S2E16: BUILDING VETS WHO CODE WITH JEROME HARDAWAY

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Laurence:

Hey, it's Laurence Bradford. Welcome to Season 2 of the Learn to Code With Me podcast, where I'm chatting with people who taught themselves how to code and are now doing amazing things with their newly found skills.

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Hey everyone, welcome to the Learn to Code With Me podcast. I am your host, Laurence Bradford. In today's episode I speak with Jerome Hardaway. Jerome served in the U.S. Air Force. After his service and limited career options, he began teaching himself how to code. Jerome continued to work as a web developer for some time,
until he started the nonprofit, Vets Who Code. In our conversation today, Jerome talks about how running a nonprofit is different than running a startup, as well as future plans of his organization, Vets Who Code. Remember, you can get the Show Notes for this episode, plus a full transcript, at learntocodewith.me/podcast. Enjoy the interview!

Hey Jerome, thank you so much for talking with me today.

Jerome: Thank you for having me on your show.

Laurence: Yes, of course. Could you introduce yourself to the audience real quick?

Jerome: Yes ma’am. My name’s Jerome Hardaway and I’m the founder and executive director of Vets Who Code, a veteran created and operated 501c3 that teaches veterans how to code through a program of 19 or 20 weeks with Ruby on Rails as well as JavaScript frameworks.

Laurence: Awesome, I definitely want to get into that, Vets Who Code and how you started that and what you guys are doing now. But I want to go back a bit into how you got started in tech. As your organization indicates, you initially were in the military, correct?

Jerome: Yes ma’am, I was United States Air Force, Security Forces.

Laurence: Was that the time when you kind of got introduced to technology or was it after you left the military?

Jerome: It was after I left the military. It was, Security Forces is basically like Military Police and security type job and
when I exited the military, I realized it was in the middle of the recession and a lot of the jobs they said I was qualified for, they weren’t hiring. So I was looking for something that I could learn to do quickly that the investment was time and not money and resources. Code ended up being that perfect match. I kind of stumbled into it by accident. I saw a commercial about it, decided I was going to research it and started teaching myself about it and ended up getting my first job as a SQL analyst for apartment home security, and then moving on to other code positions.

Laurence: Yeah, that’s so crazy that you saw a commercial on tv. I think so many people can...

Jerome: It was on Facebook, not on tv. On Facebook.

Laurence: Oh, you saw it on Facebook?

Jerome: Yes. The code.org thing was starting to rev up. It was just right when they started.

Laurence: Code.org?

Jerome: Yes.

Laurence: That’s really ironic because I think we maybe were learning around the same time because I remember watching that video with Mark Zuckerberg.

Jerome: Yes, and the Miami Heat guy, I don’t even know his name.
Laurence: Yeah, and I think will.i.am was in it too.

Jerome: Yes.

Laurence: That actually totally inspired me. There was multiple factors in my life as well when I first began learning how to code, like not having many job opportunities, wanting to make more money and so forth, but I remember seeing that video and being really inspired by it.

Jerome: It seemed like a good idea at the time. I was like, “Why not?”

Laurence: Yeah, well hey, it definitely was because look at everything you’re doing today. Good choice. By the way, I meant to say this sooner but I forgot, thank you for your service.

Jerome: Thank you.

Laurence: So you saw this advertisement, the code.org, then you began learning and I was looking at your LinkedIn before we hopped on the call and I saw you did a lot with Lynda and you also went to a General Assembly coding bootcamp.

Jerome: Yes. The Lynda actually, it goes back to a tactic we use in Vets Who Code. I’ve done those courses but I’ve done those courses in correlation to the project. With General Assembly, I actually had programming experience before then and I applied for their class in 2014 and they actually rejected me until I ended up using my coding experience to create a project that went viral. There was a young Army veteran who ended up being gunned down by the police due to a PTSD situation and his family could not
raise the money to put him down to rest properly. So I ended up stepping in and using a combination of digital marketing and experience and the code skills I had learned over the course of the years and created this huge digital campaign and we raised about $10,000 in about 27 hours. After that, General Assembly called me back and they were like, “Wow, that was amazing, we’d love to have you up here.” So that’s how that happened.

