Alison Monahan: Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're excited to have Jason Parker, Managing Producer at Canamac Productions here with us to talk about creating conversations around diversity. Your Law School Toolbox host today is Alison Monahan, and typically, I'm with Lee Burgess. We're here to demystify the law school and early legal career experience, so that you'll be the best law student and lawyer you can be. Together, we're the co-creators of the Law School Toolbox, the Bar Exam Toolbox, and the career-related website CareerDicta. I also run The Girl's Guide to Law School. If you enjoy the show, please leave a review or rating on your favorite listening app. And if you have any questions, don't hesitate to reach out to us. You can always reach us via the contact form on LawSchoolToolBox.com, and we would love to hear from you. With that, let's get started.

Welcome back to the Law School Toolbox podcast. Today we're excited to have Jason Parker, Managing Producer at Canamac Productions here with us to talk about their unique approach to creating engaging and interactive programming around diversity for schools, businesses, civic organizations, and many other options. Welcome, Jason.

Jason Parker: Thank you. It's great to be here.

Alison Monahan: My pleasure. Well, to start us off, could you just give our listeners a little bit of information on your personal career path and background, so they have some context?

Jason Parker: Yeah. So, I always tell people from the outside my career path might actually look a little bit sporadic, because I've been in a lot of different places doing many different kinds of things, but all of it's always somehow centered around people and the importance of working with people. But I've been in the tech industry, in corporate, I've been in marketing agencies, done a lot of social media, digital media, marketing, all those sorts of things. But now I've found my way into a production company as a managing producer. Along the way I've always had some sort of focus on diversity, whether that's been running ERGs in the corporate area or working as a mentor with diverse internship programs. And now formally with Canamac Productions all I'm working on is diversity programming, and that's really where I feel like I'm supposed to be.

Alison Monahan: That's awesome. I'm always a fan of the winding career path, having gone through sociology, pre-med, architecture, programming, law, running a business. I appreciate the mixing. And how can somebody find out more about Canamac Productions, just the basics?

Jason Parker: The best thing to do is go to our website at canamacproductions.com. And in the navigation bar you'll see the Explore > Virtual Walkthrough area, and you'll

see me and our Associate Producer, Gina Taliaferro, walking you through all of our programming, how it works and all of that.

Alison Monahan: Awesome. Well, let's talk a little bit about this, because I think it's pretty interesting. How does this work? What are you guys doing?

Jason Parker: Well, we call what we do "interactive diversity programming". And the reason is, we come in, in the very beginning, it starts with a story. So, the very beginning of the company was the original play *Defamation*, which was written by our executive producer and playwright, Todd Logan. And *Defamation* was on tour as a play for the first 10 years of our existence. But it's a play that is set as a legal drama and it deals with issues of race, class, religion, gender. And in the midst of this case, what's going on is you, as the audience member, you're actually serving as the jury. And so, at the end the judge turns to the audience and tells them to make the decision. And then there's a phase where audience members actually interact with each other and with the judge to deliberate the verdict, after which we have a discussion that goes beyond the case into our own lives as individuals, as part of the school, as part of the community. And so that's really the basis for how the program itself works, is it's three phases, interactive, the audience is the jury.

Alison Monahan: And I think when we talked earlier, you kind of explained that there's a lot of ambiguity and different ways of interpreting things, and that that piece of being the jury carries over into this broader discussion. Is that accurate?

Jason Parker: Absolutely. Just like the real world, these cases are messy. There isn't necessarily a clear-cut answer that everyone's going to see, and that's actually by design. Todd, as he was writing the case, intentionally made it so that there is no correct answer. Either answer, whether you find for the plaintiff or for the defendant, it's valid. And there isn't anything you can point at. There's no smoking gun evidence that says it absolutely has to go this way every time where you got it wrong. And so that's where the conversation begins to come in, because beginning in the deliberation, and then especially during the post-show discussion phase, people begin to realize, "Hey, we just saw the exact same thing." And you got a different idea about what it meant, so let's talk about that. Why did you see one of the characters being brought to tears when she was being cross-examined and think that that means she's guilty? And I saw it and I thought it means she's innocent. So, how do we come to these different conclusions when the same thing is in front of us? And that's really important to understand if you're going to be in a career as a legal professional.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, it sounds super interesting. And now you've got a second one that's about something else. Tell us a little bit about that.

