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NARRATOR: Today on Trending Globally Danny Warshay, executive director of the Nelson Center for Entrepreneurship at Brown University, sits down with Michael Slaby, executive director of Chicago Ideas and former chief integration and innovation officer for President Obama.

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In their wide-ranging conversation, they cover the beginning of big data and grassroots organizing, technology and information sharing, and how to maintain our humanity in the digital age.

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DANNY I want to thank Michael for being with us this afternoon.

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: Thanks for having me.

DANNY Thanks for coming back to campus.

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: Back on College Hill.

DANNY Yes, exactly. I had a chance to hear a little bit of your trajectory earlier today, and I thought an

WARSHAY: interesting pivot point in the way you were talking about it was this fateful encounter with a friend of yours named Eli. And I thought that might be a good place to start, because it will help you rewind backwards and fast forward.

MICHAEL SLABY: Yeah, Eli was one of my best friends I grew up with. I was raised in Washington DC so I was raised in and around politics, and what happened in 04 was I was a handful years out of college, I was working in web design and web development. The Democrats managed to lose to President Bush a second time.

I lost my mind a little bit. I was so frustrated with what I felt like was the sort of listlessness, lack of leadership, and ineptitude of the party that I didn't really know what to do with that

frustration. And I got into what can best be described as an argument of violent agreement with my friend Eli. Halfway through the conversation he said something like, well, if we're so smart, why don't either of us do this for a living. And he meant it rhetorically, but it just stuck in my head the disconnect of the thing that I was in some ways most passionate about and most animated by not being how I was spending my career and using my talents, skills, energy and time became untenable.

And that was how I shifted from the sort of early career in design and technology into politics, and then ultimately sort of managed to put them together in a sort of accidental way in the first Obama campaign.

DANNY And we've heard by your reputation about how much impact you've had in those campaigns
WARSHAY: and generally through some of your other endeavors, but it was nice to hear that your entree to politics was a pretty unassuming transition.

MICHAEL SLABY: Yeah, I was living in Chicago without a lot of political connections, and so I was just reaching for whatever was available. And I ended up interning for senator Durbin in his Chicago office, pretty much opening the mail and answering the phone for almost a year as my first work in politics.

DANNY And this was at what age?

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: I was like 27, 28.

DANNY OK, so not just out of college.

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: No.

DANNY So an intern opening mail wasn't necessarily typical for a 28-year-old.

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: Not obvious. As unglamorous as it was, being right at the intersection between citizens and government was instructive. Like literally reading the mail of what people needed from, were asking for things that the people needed help, answering the phones. Katrina happened, the Harriet Miers nomination happened, and senator Durbin was on judiciary. So people would just call from all over Illinois, from all over the country, and some of it was about expressing

opinions. Some of it was about demanding that we do something about what was happening in New Orleans. And at times it was this super mundane, unsexy experience of sort of the gears of the machinery of politics, but at times it was a very poignant, very emotional recognition that there is a touch point between citizen and government that is very real, and very close to the bone when things are going wrong.

DANNY And you didn't know that going in, right?

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: No.

DANNY You had an instinct that--

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: I was just opening the mail!

DANNY Right, and then this is an entree to a field that, as you and Eli committed to, was something for

WARSHAY: which you had passion in and wanted to commit to.

MICHAEL SLABY: Senator Durbin's Chicago chief of staff helped me get a job in a political consulting firm, and that's how I sort of shifted from that first job in politics into the campaign side of the world.

DANNY Again, people have an image of you that is, wow, somebody has big impact, but I think it's

WARSHAY: important, especially for any of our listeners who are thinking about shifting gears or maybe pursuing a passion that they've put on hold that it might take some initial entree that isn't all that glamorous.

MICHAEL SLABY: Yeah, there's a lot of mythology, particularly about the campaign 08, that sort of alters people's perspective about what it must have been like to be part of this sort of historical moment. And it was an amazing experience, but also campaigns are a grind and I always describe it as the best and the worst job I ever had. Even when we started to really understand how digital tools could scale community organizing, the process of building relationships is not fast. We were able to do it.