Laurence: Oh wow, and I’m sorry, what year was this? How long ago was this?

Jerome: This was about two years ago, it was 2014.

Laurence: 2014, okay. Which location, or which campus did you go to for General Assembly?

Jerome: The NYC, New York campus.

Laurence: Oh, the NYC. And now, looking at your LinkedIn, you’re based in Nashville, right?

Jerome: Yes, I’m based out of Nashville but I do a lot of remote stuff and I spend a lot of time in New York and San Francisco. I’m trying to decide by the end of this year which one I’m going to move to. That’s a big decision. East Coast, New York, or Silicon Valley.

Laurence: Which one are you learning towards?

Jerome: It’s difficult. For me, I want to do Silicon Valley, my wife prefers New York, so we’re currently doing this debate right now.
Laurence: I was in a similar situation with my boyfriend. We ended up in New York, but he actually didn't want to move to Silicon Valley, even though he is a software engineer. He just wasn't really interested in relocating there.

Jerome: She's not a big fan of it. Not a fan of the culture. I'm trying to, but she's a fan of the Raiders and the Raiders and the Raiders are right up the street between San Francisco and Oakland. So that's what I'm really working on. I've taken her there for Christmas to see her first live Raiders game. Hopefully I'll make a big enough impact that she says yes and I get to go to the Valley with my bros and my friends.

Laurence: Well if you don't, you come to New York and that's where I live. Actually a lot of people live here. Since I moved to New York I've been able to connect with so many people that I hadn't known before. Online through email, email exchanges, what have you, I've been able to meet them in real life and what not. People in the tech community, I mean.

Jerome: New York and, we've gotten to the point where New York and San Francisco are our favorite places because they understand what we're doing. It's just a beautiful situation for us. We're starting to move a lot of our resources and relationships, communication, to those two locales. It's an organic relationship that we don't have to force as a 501c3 that has a unique mission. It has a unique style and way of doing things. We actually know New York and San Francisco, they understand what we're doing and how we do it a lot more because they have companies and for profit organizations that run like we do. They understand remote work, they understand the importance to learn how to program. It's something that we don't have to explain, what is code vs. below the Mason-Dixon line. We absolutely love it up there. I'm always trying to get up there every chance I get.
Laurence: Yeah, that's really, honestly I've not spent too much time below the Mason-Dixon line because I grew up in Pennsylvania and then spent time living in Boston and now of course.

Jerome: You're not missing anything. Below the Mason-Dixon line, you're not missing anything. It's boring here.

Laurence: Even just living, Boston is a great city, there's so much education, there is a lot of tech stuff going on, but just even compared to New York, to me it's a huge difference. Just all the companies that are here, and of course in San Francisco. The other day I was looking at some stuff online and I actually really want to go to San Francisco because that's the epicenter of it all, you know?

Jerome: Yes.

Laurence: There's obviously tons of people and companies in New York, but every tech company is in San Francisco, or at least has an office there, for the most part.

Jerome: Yes, Seattle is coming up slowly now. A lot of people are putting in, I know Facebook, Airbnb, a lot of companies that we work with in Silicon Valley are getting satellite offices in Seattle. They're moving on up.

Laurence: Yeah. I've never been to Seattle, but I hear it's absolutely gorgeous.

Jerome: Yeah. They're crazy coffee people. That's what learning the West coast, in general, you can't, I'm simple, I'm a Starbucks guy. I can go to Starbucks and be cool. If you go to San Francisco, don't say where the Starbucks is. You
need to find a coffee shop and that needs to be your home. They have a really great one. It’s like a coffee shop/cowork space. They have another one, I can’t remember. It’s an audio store and a coffee shop. You went in and you can go buy speakers. I was like, “Who would think of this idea?” This is only something in San Francisco.

Laurence:

Yeah, we have, and I know it started in San Francisco, Blue Bottle Coffee. I think that’s a big one. And we have one actually right by where I work in New York. All these different coffee shops and what not. And coworking spaces, those are great too. We work out of one here in New York but having those hybrid ones is really neat. I want to kind of get back into your journey. When you went to General Assembly, you had already started Vets Who Code, correct?