Jason Parker: Yeah. In 2021, Todd partnered with another playwright, Lisa Dillman, to write *Just Cause*. And that case is set in 2021, when it was released, which you might recognize as a year after the summer of 2020, when George Floyd was killed. You might recognize it as the height of the pandemic. All those things are involved in the story, so it really is a contemporary look at these issues in matters of social justice. And it really poses questions like, what's an organization's role in these issues? What should they be doing at the organizational level? Should we really be looking for incremental change or systemic change, or both, and how can that work together? What happens when we're trying to pit one cause against another, like race and gender? How do we move forward on multiple fronts, instead of competing on what we're doing? So it really is a fresh look at the issues, but it's built on that same interactive model. So there's the case presented first, then the deliberation, and the discussion. So it's built on that same model that gets people engaged, gets them really talking in a productive, meaningful, civil way about these difficult topics. But it's a completely new story.

Alison Monahan: Well, this all sounds super interesting. Could you dive a little more into what the goals are here? I think you started mentioning that just now. Is this just for entertainment, or is there more going on?

Jason Parker: There's a lot more going on. The goals really depend on the individual organization that we're working with, which can be anywhere from hospital executives to incoming 1L students. But overall the goal in every situation in some way involves getting a conversation going that otherwise either wouldn't be possible, or it wouldn't be productive, or it would be too contentious or uncomfortable. It really does allow people to have a conversation that is really difficult to have in a civil and productive way otherwise. Just because of the subject matter a lot of people want to avoid these topics, or it turns into a fight, or they stay on the surface and don't really get to the meat of the subject. So, what these phases of the experience are designed to do during the case that you're seeing as this play or film, you're beginning to lean into these issues, because it's not about you; it's about these characters. It's Ms. Wade, the plaintiff, or it's Midwest Repertory Theater, the defendant. So you're able to really think about these issues, instead of walking into a room for a diversity training where they say, "Okay, everybody, let's talk about race, cold turkey."

Alison Monahan: Right. Yeah, let's do it.

Jason Parker: So, this case lets you really begin to lean into those issues without feeling quite so vulnerable, like quite so much is at stake for you personally. And then the deliberation phase really leads you through some self-reflection of beginning to look and understand, "Okay, I'm voting here for the plaintiff, but why is that? What's going into it?" You start to realize we didn't quite give you enough to go on to be a hundred percent sure. And so, you have to look within and say, "Do I

have some kind of bias that's feeding into this? Am I voting based on my empathy? What is it that's factoring into that, and what is it that's factoring into that for other people also in this jury with me?" And so, that's a lot of self-reflection, and also beginning to talk about the issues. Once that's over and we've gotten to the verdict, the verdict itself really no longer matters. It's fictitious and it's now in the past. So we peel back that illusion of the courtroom or the trial and we begin to talk about ourselves. But at that point people are open and ready to do it. And that's really the goal, is how do we get people to that point where they're ready to have this conversation and really willing to jump into it with one another? And that's the basis of the main goal for most of our customers.

Alison Monahan: Right. I remember when I was much younger, I went to a leadership training on something and they're like, "When you're leading a small group, probably not best to come into the room and just say, 'Tell me your deepest, darkest secret.'" You've got to build up some trust and empathy and that kind of thing before you get on that level. So yeah, I think all of this makes a lot of sense. I'm just curious, as you've presented these experiences to what sounds like a variety of audiences, probably, I'm guessing all around the country in different areas, what kind of common themes have you seen emerging and does that vary around the country?

Jason Parker: It varies more, I would say, based on the type of audience we're in front of, more so than it does around the country. Obviously you get some different perspectives and political views and just general life experiences depending on where you are in the country. But it really matters if you were… Put yourself in the position of an audience member and look around the room and see who else is in that room with you. What you share in common is going to form the core of how you filter what you think you want to say to the rest of these people, what kind of perspectives you want them to hear from you, or need them to see from your side of the story. If you take, for example, an orientation class of 1L students coming in, they don't really know each other yet. They met each other maybe this morning, maybe yesterday. And so, they don't have a lot to go on, except they know "We're all here for the same reason – to get started in this next step toward our career." And so, they're going to be thinking a lot about "my future": "I want to be an attorney, most likely, so what am I taking from this that's going to feed into my future in that way?" And they're going to have a lot of their conversation focusing on what they can take from this experience and understanding how to be a better version of themselves as they become this legal professional they're going to be.

