Paper Tigers and Beyond...

Interview of Jim Sporleder
Interviewed by Julie Beem, MBA, Executive Director ATN

Julie: Hello, everyone. It's Julie Beem from the Attachment & Trauma Network, and we're here today with another interview from the Educating Traumatized Children Summit, an online gathering of expert voices in how to provide trauma-informed school experiences to children. This summit has been created by the Attachment & Trauma Network's Creating Trauma-Sensitive School Program.

I am pleased today to be interviewing Jim Sporleder. He's here to talk with us about his work at Lincoln High School and what he's been doing since retiring.

Welcome, Jim.

Jim: Hi.

Julie: I want to tell you a little bit about him before we get started, and make sure that I'm saying your name correctly. It is Spor-leed-er, yes?

Jim: You're doing well.

Julie: Ah, good. Good.

Jim is a retired principal. He retired in 2014 from Lincoln High School in Walla Walla, Washington. While under Jim's leadership, Lincoln High became a trauma-informed school and that caused them to gain national attention due to the dramatic drop in out-of-school suspensions, increased graduation rates, and the number of students that were going on to post-secondary education.

These dramatic changes actually caught the attention of Jamie Redford, who's a documentary film maker, and he spent a year filming and creating the documentary Paper Tigers that tells the Lincoln story. This documentary was released at the May 2015 Seattle International Film Festival, and has received positive reviews - it is a fantastic film by the way.

Jim is currently working as a trauma-informed coach and consultant as well as a trainer with the Children's Resilience Initiative based in Walla Walla. His travels as a consultant, key-note speaker, presenter, and trainer have taken him all across the United States.
Jim is married. He has three daughters, five granddaughters - surrounded by a bunch of beautiful women - and in his spare time, he enjoys fishing, hunting, and most of all, spending time with family.

So, Jim, for the audience who are not familiar with Paper Tigers, and maybe haven't seen the film yet, can you give us a little history of how you ended up at Lincoln High and how Lincoln High became trauma-informed?

Jim: Yeah, the piece of the story that most people haven't always heard is that I had never intended to go to Lincoln. The school was called Paine Alternative High School. Pretty negative reputation within our community, I was aware of that. I was at a middle school for 22 years and had every intention of retiring at the school. I, at the time, called it my dream job.

The school district had a consultant come in and do an assessment on our district alternative programs, and they also did ... I don't know why, he made an appointment to come see me. I didn't even know the assessment was being done, but he came by Garrison Middle School, where I was principal, and wanted to leave his report with me, and I was polite, but kind of tossed the report aside.

A few weeks later, I picked it up and read it, and it was just, he did an amazing job of putting a voice to not only the students, staff, our community, our community partners, and the pain which those kids were feeling and the staff ... The voice that he was able to create through that assessment kind of haunted me. I couldn't get it out of my mind. I’m a person of faith and I just kind of felt like I was being called that way, so I went to the superintendent and asked if he would transfer me to Paine.

Julie: (laughing) Was the superintendent surprised by that move?

Jim: He actually asked me, "Why in the world would you want to go there?"

I asked him, "Did you read the report?"

So, it was announced that I was going to transfer there the following year, and in the meantime, we had an intern that they had placed at the school. Great, great young man, but with no experience. He wanted to go on a field trip and wasn't able to feel like he could leave the campus, so I told him I’d come over for a couple days.

In those two days I was there, my jaw was glued to my chest. I just could not believe what I was seeing. The environment was so out of control and so anti-authority. It was
very, very tense. There were several gangs represented in the building and that tension was just, you never knew when the spark was going to go.

**Julie:** Wow.

**Jim:** So, I went back to the superintendent and asked to be transferred within the year because I felt like I needed to get control of the environment prior to waiting for the entire school year to start.

**Julie:** So, you didn't even wait until the end of the school year. You wanted to go then. Wow, that's incredible.

Prior to this, what was your grasp on the concept of trauma and how trauma impacts children and their ability to learn? Was that something that you had already learned and figured out? Or something that you'd learned through other avenues? What made you choose to go to Paine? Because you recognized what was going on here?