The scale came in terms of the number of relationships we were able to start and build, but the process of building trust is not fast, and technology doesn't particularly speed it up. In fact, it can problematically speed up the destruction of trust, actually, because it's fragile. And that's the thing we're seeing now around trust in institutions, and sort of as norms in political speech

in particular are breaking down people's trust in government is plummeting, which is a problem.

DANNY WARSHAY: People might be wondering what the heck is Danny Warshay, the executive director of the Nelson Center for Entrepreneurship, doing moderating this? When I heard you describe that distinction and the steps you took along the way I thought, wow, that mirrors our own entrepreneurial process that we teach as a methodology for solving problems. You ensured in our language, found and you validated an unmet need, you crafted a value proposition. Largely I think you were describing it on a small, informal scale in the 2008 campaign. And then when the 2012 campaign came about, it sounded in our language like you were building a model that could sustain itself as an enterprise.

MICHAEL SLABY: An enterprise.

DANNY WARSHAY: Yeah, a sustainability model. Does that--

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: I think that's right.

DANNY WARSHAY: Does that makes sense?

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: Yeah, I think that metaphor generally is consistent, and I always talk about the first campaign, the 08 campaign. It's important to remember that we were an incredibly unlikely story. Then Senator Obama with the funny name from Illinois that most people had never heard of was not the one who was going to come out of that primary.

All the sort of institutional strength, talent, and experience-- most of the experienced talent in the Democratic Party was working for other people. Was working for Senator Clinton, was working for Senator Edwards. Senator Dodd had a really, really strong team. Senator Biden, Governor Richardson. It was a very accomplished primary, and we were the least likely in some ways team.

And so when you're building a challenger campaign it's not unlike a startup, in that the more hats you can wear the more valuable you are, which is part of why I found a home there. But it was also a real moment in a team and a movement of true belief, and it was animated by a passion that is sort of not teachable. It's not it's not manufacturable, and that was very, very

real in the team and the culture of the organization.

The phrase I often use for the 2012 campaign is a much more professional organization, and that sort of professionalization of the movement is partially a function of the difference between the challenger campaign and an incumbent campaign, which are very different animals. It was much more of an enterprise the second time around, and that gave us huge advantages. There is a very significant tactical advantage to being an incumbent in partially just the ability to have time to plan, and that played out in interesting ways on a technical side because it gave us time to build things.

And we talk about technology, the rise of digital, and the changes around data and cloud computing and analytics that all sort of coincided with the evolution of the Obama community and timeline and his presidency. We had a year to build before we needed to really compete. That's a lot of time. That's a lot of time to tackle very large-scale, complicated platform-level technical challenges in ways that we had to take any of those things as givens in a way. When you're just scrambling from primary to primary trying to win an election every week there's no planning time.

We used to sort of joke that if you couldn't do it in an all-nighter you shouldn't do it.

DANNY Well it also sounds very familiar to a startup.

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: Sure.

DANNY And to the early stage of any kind of entrepreneurial enterprise.

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: Yep.

DANNY Part of what I teach is the benefits of scarce resources. The burden of abundant resources on

WARSHAY: the other side, but a scarce resource could be time.

MICHAEL SLABY: Sure.

DANNY And if you have an evening or an all-night to do it, you don't have a week or you don't have

WARSHAY: two years. You have to be innovative in thinking how you're going to get it done.

MICHAEL SLABY: There's another feature of startups that's very true, particularly the first campaign, which is the

value of desperation, that a lot of the innovation that we ultimately sort of figured out and pioneered and some of it was just luck and some of it was just timing. A lot of the firsts that we get credit for just we were the first to be there, but the political reality was that we were going to lose a traditional primary. And so the political reality was we had to change the nature of the electorate and the nature of who was participating in that process, or there was no path to victory for us. And that genius was really in the mind of David Plouffe, who was the campaign manager in the first campaign.

DANNY And sometimes in early stage startups-- I'm curious which might be true for the one you're
WARSHAY: describing. It's that you just don't know any better. You don't know how you're supposed to do it.

