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Proem

I feel joy when my many worlds overlap, collide, and mush together. Upon reflection, of course, how could they not? Health touches everything, especially in its absence. Music feeds and soothes the soul (unless it grates). Health starts before birth and continues through actualization. When I met Betsy Neptune as a conga player and vocalist in the Latin band Lechuga Fresca, I didn't know she was Executive Director of Boston BUILD, an entrepreneurship program for underserved high school students that teaches them how to build their own business while becoming the CEO of their own lives. Youth, entrepreneurship, self-care, self-confidence, equity, and inclusion – magic levers of best health.

Introducing Betsy Neptune 01:05

Betsy Neptune comes to BUILD with over 15 years of experience in community economic development in Latin America and the U.S. She is passionate about creating a world where everyone can have a job that they love and one through which they can grow and develop to have a positive impact. In her most recent role as the Chief of Economic Development for the Metropolitan Area Planning Agency, she led economic recovery and resilience efforts for 101 cities and towns in Greater Boston. During her tenure, she expanded the team's work beyond traditional economic development efforts to include workforce development, digital access, and other strategies to advance wealth creation, focusing on reducing the racial wealth gap. Her team played a crucial role in COVID response and recovery efforts throughout the



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Greater Boston region. Her work is shaped by her experiences working in community economic development for several years in Ecuador, Peru, and Chile.

Betsy has a heart for teaching, coaching, and entrepreneurship, so BUILD is a perfect fit. She graduated from Trinity College with a degree in Anthropology and certificates in Nonprofit Management and Corporate Social Responsibility. She received her MPA from the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. Through her coaching business, she has taught high school and graduate-level classes and coached existing and emerging entrepreneurs.

Let's meet Betsy Neptune.

**Health Hats:** Betsy, thanks for joining me.

**Betsy Neptune:** You're welcome.

**Health Hats:** I'm so glad that we are having this conversation. Why don't we let's get to know you a little bit and start with when you first realized that health was fragile?

**Betsy Neptune:** That's a good question. I think I'll just say that I have some hypersensitivity issues, and my senses are tuned up too high, which makes me - you and I are musicians - I think that can make you a sensitive musician. I think it also makes the world more intense. And so that's a that's one side of it. And I was just meeting people with different health challenges over the years or family members. And I think one of the things you've been advocating a lot for is access to good quality healthcare. And I was just seeing how it varies, and so many people don't have access to the healthcare they need or even the answers they need to live healthier lives. So, I think a lot of different experiences. But certainly, as I've grown, getting a better sense of the public health element of it that there are so many things involved in being healthy, not just medical, not just the absence of disease, but also neighborhood conditions. And yeah, I work in entrepreneurship and business development, but I've also done a lot of community economic development, and certainly, that's part of being healthy. And so, it is fragile because so many things go into creating a healthy environment and people being well.

BUILD, Becoming CEO of your life 04:51

**Health Hats:** When I was doing a little research, trying to get a sense of BUILD, it struck me right away you saying help students become CEO of their lives. Yes. And that resonated with me because I use similar terms in my health advocacy. Becoming CEO of your lives in terms of managing your health. But can you tell me, tell us more BUILD and that tagline?

**Betsy Neptune:** Sure. I love that its part of the health conversation, and we can talk about how this relates. But so, the program is designed to teach entrepreneurial skills to high school students. Okay. And it started in San Francisco as a dropout prevention program, and we've shifted our model since then. That was 1999 but designed to work with young people that, if not for BUILD, might go down a path that's not maximizing all their capacities and helping them explore opportunities. And so, all our students build and create a business and generate revenue. They work together as a team. They pitch their idea. They sell their products. But most of our students will not go on to be entrepreneurs. Some of them might. But most of them are going to go into a variety of different pro professions and work at other companies or organizations. But the skillset around, how you identify a problem in the world?



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How do you then solve that problem with a unique idea? How do you pitch that idea to someone and then work with the team to collaborate to create that product? And then how do you manage your finances? All of that is not specific to business but a life skill.