But you think about even still in a law school setting, if we were talking just to faculty and staff members, that conversation's going to look very different. They're going to be talking about what it's like to be a member of this faculty, where there's at least some sort of hierarchy of people who have been here

longer, people who have more power, they're ahead of something, versus me over here, who's in a different position, and what that dynamic is like, and how things like race or gender play into it. They might talk about the power they hold, and simple decisions they make that could impact a student well beyond the walls of their own classroom. It could follow them to other courses, other professors. It could follow them in their own life, in their psyche. So, they might talk about that sort of thing, versus what a student would talk about when it's an audience of just students. And from there you can see every audience we go to, there's some commonality of who's in that audience, and that brings some focus to what they talk about. But overall, the goal of our facilitator in the third phase in that discussion is always to help people move beyond the case and see how it applies to our lives. And then also, how do you take that beyond this room? When we're done here, how do you take this experience and use it in your life after today?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I think your point about law school orientation is a really interesting one, I'm thinking back to that timeframe and yeah, nobody knew anyone at all, you're trying to kind of figure out where you fit in, where are these other people coming from? People end up making these kind of judgment calls about whether they want to hang out with this person again, based on very, very limited information. So, I can see that being a kind of fraught area for your facilitators to walk into as well.

Jason Parker: Yeah. Well, one thing we really appreciate about orientation audiences is, in some audiences where we've been, it's harder to get people started talking. We have to encourage that first person to speak up; and once that happens, we're good. In an audience of law students, we never have that problem – somebody has their hand up right away.

Alison Monahan: I was going to say, that's not an issue. And that person likely becomes the person in your class that you just refer to as "the hand" for the rest of their entire time.

Jason Parker: Right, right.

Alison Monahan: But yeah, that's a good point. Nobody's going to be… I mean, some people will be sitting on their hands, but definitely some people are going to be out sharing their opinions widely.

Jason Parker: Yes.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. No, just flashbacks. Well, as we probably know, this idea around supporting diversity and inclusion and these kinds of things has unfortunately gotten increasing pushback in the U.S., particularly as of late. Have you seen any resistance to what you guys are trying to do here?

Jason Parker: We have, yes. We have a lot of conversations with organizations that are thinking about bringing us in, especially now depending on the state and who their governor is, and who's in their legislature and what that conversation is for them. They have to have some really hard questions about what this even is, and what's our agenda when we come in, what are we expecting to do, and what's the outcome and everything, because they have to be really critical of what they bring in and make sure that it's going to work within the framework of what they're being given to work with. And one of the things that makes us really unique is that we're not a training, we're not a workshop where there's an expected bullet point list at the end, you'll be able to define "implicit bias". There's none of that sort of thing that comes with most traditional diversity training type scenarios. And it's not that we think that doesn't belong; there's a lot of place for that kind of programming and we're a good compliment to it. But we come in without an agenda, without telling you we have the right answers to all these questions. We're not telling you how to think or what to think. We're just coming in presenting you a story that characters are talking about these issues from their points of view, and then we get to talk about how that makes us feel, what we think about it. And we're open to hearing from all sides. So, this fits in a lot of different political atmospheres. We go to different religious organizations, churches, synagogues, as well as community-focused organizations that really have a lot of different opinions on these subjects. But we're always able to have a conversation, and that conversation always is focused on how do we do better as people in understanding others, and in making progress where it needs to be made?

Alison Monahan: Yeah, that's super interesting. I grew up in a very small town in the Bible Belt South and now I live in San Francisco. So, I feel in some ways like that actually situated me to be able to talk to a variety of different people, because I joke on politics, if I demanded that my friends as kids, if they all agreed with me, I wouldn't have had any friends. I just think it's different; it's a different perspective from someone who maybe grew up, born and raised in San Francisco. It's like, "How do I speak to these people?" It's like, "Well, you know, we're all people."

Jason Parker: Right, right.

Alison Monahan: No, it sounds very interesting. I'm remembering when I first heard about *The Defamation Experience*, it was at a conference and I spoke with someone who was, I think, kind of in your role. But that was pre-pandemic and this was all being done in-person, so obviously, the company had to pivot to be virtual. What kind of lessons do you think were learned there, and how are things going now with this in-person versus virtual options?

Jason Parker: Well, yeah, it was a very, very interesting time. "Interesting" is a good word.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. The curse, "May you live in interesting times."