**Jim:** Actually, I had no knowledge of trauma, and always felt within my career I had strong student relationships. I knew how important those were. I enjoyed working with the most difficult students.

Although, when I went to Paine, I noticed there weren't as many kids there that I had relations with that I thought I had, and so my welcoming wasn't ... I didn't get the red carpet, put it that way. As I greeted kids in the morning, they wouldn't even greet me back. I'd go to do high fives and my hand would be the only one up in the air, and I'd sit at the breakfast tables and try to engage, and kids wouldn't even acknowledge that I was there. It was pretty rough.

I was a traditional disciplinarian. Even though I had strong student relationships, I was very traditional. When I went in there, I went in with a big stick, to be honest with you, to try to get control and try to get the building safe again. I've always asked myself, how would I approach that differently with the knowledge that I gained through trauma.

**Julie:** Mm-hmm.
Jim: So, we went, I'd say, two years, before Terri Barilla, who's the champion in our community around trauma, and she invited me to go to a conference. At that conference, I heard Dr. John Medina speak, author of *Brain Rules*, and that was the first time I'd ever heard the term "toxic stress." I'd heard the "fight, flight, freeze" phrase, but I didn't really have anything to connect it to.

Julie: Right.

Jim: He was the first ... I mean, I'm listening to a world-known brain scientist who is sharing that these kids that come with the brain overwhelmed with cortisol physiologically cannot problem-solve or learn, and that it was out of their control. I'd always been trained that behavior was a choice, and that's how I approached it. In 90 minutes, he turned my world upside down, to be honest with you. I realized, after hearing him speak, that my discipline - which I always told people I taught kids, I didn't punish kids - that my discipline was punitive, and that was pretty hard to accept that. I knew I needed to change.

Julie: I'm highly thankful that you did, and so are several people in the industry, and you're not alone in that aha-moment, because that isn't something that's generally widely known. We're working on it, though, right? (laughs)

Jim: Yeah, that's ... When you talk about Lincoln, you know, we let the kids ... I knew we needed a new name. Needed a new name to start a new culture, and we let the kids choose the names that they would like the school to be and we put them up in the hallway.

I always tell people, "Get High High School" didn't make the -

Julie: (laughing) Get High High School!

Jim: - posters in the hallway, but the kids actually chose Lincoln High School and the kids chose the mascot. The phoenix was the mascot, so it was really cool to see Lincoln coming out of the ashes.

We later found out there was a Lincoln High School on the same footprint in the 1800s, so without that being known, it was kind of a cool deal.
**Julie:** Exactly. There's very few accidents, are there? It's very exciting that the students got to be involved in all of that.

So, without giving away a lot of the film, because I want our listeners who haven't seen the film to do that, can you just quickly summarize the overall turnaround? What happened at Lincoln?

**Jim:** Well, you know, there wasn't a lot out there at the time, 2010. I had to take the theory and try to figure out how to put that into practical practice. There were three concepts that we picked up and Natalie Turner, I had her come in and train us before school for two years, and even Laura Porter came in the third year and just did an incredible job.

The three concepts that we learned was one, the behavior isn't about us. We've got to drop our personal mirror. Second was, when students are highly escalated, they can't problem-solve and we need to give them time to de-escalate before we start addressing the issue, and then the motivation for that is that if we drop our mirror, we allow the student to calm ...

I've always said, relationships actually start with accountability and it leads to relationship. We know by the research that the more caring adult relationships that we can surround these kids with, the higher percentage we have for resilience and hope and healing.

**Julie:** Exactly.

**Jim:** So, I quit telling kids ... You know, my biggest challenge when I first got over there was, everything was "F-- You," and it was an automatic three-day suspension. So, when I decided to do discipline in school rather than out of school, started asking kids rather than telling them that that wasn't appropriate, I started asking them, "What caused that?"

And it blew me away. From day one, when I started asking kids they started telling me.

**Julie:** Wow. They've never really been asked before, right? I mean, that's part of it.
**Jim:** As you know, the research tells us that kids of trauma don’t feel like their voice is heard, or even have a voice, so I learned that once you started asking and wanting to hear their voice, validating their feelings - not necessarily validating the action, but validating their feelings - you could just watch them de-escalating, and they on their own will come up with the, "I shouldn't have done that. The teacher didn't deserve it."