Jerome:

Yes. The situation was, we were already, after that people were like, “You just can't go back in the shadows.” I thought that after I did my little good deed, I was going to be able to just disappear, but there’s just a crazy amount of fortuitous events that happened. People were like, “No, you can't do that, you have to do something.” So I was looking at what helped me get out of my situation. I wanted to scale that.

While going to General Assembly, I started building Vets Who Code a lot more. Nonprofits are totally different than for profits. A for profit, if you’re selling a product, you just do the paperwork and you’re done. Nonprofit is, that’s one of those things where I try to educate people. Building a nonprofit, on the paperwork and the administrative side, isn't easy. I had to learn a lot of stuff dealing with the IRS, had to learn a lot of stuff dealing with the Office of Charitable Solicitation. People don’t know, you have to get authorized as a nonprofit. You have to do the business license, get the EIN, get authorized as a
nonprofit on a state level, get authorized as a nonprofit on the federal level and then you’re at the mercy of popular opinion or bad things happening when it comes to the government. There was one situation for us, that because of the Pentagon hacks, the IRS, their databases were messed up. We were a 501c3, legally by the federal government, but they were not showing us up in their databases because they had such a huge backlog.

Yes. The situation was, we were already, after that people were like, “You just can't go back in the shadows.” I thought that after I did my little good deed, I was going to be able to just disappear, but there's just a crazy amount of fortuitous events that happened. People were like, “No, you can't do that, you have to do something.” So I was looking at what helped me get out of my situation. I wanted to scale that.

Laurence:

Oh man.

Jerome:

Americans are lazy and we want it right now. If you go in and type in an EIN, you want the EIN to just pop up to show this person is a nonprofit. So because we weren't, and no one was going to sit on the phone for 45 minutes just to hear somebody, the IRS, check and say this is a nonprofit organization, we were getting a lot of credibility issues because people were like, “They're not a nonprofit.” Until we got invited to the White House and then, “Oh yeah, they are a nonprofit. That's the real deal.”

I was doing all the paperwork, all the hard boring stuff of building the infrastructure of a nonprofit and sitting down with my idea, my agenda, and saying what did I want to build. What was my idea of a perfect nonprofit? I had been to the nonprofit sector and I saw a lot of things that I absolutely loathed. And I was like, “I don't want to bring a lot of that into my nonprofit. I don't want to be a business as usual nonprofit.” I wanted to do some things I saw in the for profit sector that just made a lot of sense, especially in the tech sector. I was like, “Why are they not
doing it? Why do nonprofits, when they have a mission that's really important, move slow?" The problem's going to solve itself. I didn't want to be that guy.

We took our nonprofit and we added Agile methodologies and sprint thinking to the nonprofit structure. Asynchronous style of handling meetings. Sprint, Rework, and Remote are three bibles of our nonprofit. Those are three books that I used to help do what I did. The first app that I used to help build the 501c3 was Basecamp by DHH, who created Rails. Ironically, he's a fan of our project, of our 501c3 and he actually came and spoke to our veterans once for an AMA. It's been a really cool journey. I'm doing this, I'm putting in the work. I've had people who literally I'm a fanboy of, turn around and become a fan of what I do.

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Yeah, that's so awesome, congratulations. I love how you spoke about applying some of the startup methodologies to the nonprofit and using things like Agile and all that good stuff. I'm curious now as you're talking about that, how many people behind the scenes at Vets Who Code do you have working there and helping you run these programs?

Jerome:

We are a very small team. We are six people right now, we’re hoping to get to seven or eight by the end of 2017. We want to bring someone on who's a bigger expert when it comes to EQ, when it comes to that emotional experience, things of that nature to help in veteran transition. We go back to the book Rework and it says “hire only when it hurts.” We're not trying to raise a bunch of money to hire a bunch of people or bring a bunch of people to the team. We're in a concept of hiring only when we see a grotesque weakness. That’s what's starting to become something that's glaringly obvious for us that we’re going to see in the future is the veterans that come out are younger and newer in our organization. Especially if we focus on this new project that we are building, in
regards to, we’re trying to truly expand so we’re building a new platform that will use a couple of technologies that we use so we won’t have that problem of having to pick and choose which veteran comes through our 501c3. What we are seeing is that it’s really hard for us to be able to do that emotional connection with everyone from every type of person. You need someone who is experienced. We found her, but we’re trying to make sure we get all our ducks in a row so we can bring her on board.