Jason Parker: Yeah. If you remember all those commercials that everything said "In these [insert adjective here] times." All of that was true, but what we saw right away is the need for this kind of work wasn't going anywhere; it was only getting bigger. And we had to come together and reimagine what we were doing in a way that would continue to meet that need, even given all the new cards we were played by COVID. So, our live performances obviously completely stopped at that moment. But what we saw when we began offering this in a virtual format is that we had a lot of preconceived notions about ourselves and about this work and about how it works, and how we should present this, how it should really function. And some of that was wrong, and some of that maybe was right before the pandemic, but became wrong as people became accustomed to how to make connections with other human beings, even if it's virtual, how to interact with people, even if it's on Zoom. And we learned some things like, we had a feeling that doing this virtually would feel like there's even more space between people, but we learned sometimes a virtual program is more intimate, because especially back then, we're now sitting in someone's bedroom and they're sharing their intimate feelings and perspectives with us. Maybe they have their laundry folded and it's on the bed behind them. You're really seeing them. You're not seeing them stand up in an auditorium where they got dressed and drove in and came to school today. You're seeing them as they are.

And so, the virtual kind of format didn't necessarily mean that anything was lost from our live programs in the way people were interacting with each other. And for some at that time, it was the most connection they had had with that number of human beings at once since they got quarantined. And so, that was a really big learning for us, and we have carried that through in trying to have less preconceived notions about how it should work every time, less sort of sacred cows, as they call it in the marketing world, that we have to have this exactly this way every time. And now we're offering a variety of different formats that really meet each of our customers where they are, whether that is, there's no Zoom at all, or it's all the way on Zoom, or somewhere in the middle. Maybe we are coming into three or four auditorium spaces at once on a couple of different campuses and doing one event, where we're virtual and they're together. So, we've learned that we can do this a lot of different ways, as long as we are understanding who the audience is, who the organization is, and what they're accustomed to doing, and making these kinds of connections possible and meeting them there. As long as we can do that, we've got the format for the experiential part that's going to work.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, that's super interesting. I think even law schools, who had to suddenly go virtual, which if you'd told them a week before they had to do that, they would

have been like, "That's completely impossible. There's no way." And then they did, and then they realized maybe actually there are some benefits to this. If your kid's home sick, you can still Zoom into the classroom. "Huh, maybe we should keep that." So yeah, I think that idea of particularly coming into someone's personal space to have this type of conversation is actually really interesting.

Jason Parker: Yeah. And the conversation has changed over the last few years quite a bit since then, just because the events that have unfolded in front of us starting with COVID. All the deaths with George Floyd being that sort of flagship moment of a "Snap!", where things changed for a lot of people that it wasn't changing for them before that, all of the things that were happening in that timeframe that we were watching from home. It just changes the way people are talking about and engaging in these issues. And that's where *Just Cause* came about, is looking at how these conversations are changing, how perspectives are changing, and how people are engaging together in a different way about it. But part of that's been shaped by the technology of how we interact with each other, has changed the way we talk about things as well.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I would imagine that one's interesting to see now, because in some ways, to me, 2021 just seems already so far away and such a different world. I think we're in this process of kind of reframing or trying to frame in some way like, "What was the pandemic? What is all this stuff?" So, I would imagine it's interesting for people to kind of engage with that and really sort of grapple with, "What does all this mean?"

Jason Parker: Yeah. And depending on the person, some people have tried to put some emotional distance between 2021 and themselves for a lot of reasons, a lot of the things that were going on in 2020 and 2021. And then, watching the story, some of that comes rushing back to you, of being in that moment again and remembering what it was like when you had to make decisions between doing what you believed in or being safe because of COVID. Those were the kinds of choices that we were being forced to make.

Alison Monahan: Right. And I remember going to street protests in San Francisco and everyone's out there with their masks on, but still chanting and kind of being like, "Is this okay? Does this make sense? I don't know." And at some point I remember there was a protest in a park, and then people got kind of on the march, and then it was just very, very compacted in these streets. And I was just like, "I don't know, I feel like I should probably go home now, or at least go to the sidewalk because I'm feeling like there are a lot of germs spreading right now."

Jason Parker: Yeah. There were so many competing things to worry about and care about all at the same time.

Alison Monahan: Yeah. I was like, "At least we're outside." Yeah, all these calculations, we all were just making constantly – and are still to some extent – but it just seemed more intense, I guess, all at that point. Alright, well, we're running a little low on time. I want to ask you a couple of more questions before we wrap up. What ideally do you think participants who have gone through one of these experiences take away with them?