MICHAEL SLABY: Oh, ignorance is a virtue.

DANNY Right, so again a benefit of a scarce resource, the scarce resource meaning knowledge. You
WARSHAY: just don't know. You don't have experts on staff who can tell you how it's supposed to work.

Well, it sounds like it's a balance because in 2012 you could have been the victim of the burden of abundant resources.

MICHAEL SLABY: Yeah, and we were.

DANNY You knew a lot at that point.

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: I mean, there are things that didn't work. It's like a like an overly-funded startup.

DANNY Right.

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: Where you have too big a staff potentially, or you grow in dimensions that ultimately don't end up being valuable. You see this very commonly in highly capitalized technical startups where they grow really, really fast in one direction not realizing that they're like off by a degree.

DANNY When you have too many resources it blinds you to different paths, because you're deploying
WARSHAY: those resources in one direction.

MICHAEL SLABY: Yeah, I think the more accurate is you're out driving your headlights so the pace that you're going is actually faster than the feedback you're getting. So if you're right you're way ahead of

the game, but if you're off by even a little you're way ahead of the wrong game. But I think we too often got focused on solving technical or engineering challenges, and some of that work ended up being super valuable. Some of it was over-engineered because we were focused on the technical problem.

DANNY And eventually you transitioned to starting running your own startup.

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: Yeah.

DANNY A classic startup. Can you tell us a little bit about that, and maybe how you parlayed some of

WARSHAY: your learning from 2008 and 2012 into this new opportunity?

MICHAEL SLABY: Yeah, so after the reelect I was a little burnout on campaigns. Campaigns are just a really tough environment, and I'd gotten into politics mostly because I believed in the power of government for public good and public service. And I was more interested and I still am more interested in the problems of governing than campaigning. I really wanted to focus on the problems after election day, and so what me and some friends got together and started thinking about was these things that we sort of got good at sort of intentionally and accidentally over the course of a couple of cycles in the Obama world were around sort of the digital transformation of organizations, and the leveraging of digital tools and for community organizing in scale, for building movements, the power of technology and data, and how those things related to building movement-driven, data-driven organizations that could we bring those things into the broader social impact landscape.

We sort of said politics is taken care of. Let's see if we can bring these tools into some other spaces that are starved for innovation, and so that was where we focused and we built we built a for-profit e-corp social enterprise around this idea that there was enough market demand for real world-class technology and digital transformation to sustain a serious business. And part of that assumption was a belief in the evolution of how corporate America is changing, and how CSR and mission and purpose play out relative to brand value and relative to things like customer acquisition, employee acquisition and retention. And that the slow evolution that we've seen over the last decade or so around CSR and ESG metrics in a for-profit space has been accelerating to a place where purpose is now a meaningful strategic pillar of the best companies and most profitable companies.

And that those companies, however, needed help delivering on that promise so that it wasn't

just about PR or retention or brand. That they were able to internalize that in their operations, in the way that they were showing up in the world, in the way that they were leveraging their employees as a community, and that a lot of the challenges and skills that we'd built around social movements applied to that space too because there's more money there.

DANNY When I Googled the name of the company--

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: Timshel?

DANNY Yes! I was curious to find that there's some roots in the Bible in the book of Genesis, and I was

WARSHAY: curious whether that was deliberate.

MICHAEL SLABY: Oh, yeah! This is what happens when you let an English major start a tech company.

DANNY [LAUGHS]

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: It's really a reference to *East of Eden*, and *East of Eden* is Steinbeck's sort of glorious, epic novel about humanity's relationship to each other through the lens of this family and the Cain and Abel story. In the book one of the characters discovers this word in the Bible, and describes it as the most important word in the world. And the whole idea is that, rather than our lives and our destinies being predetermined, Timshel in the book is this word in Hebrew that means thou mayest, meaning that our goodness is determined by the choices we make.