Laurence: Yeah, so you have six full time employees?

Jerome: Yeah.

Laurence: Are you guys all located in the same area or is kind of like a remote company?

Jerome: All remote. One thing that Slack and Basecamp are really good about that they both preach, if you go through Slack’s podcast and you go through DHH and Jane and Jason says, “You limit yourself when it comes to boots on ground, everyone has to be in the same area, you don’t get the best talent.” That’s really true, you don’t get the best people for the job when you’re dealing with a lot of, when you’re doing that. One of the things that we really focus on is finding people who fit our mission, people who, just like in the interview phase, people we can stand being around for 15 minutes even when the going gets tough. It’s not so much if you’re good, it’s like, “I’m going to be spending more time with you guys than my wife and kids, I need to be able to stand you.” One team member’s in Atlanta. Two team members are in New York. One is in Memphis, but is going to be relocating to San Francisco at the end of 2017 and I’m in Nashville.
Laurence: Yeah that's great. I love what you're saying about having the best talent and location shouldn't be a decision, it shouldn't be a factor when it comes to making the decision.

Jerome: It just comes down to the idea of Rework and Remote, especially in a nonprofit. If you look at how nonprofits are usually run, the issue that comes into play where a lot of money goes and how a lot of their impact and usefulness, it comes down to, quite frankly, a lack of talent. Or achieving talent in the nonprofit. What we preach is it's more important to have talented workers than to have a talented outreach team or to be focused on outreach. Talented workers can do amazing things.

We have one student named John Garcia, I've been raving about this guy. Because of our education with frontend development, how we focus on our way of Crawl, Walk, Run, his portfolio is so amazing that we are already getting calls from people that have seen it and want to talk to us about bringing him on board. It's three different states. I'm getting Slack messages from people I've shared it with saying, “Yo that dude has talent.” Where he was and where he is now, focusing on React and D3 and things of that nature, is just mind boggling.

The same with another one of our troops, Lee, who was former Army. His skills with Ruby have gotten to the point that he actually, it was our program that taught him, but it was him that sold us to Facebook. Being able to meet him and have the type of conversations and seeing where he was, for someone that's been at it, spent the time, been at it for maybe 10 weeks, they were so impressed that they invited us back out for Veteran's Day week. They want to work with us and start building more impact and relationships down the pipeline. It's things of that nature.

We have very big quality vs. quantity philosophy. And skills pay the bills philosophy that we push in our nonprofit. What we see is that while we don't have the advantage of other organizations that try to preach about their huge communities, our community kills it because
these guys and girls are coming out and they're leaving and they're getting jobs. So it doesn't really matter what they're doing in regards to, we don't have a community of 250 people, we have a community of 80 people max. Not even all of them are always in the Slack channel, we're fine with that. The people who stay active, we have that community and they're able and getting jobs and able to help other people and onboard other troops and things of that nature that makes it significantly easier for us to do our job, which is to make really good programmers. In the end, that's one of the things that we preach. You can have all the network and the community in the world, if you don't have the skills when that technical interview comes up, it really doesn't matter. In some things, with the skills, you can get people to be more forgiving, be more lenient on other rules. As in, we've had talks, one of our veterans works at Marvel right now and we've had talks with the Disney organization. They have a really strict H1B visa rule for a lot of their really cool jobs. We were able to talk to them and get them to actually lift that for one of their positions because they were so shocked by the talent that we were bringing in the door.