**Health Hats:** Those are life skills. Absolutely.

Pitching products, services, yourself – Life skills 06:38

**Betsy Neptune:** I was talking with a young person today about resume writing, and we said it's the same thing as pitching your product. You're pitching yourself as the product. Many of our students have gone through a pitch process where they've been on stage, and a judge asks them, how did you come up with this idea? Or how do I answer questions in an interview? And what about your marketing plan and your market research? All that goes into helping them develop all of those skills. So, our students say they have better public speaking skills and more confidence in working with their teammates. And, just this confidence, I just put out an idea in the world, and someone bought it. The confidence that they have to be able to do something like that, which then sets them up for post-secondary success.

Now a word about our sponsor, ABRIDGE.

Use Abridge to record your doctor's visit. Push the big pink button and record the conversation. Read the transcript or listen to clips when you get home. Check out the app at [abridge.com](https://abridge.com) or download it on the Apple App Store or Google Play Store. Record your health care conversations. Let me know how it went!"

How do I know this could help me? 08:10

**Health Hats:** So how do people find you?

**Betsy Neptune:** Our website is [build.org](https://build.org), and that's the national website. So, we're in several different sites around the country. And there's a specific site on our [website for the Boston program](#). And then that lists all of our initiatives, our team, our board. So that's the best.

**Health Hats:** I thank you for that, but I was thinking more about somebody to do that somebody has to know something first and then look for that. But how do people, whether the kids or the parents, how are they ever going to, like, how is it in their conscious in their radar even to think of it?

**Betsy Neptune:** Oh, good question. So, we work in public schools. Oh, okay. So right now, we're focused on Boston public schools and Randolph public schools. We partner with the school leaders to offer this as an elective program. Oh, so it's an elective course for our students. So, all the freshmen in all the high schools we work in have an opportunity to take the course, and then they opt-in. So, they say, yes, I want to learn how to become an entrepreneur. And we're currently expanding to more high schools for next year. Our focus is on resource high schools. Focusing on those schools, the students have a few different challenges. Go back to the public health question. Several challenges in their neighborhoods or more limited social networks.



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## Mentorship 08:52

**Betsy Neptune:** And that's the other piece of our program: we match all our student businesses with mentors from different companies or organizations. And that, again, if you think from a public health perspective, broadening one's social networks, to access more opportunities to live a healthy and full life. So, many of our students have never had relationships outside of their neighborhood or outside of their community group or ethnic group. And so, being able to help them access folks who live in the Seaport or work in the Seaport or someone who works at a financial institution they might not ever meet is important for us.

**Health Hats:** Then I guess I would ask a similar question. It seems like this depends on mentors. How do you find mentors?

**Betsy Neptune:** It's a good question. They come to us in a variety of ways. So one is that we have a solid base of corporate partners, and we're seeing a trend in the kind of corporate philanthropy they want. It's not just about giving a check, which we appreciate. It's broader than that. So many of the corporate partners we work with say we want to donate to you, but we also want our employees to be engaged. And that's employee engagement and providing a good experience for their employees. So, I was just talking with someone from an institution that has been donating to us today, who said we want to give you more, but we would like our staff to be more involved as mentors. Some mentors come to us through community organizations. So, I have a staff on our team considering recruiting mentors from a broader range, right? Churches or synagogues, or other community-based organizations that could more readily understand the experience of our students. But the majority, yeah. The majority comes from the corporate sector.

## Community integration 11:05

**Health Hats:** It is, you know what you're saying. Yes. And I think about my work in healthcare and research, and like today, one of the things I'm working on is just thinking about more community-directed research. That most health research comes from the academic medical centers who then go to communities to find resources, and I think what the questions are that communities have, right? And how do they find mentors in research who have the research skills so that it's coming from the communities that are then partnering with research rather than research trying to partner with communities?

## Building resilience, managing manageable stress 11:51

When you and I first talked about having this conversation for the podcast, I thought we started talking about building resilience in students. Yes. Which was the thing that sort of resonated with me to want to learn more because of this whole learning how to take care of yourself. We all have stresses in the world in our worlds, and some of them aren't manageable. Like grief is not manageable stress. You have grief. You got it. You have trauma in your life. There it is. But there are so many manageable stresses. The problem-solving you're teaching, modeling, or experimenting with is a skill that helps people manage manageable stress.