And underlying our assumption about the whole company was that from an innovation, technology, and disruption space that we needed to make better choices about what problems we were solving. That 37 photo-sharing applications might be one too many. Can we get one of those teams working on mobile services for refugees? And part of our ethos as a company was wanting to do world-class digital work and consulting work and build world class technologies, but in service ultimately of something larger and that was the choice we were making.

DANNY To shift gears to-- as I said we're going to fast forward at some point to 2018. However you

WARSHAY: look at it, it's different from some of the early stage scenario that engaged you and Eli to say let's commit our lives to this.

MICHAEL SLABY: And, in some ways, very similar. I would say the 2016 election and President Trump's victory

was a huge surprise to a lot of people, including me. Waking up that next day for me and for a lot of people on the left in particular was very jarring, and for some people very scary. My experience sort of going through that moment was, one, very similar to the experience I had in 04, which was how did we manage to do this?

I believe that President Trump and his administration are more of a warning and in many ways sort of the culmination of an undermining of norms, institutions, patterns, and trust that we need to listen to, figure out how to listen to and learn from before something really bad happens. That President Trump isn't the really bad thing, and that it's a little scary from my perspective to think about, but that there is an opportunity here for us to re-imagine how we think parties work, how we think politics functions, how we communicate in politics, and how we leverage and how we want these tools to function relative to public institutions.

And that's a conversation that we started finally with Zuckerberg's testimony in front of Congress.

DANNY Which early today said should have happened 10 years ago.

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: At least! Right? This conversation about what the role is we want these tools and platforms to have relative to public institutions. What are the values that we want them to consider in thinking about their interaction with the world, and the things that matter because these things are going to play a role in how people relate to each other and relate to the government, and how politics and all these other questions that we should have been able to see coming and talk about before basically just privatizing all of that decision and letting Facebook make whatever decisions were best for Facebook.

We need to have a similarly difficult, complicated conversation around artificial intelligence and how we want those kinds of tools to augment, challenge, or change the way we interact with each other and the way that we interact with institutions. How are our institutions well set up to leverage those kinds of things in healthy, productive ways that augment and make humanity a better version of itself? Or are we just going to have a conversation about disruption for the sake of disruption and the robot apocalypse? Which feels counterproductive.

DANNY Well maybe tying it back to that definition of Timshel, which is like a call to action and it's to say

WARSHAY: that you should do this. For our listeners, what could they do? If you say we should have a

conversation about this, I assume you don't mean leave it to the congressional hearings.

MICHAEL SLABY: No.

DANNY So what else could people be doing?

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: Clearly, listening to the questions that were asked in the congressional hearings suggests that we can't just leave it there.

DANNY No, I suspect not.

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: Our representatives have to do better, but we also have to demand more of them, demand more of our own participation in this. We live in a system of self-government, and that means that we need to find ways to participate as a habit, and some of that is conversations like this. It's not always a protest, it's not always a march. Sometimes it's just having an intelligent, thoughtful conversation in your own house, in your own company about how these things play out or how we want them to play out. And then finding ways of challenging our leaders on those things of trying to find mechanisms to hold them accountable, whether that's elections, whether that's organizations we support, whether that's marching and protesting. It can also just be like how we have conversations with our children about the roles that technology plays and how we build relationships.

I don't think the answer is not to use technology. I think the backward-looking view of relationships were better when we only talked to people in person is this sort of anachronistic silliness that is sort of comforting and nostalgic in a way that's not helpful and probably dishonest ultimately. These technologies create opportunities for us to maintain more relationships at a distance than we've ever had, and to be careful about the value judgments we make on digital relationships versus in-person relationships, because not all in-person relationships are good. Not all personal interactions are healthy and positive.

Having an honest conversation about how these things change the way we build relationships and build trust and relate to people and each other is a conversation we need to be willing to participate in. There is one set of folks who will say something like the toothpaste is out of the tube, whatever, and that privacy is dead. I mean, that seems pretty nihilistic to me. I'm not willing to be that cynical about our capacity for being better.

DANNY Well, it's maybe to tie back to that first early stage job you had opening the mail.

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: Yeah.