That's what we do, that's skills pay the bills. That's something that's really ingrained in VWC. It's because that's how we built it. We didn't go out there and focus on a lot of fundraising, I worked a full time job while building it. Just focused on mastering my 5pm to 7pm and going out there and crushing it every day then turning around and getting to the level that we are. That's one thing that people when we go to meet people, especially when I hear a story of how we actually got a lot of our big high level connections was actually through interviewing and getting the job then turning the job down and pitching bits of code. They absolutely loved that story. They were just shocked. A lot of nonprofits don't, everybody is always about storytelling, that's what has put us ahead of a lot of other people, getting the types of awards and relationships we're getting. We're not storytellers, we're going to show you and then we'll tell you a story and then we'll see how we can work from there. That makes a lot of
people, they want to work with us after that. That's something we pride ourselves on.

Laurence:

Yeah, that's great. The vets who code program, what is that like? Is it like a bootcamp or is there a certain set of classes a person must go through? Also, on that note, what specific skills and programming languages do you teach?

Jerome:

Roger that. We don't use the term bootcamp because it's not stressful. It's intense, the work is intense, it's a lot of work, but it's not truly stressful. What we focus on is, like we said, skills pay the bills. We focus on giving these guys a serious program and ideas. It's not just cracking open a book or finding a project and building on it. First month, after you do your prework, the first month you're meeting with me four nights a week. Second month you go down to two nights a week and third month we're meeting once a week. The fourth month we're meeting once a week or as needed. We do that because we call it a Crawl Walk Run. So basically Walk phase is when they need the most attention from me. When I'm holding their hand I'm teaching them everything they need to know to get a strong foundation of object oriented programming. As we go on, they're starting to go more in month two, is more focused on Rails. We have great products from our partners to help them with that as well as they have such a strong Ruby foundation that Rails is easier. By then we've done Ruby and Sinatra.

We focus on philosophy with Ruby coming from the concept that you are eventually going to have to update a Rails app once in your career if you choose to go the path of Rails. It's simply easier to update Rails apps if you focus more on the components than the power of Ruby and not what Rails brings to the table. We focus on teaching far more mastery of Ruby than how to use Sinatra or how to use Rails. We know that once you try to upgrade a Rails app, being really dependent on the Rails framework can hurt you. These are things that, that's a professional level
lesson that most people don't get until three or four years in the game of code and we're teaching it in week six. This is why we do it like this. In the same concept in regards to pretty much everything, we focus on not teach you how to code an idea as a beginner, but teach you how to code in what makes the hiring manager happy. Then we retrograde from that and figure out how to make it the best way for our veterans to learn.

Laurence:

I love that. You guys focus on the fundamentals and also what hiring managers want. At the end of the day, that's what everyone wants, right? A job and having the skills that the hiring managers want is key.

Jerome:

Yeah. Those are the most important people, not what you want, it's what they want. Those are going to get you in front of whoever's in charge of the technical department who's going to be over that technical interview. That's their first line of defense. We are stack. We call it the VWC stack, but what it really is is a blended stack and it feeds off of that Crawl, Walk, Run. We use that idea a lot because that's how you're usually trained in the military to prep for deployment. Crawl phase, walk phase, run phase. It is Rails utilizing some mean stack fundamentals. First you learn Ruby, then you learn Sinatra, then you learn Rails. Then while you're learning Rails, you'll start learning JavaScript using Asset Pipeline. Pipeline will start going into more Sass and CSS and HTML while doing Asset Pipeline. From there, we move into our first Angular app. The first Angular app is, we are using Bootstrap as the framework and from Bootstrap we're also using Bower. That's how we build. That's after they've already used Rails with MySQL and Rails with Postgres. They do the first Rails app, which is Bower. Then they use the second Rails app again with Node. Then after that we use React, we teach them how to use React with two different gems, the React Rails gem and the React on Rails gem with shakacode code.
Then we use Ember.js and we are looking into trying to see if we can try to make an electron in Rails app. That’s something that a couple of our troops have been interested in, how to build an electron app. That’s how we do it. We focus on using one thing as the core and then going into adding on to that as layers. As they get more layers and the more self sufficient our troops become, that’s how come we’re able to minimize the amount of time that we spend with our troops. Once again, they also get the greatest tools in the world when they come with us. We train Pragmatic Studios, Pluralsight, Interview Cake, Angular on Rails, they give them great free products to go along learning Angular Rails with mpm set up. They get some of the best tools in the business in conjunction to keep learning with us so they don’t have to, so coming with us isn’t a problem. That's one thing that we really like and we really enjoy, was focusing on teaching our veterans.