Jason Parker: Well, the feedback that we get has been pretty clear since we've been doing this for 12 years. We always hear that these conversations keep going. And what's important about that is they're not just still talking about the characters they met in these stories – in *Defamation* or in *Just Cause*, but they're really thinking about how it applies to what they're seeing and what they're experiencing in their real lives. So, they have a situation in front of them and they think back, "Okay, this reminds me of when Ms. Wade talked about walking in the room and getting 'the look' when she was a Black woman and they were expecting a White woman. And I think I just saw somebody realizing they were experiencing the look, and now I'm thinking about that too." And so, they begin to think about what they learned through these stories and what they heard from the other people in the audience, how it really applies every day for them. And the other thing is, we hope that by modeling that, "Yes, we can have a productive, meaningful, civil conversation about issues that are often so contentious – look, we're doing it right now" – that gives people what they need to feel like they can do it the next time there's a conversation or an opportunity for that conversation, where there isn't any sort of moderator there to help them out, but they feel like they have what it takes to do it. They have the courage they need, they're not going to shy away from it. And so, that's really what we're looking for at the end, is that people remember the story, people remember the experience, and they're able to put that into use in their daily life.

Alison Monahan: Yeah, I can definitely see that being useful for incoming law students who have to kind of jump into the situation of, often in first-year classes, discussing pretty fraught issues. And I think a lot of people just don't really feel like they have the tools to do that, and that can result in maybe saying things that they don't want to say or shouldn't have said, or that someone takes offense at. Yeah, just that kind of having somebody facilitate, "Alright, here's an example of a civil way to have this conversation that is not attacking anyone or whatnot", would be useful.

Jason Parker: And one more thing specifically for law students that we hear is before this experience – and it's not always incoming at orientation – but before this experience, they may not have felt they knew how to raise their hand and say, "Okay, we're studying this case and we're talking about whether or not it meets the definition of homicide, but can we talk about the fact that this was a Black person killed by a White person? Can we talk about race about it for a minute?

That had something to do with it, right?" And sometimes that conversation isn't going to happen.

Alison Monahan: Right. I can just imagine kind of screeches to a halt and everyone's like, "Oh, yeah."

Jason Parker: And sometimes it's the comfort level of the professor. Sometimes it's just you don't have time because you literally have to learn what homicide is and what it isn't.

Alison Monahan: I'm just thinking back to my Criminal Law class where I had a professor I couldn't stand, but if you asked him that, his head would have exploded, basically. "No, no, we cannot. Alright, moving on." But maybe he's not teaching anymore or something, I don't know. No, I think that sounds really interesting, that people do feel like they're empowered to sort of bring up these things that are often just overlooked or not discussed, but do probably have an impact. I mean, nothing happens in a vacuum.

Jason Parker: Exactly, yeah.

Alison Monahan: And what benefits do you think participation might have for these different organizations?

Jason Parker: Well, in a lot of cases we tell people that this works in so many different situations, because every single time this conversation is unique to that audience. So it works whether you've never done programming, you've never had your participants, your audience have this kind of conversation, or if it's something you do all the time. And what this does a really good job of is bringing people in different parts of that spectrum together, and also beginning this conversation in a way that you can pick up where we leave it off and keep it going. So, like I said before, it's a compliment to other programming. It's not we just swoop in and change the world; we're done and everything's perfect. We come in and we get this conversation going, but you can keep it going. You can look at what people are talking about, where their passions lie, what gaps in programming you think you might have, based on what they're saying in the discussion. And then you can bring in other speakers, you can bring in other programs, you can bring in other cultural experiences, whatever it is you think that might need to be. So, it really helps you get that conversation going and gives you building blocks to continue programming, continue opportunities for experiences that keep this work going further.

Alison Monahan: That sounds great. Well, we're about out of time. Any final thoughts you would like to share here?

Jason Parker: I think we've covered most of what's really important about it. So, thank you.

Alison Monahan: Awesome. Well, yeah, my pleasure. Remind us how people can learn more if they are interested in learning more about this.

Jason Parker: Yeah, you can go to canamacproductions.com, and there's a page both for *The Defamation Experience* and *Just Cause: The Experience*, as well as the walkthrough page where you can explore the programming and kind of get an idea phase by phase of how it works, and see real examples of these conversations in action as well.

Alison Monahan: Awesome. Well, Jason, thank you so much for joining us.

Jason Parker: Thank you for having me.

Alison Monahan: My pleasure. If you enjoyed this episode of the Law School Toolbox podcast, please take a second to leave a review or rating on your favorite listening app. We would really appreciate it. And be sure to subscribe so you don't miss anything. If you have any questions or comments, please don't hesitate to reach out to Lee or Alison at lee@lawschooltoolbox.com or alison@lawschooltoolbox.com. Or you can always contact us via our website contact form at LawSchoolToolbox.com. Thanks for listening, and we'll talk soon!

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