Rarely, was their emotional upset over anything that was happening at school. It was something that was brought into school from issues outside.

**Julie:** Mm-hmm.

**Jim:** I mean, that's only ... The teachers were doing the same. They were getting the same results.

**Julie:** Yeah, so what did that look like for the teachers? I mean, that's definitely a shift, culturally, for them, too. They, like you, had not been trauma trained up until that point, and it is hard when somebody's like telling you, "F-- You," to not take it personally.

I mean, any of us who've experienced that, we know that for a fact. How did you convince them that this new and different way was the way to go?

**Jim:** Well, at that point, our student population went up from 50 to about 175, then it jumped to 200, so I was able to do quite a bit of hiring. So, we specifically knew who we wanted, and what type of person we wanted, so we, really, I think, knocked it out of the park in finding relationship-focused people and we built upon that platform.

So, the teachers embraced it. Not all, but most of them, embraced the fact that I was coming from a different place. What does that look like in the classroom is a teacher would pull a student maybe out in the hall, and just say, "Man, you look super upset. I don't know what brought that on, but what do you need from me right now to help take care of you and also allows me to teach without the disruption?"

We don't ask kids what do they need, and if it meant the kid needed to put his head down on the desk, or that's what he wanted to do, or she wanted to do, we allowed it as long as they weren't disrupting.

When you start building that relationship, kids appreciate those moments that you're sensitive to what they're going through.
Sometimes it was they needed a time-out outside of the classroom, and we would allow them to ask for it, or the teacher to suggest it, but it was always, "When you're calmed down, get back into your schedule when you feel like things are okay." And they did. They did.

**Julie:** Mm-hmm.

**Jim:** It was a motivator that just kept us wanting to learn more because of what we were hearing from the kids, their stories, which we were wondering, “How did they even make it to school that day?”

**Julie:** Mm-hmm. Right.

**Jim:** Then, as the relationships continued to grow and deepen, then we became the family, the nurturing environment that they were seeking.

**Julie:** And that's awesome, and that in and of itself was a reward to the staff, to be able to see it. I mean, that's why so many teachers do what they do. That’s why they're teachers, is to be able to build relationships and make life-differences for the kids.

**Jim:** I always say that sometimes the credit comes to us, that we transformed Lincoln, but I always say the kids transformed us. The lessons I learned, I could not have given to the kids at the level which they were able to give back to me.

**Julie:** So, the wonderful work that happened there - the relation-based, the trauma-informed awareness of what kids need when they're dysregulated and they can't learn - not only was good relationally and good emotionally for the kids and even the staff, but it actually produced some significant data that you can point to success.

The dramatic drops in the school suspension, and the graduation rates that went so high, and the kids going on to secondary education. That obviously didn't go unnoticed and not only by Mr. Redford making the film, but it didn't go unnoticed in your administration and other places as well, correct?
Jim: Well, Jane Stevens from ACESTooHigh.com, she was connected with Terri Barilla in our community, and Terri was sharing with her about Lincoln, and she actually came out to Walla Walla, and then she wrote an article about Lincoln and about our community, and that article went viral.

When that article went viral - in fact, I think it was represented by 30 different countries as well - but that got attention, and then Dr. Coletti came to town. So, when Jamie heard about ACEs and decided that was something that he and Karen Pritzker wanted to do a documentary on, it was Jane and Dr. Coletti that kind of led him to us.

Julie: Awesome.

Jim: We kind of had a greet and meet. I was kind of judging him as well as him judging us, in a positive way as to whether I thought it was something that we wanted to ... I didn't want to just turn our kids over to anybody.

Julie: Right, exactly. It's a little scary move, letting that much publicity come into, and that much public lens into your school, for sure, with those kids.

Jim: I got to watch him interact with kids, because when they came out we were in the middle of summer school. He impressed me right away, and he's such an incredible person of integrity that won me over pretty quickly.

Julie: Awesome. Well, you know -

Jim: So, Paper Tigers, as a documentary, I think what Jamie has done ... He has such an amazing ability to tell the story around complex concepts that when people view Paper Tigers, Lincoln becomes a lens to seeing their own kids or their own clients, and that’s the powerful part that I appreciate so much.

