the problems that are in front of us, I think.

BD: If there's any small silver lining to all the clouds that have covered our communities for the better part of the last year.

BD: It's that, you know, we've all been stuck behind screens and hopefully it's been impossible to ignore, just how disproportionately

this pandemic has impacted Black and Brown communities, just how disproportionately the pandemic has impacted environmental justice communities.

BD: The long term costs of inaction on transportation, on housing, right, on education right we say on almost every issue we see an impact as we try to manage through the virus and the pandemic or to come back up out of to reopen and rebuild.

BD: You know that there's so many different statistics, the one that sticks in my head as it does for many others right is the Boston feds report on the the color of wealth in in greater Boston right, and the fact that the average median wealth for a white family in Suffolk county is \$247,000. The average wealth for black families in Suffolk county is \$8 right like that didn't happen overnight and, but I think as people see the impact of that the inequity it creates that there is a broader sense that just returning to normal isn't going to be good enough right like we want to get back to the normal that is like cookouts and hanging out with family and friends, we can get back to the same tired old normal politics that produce the society that COVID ripped through.

BH: It must be quite a challenge to campaign during this time as well, and then you can add you brought it up a little bit, but.

BD: Yeah it is um on the one hand, it can be great in that you're able to do three, four or five meetings in different parts of the state in one evening, right, but you know, for everything that you save in you know drive time and transportation time you lose so much between screens right, you know, trying to deliver a speech over a screen is just challenging right like i'm someone who feeds off of interaction with people.

BD: Both when i'm speaking and just in my day to day life right, you know the things I like least about work for the last four years were email, and you know and teleconference meetings and that's all our world's been for the last year. Now I know if that's my biggest problem that i'm lucky as can be.

BD: But yeah it's just you know there's something far different when you're actually looking into somebody's eyes, instead of looking into the green button right on the top of your screen or trying to figure out like all right do I need to move things around behind me? Which I do -- I have like the worst work from home setup.

BD: It's just silly so yeah it's um it's tricky to get people with that and, by the way, like people are on fumes people are afraid people have been through so much and i'm mindful of that when I pick up the phone right now that you know whether i'm making fundraising calls or i'm making political calls, you know people's days are somehow more filled throughout all this.

BD: And in many ways, the last thing people want to think about is politics, but in many ways, and the argument I think is it's unfortunate is the time we got to think about it, and just you know just changing losing the the White House isn't going to solve all our problems critically important, thank god we did, but that should be the the beginning of our work, not the end of our work.

BH: yeah.

BH: And on that note, for students or alumni not just in UEP but I guess policy programs in general who are who might be interested in following a similar path, what would you have any like words of advice for them or lessons learned?

BD: Yeah I think don't wait for the opportunities to come to you right it's very easy to think this is the worst time it'll never work right now.

BD: You know, I was about to talk myself out of running for the state senate in 2006 I was in my apartment in Somerville on the phone with my younger brother.

BD: And I was describing to him as a little like you know I'm in my second semester I've got an internship I like I've got this field project I've got to do. I'm never going to have the time to do all this stuff.

BD: You know I'll just maybe run for mayor someday. I'll go home and run for City Council. I would get myself established. I'm going through all this and I realized there's No one on the other line.

BD: And so I picked up the phone and called back. I'm like hey my cell must have dropped he's like no you didn't drop you I hung up on you.

BD: I said, what do you mean and he said he'd been an idiot you're talking yourself out of this opportunity right like these, you don't know if this will come again like go for it.

BD: And I think it's important to remember that right like it's always the rational decision cannot run right, and you know it is difficult, it is difficult for sure, but it is so rewarding.

BD: So one, I would just know there's never going to be the perfect time and then two, just get involved right like just get involved find the issue that you care about and get involved in it locally and you might think, well, what can I do you know in my city or town. On housing, what can I do on racial justice, what can I do on transportation? There's going to be something right there's going to be something if it's you know, a new police union contract being negotiated right like there's a lot of action there right if there's you know, a sustainability community in your or a sustainability committee in your Community get involved in that right, you know find the find the thing that you're passionate about and put yourself out there on it and the opportunities are going to come and then, when they come be ready to take them and and know that it's never going to be a straight line right like when when I interviewed people for jobs. Whether it's in the state senate or in Nextamp and even now we're looking at resumes on a campaign.

BD: I love to see resumes that aren't straight lines and when there's gaps in people's resumes I love asking them about them.

BD: You know, and people are sheepish about it sometimes like well you know I had to wait tables for a little bit you know my mom needs help at home, like that's important!

BD: Like that's an important life experience right if your life has been a straight line then where's the struggle been and if you haven't had that struggle then, where does your sense of empathy come from, what drives you? It's not saying you can't have it, but for me right, like when I think about the formative experiences in my life they haven't been successes right they've been these failures they've been times that i've fallen down or times that the world has knocked me down in some way and i've learned a great deal from those, so if you're thinking about politics if you're thinking about elective Office, if you think about just being involved in the policy process generally. You know, put yourself out there, get involved and know that there will never be a better time than the one that is in front of you right now.

BD: And don't shy away from the twists and turns that life will take you for, it may well be that that's what that's what puts you in the best position for what you want to get.

EB: I'm Ella Brady, and this has been the UEPodcast. Email us at tuftsuopeodcast@gmail.com to get involved. Thanks for listening, and see you in two weeks.