DANNY You said it was eye-opening to see the impact that somebody writing a letter might have on

WARSHAY: the senator you were working for, and now we have different media through which to communicate maybe on a different scale, maybe with different intensity, but still that connection between the citizenry and the people who represent them.

MICHAEL SLABY: One of the problematic features of our current communications and technical infrastructure is that it's easier to talk at scale than to listen at scale, and listening is an underrated skill. And listening to people you disagree with is an underrated skill. We've really lost the ability to disagree in a polite, intentional, thoughtful and humble way to say, we're two humans who are trying to figure out the human experience. And we disagree about some of what's happening around us. Let's talk about that. It's not a conversation we have much in politics.

DANNY And I hope it's not disclosing too much that you told us earlier today that you're a regular

WARSHAY: reader of redstate.com com and for strategic reasons.

MICHAEL SLABY: Yeah. I mean, I think it's important and there have been some interesting small projects that have cropped up, even just in the last year or so since the 2016 cycle, about this challenge of talking to people we don't know and don't agree with and whose experience is different from our own. I also think it's important even when not in the context of people we disagree with, but just it's important to be close to the things that we work on. So if you care about education in the inner city you need to go there, you need to see and meet people, and be humble about learning from the experience that people are having.

My reading redstate.com is partially a function of strategically as someone who works in politics understanding the people you're competing with is valuable, but also of wanting to understand my neighbors, my family, and the people around me who are also citizens of this country. One of the things that we have seemed to have forgotten in politics is that public service and representation is about representing everyone you represent, not the people who voted for you. And that's a simple concept, but it's really lost. But it's also easily recoverable, which is why I'm optimistic.

DANNY One of the things you emphasized, and this is a way of quickly rewinding in the spirit of

WARSHAY: closing, was your own learning process here at Brown. You were a creative writing and biochemistry double concentrator.

MICHAEL SLABY: Sure.

DANNY Something like that?

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: Something like that. I ultimately graduated with a degree in English and creative writing, but double concentrating wasn't really a thing.

DANNY You studied a lot of science, and you took--

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: I took a lot of biochem classes, but didn't actually get a degree in biochem. I think particularly in a world of very complicated intersections between lots of things, being able to translate multiple languages of technology, sociology, and writing and communicating are these-- I am most excited and have sort of found the most joy at the intersections of lots of things, and so being a generalist is important. The ability to learn and grok new things is as important in many regards to any particular specialty knowledge that I've ever had.

DANNY And I think a way you phrase that nicely was make sure you're learning for the future. If you're

WARSHAY: learning from the present, it's something that's going to be too particular and obsolete very quickly.

MICHAEL SLABY: Yeah, I think it depends on where you are in your arc. Like we were just talking with a large group of undergrads, and I think when we think about the future of work conversation right now too often we're planning for the jobs that we need now not the jobs that we need in a decade. And so I studied the things that I was passionate about, but learning to learn, being willing to learn, and adaptability are skills that are as important as any kind of particular knowledge. And thinking about where what we are educating our current young people for is a really important conversation, and that we marry this sort of modernization and innovation in education conversation with the future of work conversation, so that we are serving our young people well in what world we are preparing them for.

DANNY That's a big part of our mission at the Center for Entrepreneurship here, that we view what

WARSHAY: we're teaching as a liberal art, as a fundamental skill of problem solving, and that's one of the

reasons we're so thrilled to have had you here today. I wondered if you could, as the final word, give a plug to the poem that you mentioned earlier, and then I have feeling it will resonate with a lot of our listeners.

MICHAEL SLABY: Yeah, we were talking about sort of the process of discovering an intensity and intentionality about my own life and career, and what I work on and why. And there is a quote that is misattributed to Bukowski about anything that burns your soul with sufficient passion, but he wrote a poem called *So You Want to Be a Writer*, and it is as good an articulation of how to think about the things that inspire us as I've ever read.

DANNY Terrific. Well, thank you so much for your time on campus today.

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: Thanks for having me back.

DANNY And for being willing to sit down with us and be here at the Watson Institute.

WARSHAY:

MICHAEL SLABY: Appreciate it. Thanks.

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