It's not just Lincoln's story and that's it, it's using the story of Lincoln that creates others to want to do the same for their kids.

Julie: Mm-hmm.
Jim: I call it throwing the stone in the middle of a pond.

Julie: Exactly.

Jim: The ripples travel out and they're hitting a larger audience than even what I think we're personally aware of.

Julie: Mm-hmm. I would agree. I would definitely agree.

So, the documentary itself has been shown in a wide variety of venues at this point. I know, because I've seen notifications for it everywhere. Do you attend a lot of those screenings and travel to places to talk specifically about the film? Does that take a lot of your time in what you're currently up to?

Jim: You know, in the very beginning, I would go to some of those screenings, but what I like most and what I've been doing more of now is participating in large conferences in which we may pre-screen the night before, and then I'm able to participate in the conference, whether as the keynote or in breakout sessions. I've seen, as a tool, Paper Tigers, if it kind of helps lead us into a conference, it drives the conversation deeper.

Julie: It does, yes. I bet it does.

Jim: I'm more into ... I like using it as a tool to get things to a deeper point so that, hopefully, we can encourage change and the paradigm shift that's necessary in order to embrace trauma-informed practices.

Julie: Exactly. So, when you started this journey at Lincoln, you had no idea that you would become one of the leaders trying to make that change, but three years ago you retired ... It makes me laugh to think that we would even use the word "retired," because I don't sense, from talking to you, that you're any less busy now than you were at Lincoln High.

What have you been doing? What are you up to?
Jim: Well, I humbly have the opportunity to travel the country and to participate not only in educational conferences but in social services conferences with more diverse participants. I really have enjoyed that.

I'd say that the greatest joy I have is that I have an outreach program with Lincoln alumni students in which I had worked with as students, and they bring me the greatest joy and as you know, you can't experience the joy without pain.

Julie: Mm-hmm.

Jim: But I've learned - actually, I feel like my learning curve has been higher being out of the system because I think I'm pretty adverse at our system and how it works. Now, I'm learning so much about our systems that work with young adults in our communities and I've seen just how important it is that we knock these darn silos down and that we come together as a community around trauma so that we're speaking the same language, we have the same understanding, and we understand that in order to keep these kids on their feet, we've got to build those positive, caring-adult relationships.

I don't want to label or judge, or even come across that way, because I know every community is different, but my experience is that in the adult world, some of our social services are maybe a little more traditional in their approach, a little bit more punitive.

Julie: Right, right.

Jim: I had a young man the other day, that he and his wife went in and they were missing one form. It would have taken one phone call to verify that the form had been completed, and the person wanted to teach them a lesson of responsibility, so they would not help them with their rent.

They lost $400 that month of support on their rent, which, they didn't come home and sit down and say, "Well, you know, we really need to become more responsible." It put them in a crisis of, "How are we going to survive?"

Julie: Right. Exactly. Exactly. And yeah, part of it was just not understanding even with the young man's background with trauma, that that's not going to be likely for him to be able to ... You know, he wasn't going to learn from that experience, even if it hadn't
thrown him in a crisis, but then on top of that it made their matters so much worse, and that's ...

**Jim:** One of the priorities I have right now is that I'm working with a faith-based group that has a strong outreach in our community with our struggling members, and I just see how important it is that we've got to keep mentors in their lives.

So, we're looking at developing a program in which we can put a caring adult with some of these kids' lives. They'll call me on the road and they'll be in their crisis, and you know, sometimes I'm not there. I'm trying to think, I might be ... I need to have adults teeming to help put wrap-around support around these kids.

**Julie:** Right.

**Jim:** Mainly, the kids are just doing amazing, but they've had no modeling and they're used to responding like their families responded, so when they get in a crisis, they don't know what to do and they freeze. I usually hear about it when a decision had to be made immediately or the day before, and trying to train them to call me sooner.

**Julie:** Right.

**Jim:** I just think if I have adult mentors out there that they can call, that are checking in on them more regularly, I'm excited to see what kind of result that brings.