Laurence:

Thank you so much Jerome for sharing all that. It sounds like you guys have a really awesome program and I love what you’re doing. To my knowledge, I think you’re the only, maybe there’s others I’m not aware, but I think the only organization I’ve seen that is really supporting veterans specifically and helping them learn how to code. I know definitely, there’s people in the Learn to Code With Me audience who are veterans, so hopefully they can hear about this and maybe even be inspired to apply. Actually on that note, if someone is listening and they are a vet who is coding or wants to code, where could they find out more information or where could they apply?

Jerome:

Roger that. We are actually, you can apply on our website, vetswhocode.io, but what we’re doing recently is we’re moving forward with building a platform that it’s going to help all veterans who want to come in and use our curriculum. We’re going to be focusing on a lot more open sourcing. We’re building a new Rails and React platform that will host all of our educational stuff and host
everything that veterans will be able to use to code within the app using Ruby on Rails. It's going to be a crazy application. We're going through the process of debuting that Memorial Day. We're actually probably going to start allowing veterans to enter our organization Slack maybe starting January 2017, with the focus on debuting the new app on Memorial Day 2017. It's going to be a crazy, we've gotten so much great support.

One of the things we were really concerned about, I don't know if you've heard of this website Ripple IT but you're able to code inside the app on the online editor for Ruby on Rails. We use that a lot when we teach in our classes. Their API, for having more than a hundred people hit their API, it's like $1300 a month. We were like, “Oh my goodness, how are we going to afford to have API for $1300 a month?” We just emailed the guy and told him what we were looking at doing and if there was a way we could get a price discount. He was like, “What you guys are doing is amazing. We would love to have you guys use our API for free, just please let people know that we work with you guys and stuff like that.” I was like, “Yeah, of course, thank you.” The idea, that was just a huge relief off my back. It was like, “Wow, that was a lot of money that we were going to have to invest in just one thing that was stressing me out that we don't have to worry about that anymore.”

That's what we're looking towards, so I would say go to vetswhocode.io, we're going to set our timer for when the app drops, and just be on the lookout for it because it's going to be fun, it's going to be amazing, and we're hoping that with all the open source, the rapid open sourcing, especially our veterans, our troops coming to volunteer, you guys are going to see a crazy 2017 from us so I'm very excited.

Laurence:

Awesome, I can't wait to see that. And finally, so I know, everyone go to vetswhocode.io to find out more information about the organization, but where can people connect with you Jerome, online?
Jerome: Roger that. I am Jerome Hardaway on pretty much everything. So from Medium to Twitter to LinkedIn, so find me there. If you want to go follow Vets Who Code on Twitter or Instagram or LinkedIn or Facebook, we’re on there as well. That’s the best way. I answer emails, I answer tweets, I love talking to people on Twitter. I’m a geek, so if you guys are doing any geeky stuff or any comic book stuff, if you want to talk Marvel comics with me, be prepared and know all your facts, that’s my only warning to you. I’m also on the Ruby Rogues podcast as a panelist, so I talk a lot about, for me Ruby is life, Ruby is my favorite language outside of JavaScript and after JavaScript it’s pretty much a subject of data science. Outside of those big three, I’m not really working or looking at any other technologies out there. I love to talk about Rails, JavaScript, and data science.

Laurence: That’s awesome. I don’t know much about it but I’m completely fascinated with data science myself. Alright Jerome, well thank you so much for coming on the show.

Jerome: Roger that, thank you and thank you for supporting Vets Who Code.

Laurence: I hope you enjoyed our conversation. Again, the Show Notes for this episode, plus a full transcript, can be found at learntocodewith.me/podcast. If you’re listening to this episode in the future, simply click the search icon in the upper navigation and type Jerome’s name. It’s spelled Jerome. If you enjoyed this episode, head on over to my website learntocodewith.me where you can get even more awesome code related content, like my 10 Free Tips for Teaching Yourself How to Code. Thanks so much for tuning in and I’ll see you next week!
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