**Betsy Neptune:** Yes, exactly. We have several core principles or skills we want to instill in our students. And one of them is grit, which is the same, right? Resilience. And the other night we had a pitch competition. So, all our teams competed over this past year, including our freshman teams. And we



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narrowed it down to three that pitched in front of 300 people and a group of VIP judges. One of the teams said we demonstrated grit, and they had to develop a product. They had a product they tried to develop, which didn't work. Oh, okay. They were developing key chains. And they didn't know how to do the laser cutting. It just came out looking terrible. And so, they talked about how they had to iterate continually. And they said that took a lot of grit. We messed up.

**Health Hats:** Which is so real life. I don't know about you, but I've failed way more times than I've ever succeeded.

Cushion to fail 13:43

**Betsy Neptune:** And I think that's a good point. One of the things that I think a lot about is who has the opportunity to fail. Who has more of a cushion, right? I've coached entrepreneurs for years, and some of the entrepreneurs I've worked with just don't have that cushion. If you think about the prominent entrepreneurs of the world, right? All the famous folks that have created companies, a lot of them had more of a financial cushion to be able to fail. And most entrepreneurs have to iterate repeatedly to get the idea. But many people just don't have that financial cushion, whether they didn't grow up with those resources or don't have the right connections to people. And that's what we're hoping to instill in the young people we work with. You can take risks wisely and learn from them with less money. But how do you do that in a way that then helps you learn and continue to grow?

**Health Hats:** That's interesting. When I think about when I first started this blogging and podcasting, what I would talk about was the magic levers of best health. And I think one of them there are basic things like drinking water. I think one of them is live within your means. Or live under your means. I think about the times I've gotten laid off or fired. You know, because I am who I am. But we could do it because we weren't overextended. So, we had that cushion, as you were saying. And I think that's a skill. You think they'd teach this shit in high school?

**Betsy Neptune:** They don't.

**Health Hats:** How much more basic can you get?

\$50 seed 15:20

**Betsy Neptune:** it's a good point because we give, so we offer our student teams at the very beginning, we give them \$50. To prototype, right? So, \$50 to create a product. That's all you have. And then. If they do well, they pitch that, and we have kind of volunteer investors that are our corporate partners generally. And then, based on their recommendation, we'll give them \$150 more to man manufacture. Okay. That's it. Yeah. And within that they've generated, one of the student teams already generated \$300 in profit. Right. \$400, split between teenagers, is not a bad deal.

Raw talent, practice, put in the time 15:57

**Health Hats:** That's great. You and I know each other through music. We play in a band together. I'm good at what I do professionally. My not so much music. But I think about my managing stress and my own life and the role that music has played in different people, circumstances, and challenges, and it's a break away from my career. I'm never going to be a career musician; I don't aspire to it, and I don't have



what it takes. How do you do with the kids and thinking about this grit business and that they have these? What am I trying to say? Their life is a broader,

**Betsy Neptune:** It's a good point. I, I think about it as a balance. Like obviously, there's raw talent, and then there's practice. And we see that so many athletes or musicians can identify someone you're like that's raw talent, but also, they need to practice. And develop that. So, I think for some of our students, it's trying to. You can't just rely on what you're good at. You must put in the time. And then really identifying like then for many of these students, and I just had a conversation with some of our graduates to whom we've given scholarships. So, where do your passion and your skills, and the opportunities align? So that you're making wise decisions and maybe, myself included, I love music. I'm also not going to be a professional musician. Because I have other passions and don't have the like raw talent of incredible musicians, and so, you make a choice that this brings me life, and this is fun, and I'll put in X amount of time, but I'm also going to have a full-time job that pays the bills.

**Health Hats:** Right. Wasn't it Pablo Casals, the cellist? Who said he practices eight or nine hours a day, and he's getting there?

**Betsy Neptune:** it's like exactly. Yes.

Universal skills – just do it, follow through 18:07

**Health Hats:** I'm impressed how much we can learn from your students managing their health through their entrepreneurialness. Whatever the word is. Also, I think so much of being an advocate like I'm a patient caregiver advocate. And like today, I was in a meeting of these techies, and I'm like talking to them about their need to do some marketing. Who can relate? What's their pitch? Like how are they, how are people going to be, what they're doing is important, but who knows about what they're doing? Yeah. And so, I think you're right, that these skills can be used in your family, your business, your church, your right. This is about politics, meaning the art of getting stuff done.