**Julie:** Yes. No, I think that's exciting and it's exciting for me to hear you talk about that because I, personally, have been working at my church on a similar kind of project and we're still not exactly sure where all of that is going to go.

I might be calling you after this interview for some insights about what that looks like in terms of what kind of mentors and volunteers are needed to keep those programs ... That's best for them so that you are able to intervene before whatever happens gets to a crisis point.

**Jim:** You know, Dario Longhi, who did the state research for Laura Porter when she was running 124 networks across our state, he did a special case study at Lincoln and he,
using the science protocols, I think he's the only person in the country that's actually been able to come up with a resiliency score matched with a high ACE score.

Our kids, or the case study, the kids averaged 5.5 ACEs, and 70% of them, in a trauma-informed environment - and he tracked them back to their eighth-grade attendance, behavior, grades, all that - were functioning as if they had zero ACEs -

**Julie:** Wow.

**Jim:** - which is just incredible research. But he shared, at the time I was so excited about the results, but he shared that the one thing is, is that a trauma-informed environment, it doesn't mean the environment follows the kids when they leave. That's the piece.

My biggest learning curve since I've been out is that the kids who have lost contact with a caring adult are struggling so much more than the kids who have kept in contact with a caring adult that they can call.

**Julie:** Right. Because invariably, as adults, we all know, we're going to hit moments of crisis.

**Jim:** Exactly.

**Julie:** And it's hard not to slip back into your ACEs-laden dysregulation if you don't have someone able to help you. That's fascinating research, that he was able to correlate that so closely.

**Jim:** I can send the summary to you afterwards if you'd like to see it.

[Link provided by ATN-](https://www.resiliencetrumpsaces.org/images/docs/LH_report_final_March_1_2015.pdf)

**Julie:** Yeah, would love to see that, for sure, and even share a link or something with our audience, because as I'm thinking about that, that does two things. It provides evidence for the need of what it is that you were just talking about in terms of adult
mentors well into their young adult lives, but it also provides hope of what trauma-informed systems do.

I mean, to get kids down to where it looks like they haven't been impacted by those ACEs, and that they're functioning as if their ACE score was zero, is pretty - it's not pretty significant. It's very significant. That allows them to learn. No wonder you were seeing the incredible academic results that you were seeing.

**Jim:** Yeah, it's ... You know, the also powerful thing for me was, when they were asked, "Why do you think you were successful at Lincoln?" it aligns with the research.

That's the other thing I find, is that so many times when you have a chance to get into a situation where you're really able to have some personal contact, when there's a caring adult involved, these kids were sharing that they had confidence, they had trust, they had a family, they felt safe, and the two pieces that were so encouraging to me was that they had hope and they were optimistic about their future.

**Julie:** That's great.

**Jim:** Those are priceless things that don't cost anything that we can give to kids if we understand the power of a caring adult relationship.

**Julie:** Mm-hmm. I agree. I very much agree.

So, you're out on the road, speaking to groups, training, and training systems, giving your wisdom and advice to folks that are out here looking to implement trauma-informed systems. Where do you see the movement going, and what would you say to people who are contemplating - people that may be in a situation like you were just as you were walking into Lincoln, and are contemplating changing things?

**Jim:** Well, one thing I've noticed in the movement is that we've got a large population of people that are beginning to understand the why, why we need to move in this direction. Probably the number one question that keeps getting asked is, "Okay, I get the 'why,' now show me how."

**Julie:** Mm-hmm.
Jim: Heather Forbes co-authored a book with me that just came out here in the last six months, and it's the "how."

Julie: Right. Okay.

Jim: That's another journey that's opening up in that as we're putting on full-day workshops with leadership teams and the principal on, how do you implement this system. It's a simplistic process if you're willing to embrace what the research is telling us. I think we're making it way too difficult.

Julie: Right, right. But the willingness comes with an incredible shift, a paradigm-shift in your belief system, and that's really part of the crux, right, of the whole thing?

Jim: Yeah, to me it starts with our understanding of the impact we have when we're regulated. If we're dysregulated as adults, I always say we can't get past first base on any implementation process, but once we understand that a calm adult represents safety, and it begins to be the platform for that relationship to start developing, it motivates us to drop our mirror when that kid's telling us to, “F-off” and to seek the story behind the behavior rather than punish the behavior.