**Betsy Neptune:** I would agree. It's funny because when I coach entrepreneurs, sometimes they say oh, do I need to patent this idea? And there are certain things that you need to patent. But generally, my recommendation is no, because many people have probably already had that idea. They just haven't done it. Or they haven't marketed it, or they haven't figured out the plan. It is about having a good idea, but it's also the execution. And for a lot of our students, again, they're, they have good ideas, but helping them, you can't just rely on a good idea. You have to get it done and get the word out. And so, I think that skill again is a that's a life skill. Because a lot of our, I know a lot of people that man, they have great ideas and have never gotten them out into the world were followed through.

**Health Hats:** Having accomplished one thing through this program. And even if it is getting \$50 and making something. The confidence building of that. Great. You must love what you do.

**Betsy Neptune:** Oh yeah. So, all our students have to pitch like they work as a team. Every student must pitch in front of strangers. And so, when we talk to them afterward, they say, that's the thing. I was terrified to do public speaking. We had this big event the other night with freshmen. So, 14-year-olds are pitching on stage in front of 300 people. And many of the adults came up to me, and they were like, I never would be able to do that now. Cause just never learned that skill or learned to develop that confidence. And they all were so confident pitching. So, it was great.



**Health Hats:** You must love what you do.

**Betsy Neptune:** I do. I do, fortunately.

The health connection 20:47

**Health Hats:** Yeah, that is fortunate. So, what should we have talked about that we haven't?

**Betsy Neptune:** I think we might have covered it. I don't know if there's more of a health, like their health connection. I'll just say, again, I think developing their skills, cause if you think about it, even in the healthcare system, and this is what you've been working on for so long, they can now advocate for themselves. Oh, in a different right. In another way, they've had to put their idea out in the world. And I think that's; also, I hope. They'll bring a skill into every other aspect of their life when they bump up against a doctor,

**Health Hats:** For themselves, their parents, their kids, or the insurance.

**Betsy Neptune:** Yeah. Whatever the insurance company or things happening in their neighborhood aren't contributing to their wellbeing. So, I hope this is a skill that translates to give them a better quality of life, not just in the classroom.

**Health Hats:** Wow. This is great. Thank you.

**Betsy Neptune:** Thank you, Danny. This was so fun. It's a privilege to be a part of what you're doing. Thank you for what you're doing to bring health and wellbeing to the world.

**Health Hats:** It's selfish because it's a platform for me to learn. I have many questions about things and am not good at studying. So, I have this conversation, and frankly, tomorrow, I will have forgotten this whole conversation, but then I have to produce it. Then I'll be listening, and so why is this important, and what's the story? And then it's gotten into my brain, and I can retrieve it other times when I need it. It helps me. And the other part is that I spend a lot of years in nursing, and one of the best things about nursing is it's legal to be nosy, and I miss that.

**Betsy Neptune:** That's wonderful. I love that. I love that,

**Health Hats:** I've learned a little about your life, what you do, and what you care about. And it wasn't too intrusive, but I'm a little nosy.

**Betsy Neptune:** I love it. I love it. That's such a great. I love it. All right.

**Health Hats:** Thank you.

**Betsy Neptune:** Take care, Danny. Thank you.

Reflection 23:04

If you'd like a bonus to hear Betsy on congas and vocals and me on baritone sax with the Lechuga Fresca Latin band, listen on through this reflection and the outro.

I spent two days this week as a guest at a Health Equity Summit sponsored by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality (AHRQ). I recorded this chat with Betsy in June. The overlap couldn't be more pronounced. Health equity, no health itself, depends on local communities with members who actively



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embody and accelerate agency, belonging, self-confidence, and engagement. BUILD brings to light, nurtures, and fertilizes the seeds already present in young people as they find their communities. We old farts need them - BUILD and their mentees. There's only so much we can still do. We're old. They aren't. Please find the organizations in your community that support rising young people. Mentor through those opportunities or find your own wherever you live, work, play, worship, and learn. It'll be good for you and certainly good for us.

Pablo Pueblo with Lechuga Fresca Latin Band 32:22



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