Julie: Right. Right. So, if I am an administrator, a principal, a person who knows that my system needs to become more trauma-sensitive, or become trauma-sensitive, where do I start?

Jim: First off, you bring up an excellent point and that is, I've learned that if the principal is not leading it, then the sustainability is just not going to be there. It's actually very painful when you have teachers that get it and are implementing it, but there's other silos within the building. Those children have to go to the next grade.

Using my daughter as an example, when she was doing trauma-informed practices in kindergarten and these little guys that were tearing up the classroom were learning how to use the systems that she put in place to self-regulate, depending on who they went to after that, if they got into a very traditionalist classroom, then those behaviors would start resurfacing.
**Julie:** Mm-hmm.

**Jim:** If we have a full implementation, the principal's leading it, then these kids are going to have a trauma-informed teacher to build on that momentum each year versus hit and miss.

**Julie:** Right, right. And it probably becomes a much more collaborative environment for the educators to share, one teacher to the next, of what's working or not working with a kid.

**Jim:** You know, once you embrace trauma-informed, it's not a checkbox - it becomes who you are. You can't transform kids without being transformed yourself, and it becomes who a school is. It's the culture of the school. That's how we take care of our children.

To me, that's the powerful aspect of it.

**Julie:** It sure is.

So, any closing words of advice that you would have for a school that's undertaking this transformation? Things that they should or shouldn't do, or things that you think are pitfalls that you wish somebody had told you to avoid?

**Jim:** One I would just share is that I think when we use the term trauma-informed too many times, that gets a little bit cloudy in that we then begin to look at who we think is trauma-impacted, and then we decide who aren’t - and we'll call that manipulators versus truly understanding that a trauma-informed model is what's best for every single kid. The kids who come from a healthy household.

What student does not benefit from a caring adult relationship? If we can understand that ... First off, we should not be putting ourselves in a position to assess kids. The most compliant student in the class could be your most traumatized. If we're treating every student as they deserve to be treated, then we're not making those judgments or those labels.
And I'll just quickly say the second piece is, there's a misunderstanding that trauma-informed means that because a kid has been traumatized, we can't do anything about it and so we excuse behaviors versus understanding that we're failing those kids if we do not set clear boundaries and hold them accountable.

**Julie:** Yes.

**Jim:** Not through punishment, but through how we reframe our language to them. Those kids will respond. You have to do a lot of front-loading. You gotta' teach them the breathing techniques, you gotta' teach them about their brains and their triggers and it takes a lot of front-loading, but that front-loading is what works in the long-run that you start seeing the changes take place.

**Julie:** Right. I know in my world, a lot of times folks don't understand the need for repair and so it does begin to look like a trauma-informed system is one where you let the kids do whatever behavior they want, and that's so far from the truth because that idea of repair is so critical to relationship-building and to their own internal-working model of themselves of who they are.

Of course we want to teach kids the value of repairing when something has gone awry.

**Jim:** We owe it to them. These kids that come from these toxic environments, they don't have any models. The adults in their lives have caused all their pain. They come to school and we're adults, we've gotta' understand that they have survival brains.

Those brains are different. They're not bad brains, but they're developed for these kids to survive these horrible environments that they're in, and so we've gotta' be the mentors and the ones who model and guide them. Which leads to hope and healing.

**Julie:** It does. It most certainly does.

Well, thank you, Jim. Thanks for inspiring us, thanks for enlightening us about all that you have been through. I'm sure glad that you made the leap from your middle school into Paine High School and learned all that you've learned because it's helping the rest of us learn as well.
Jim: Well, I say it's all on the same team. We all have different roles to play, and to me, I'm grateful for the opportunity to work with such amazing people that want to move in this direction. I learned from them as much as they learned from me, so thank you for this opportunity. I appreciate it.

Julie: Well, we appreciate you being here, too. And thank you listeners for joining us today.

Again, this is Julie Beem and I've been with Jim Sporeleder, and we've been talking about his work at Lincoln High School and all of the things that he's learned about trauma-informing high schools through that.

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