

Tiffany Blakely_Dave Allison, ...rview (2024-02-09 11_01 GMT-7)

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00:01 David Allison

All right, Tiffany, thank you so much for joining me. I really appreciate you being here today to chat. And I'd love for you to start just by introducing yourself and sharing a little bit more about yourself.

00:12 Tiffany Blakely

Great. Thanks for having me. My name is Tiffany Blakely, and I am a Colorado native. I was born and raised in the Westminster/Arvada area. I was a graduate of Standley Lake High School in 2003 and I have stayed in the area. I have three boys that are ages, almost 12, almost 19 and 20 and they also have gone through the schools here. My oldest graduated from Standley Lake also, my middle son attended Stanley Lake and my youngest son is currently at Mandalay. So I stayed in the area, and still have family in the area. And of course, I work at a school in the area, too.

00:58 David Allison

Fantastic. So tell me just a little bit more about your family. You know, how did they end up in Colorado? Like what's the family history there?

01:09 Tiffany Blakely

Sure. My grandmother on my mom's side, she was from Louisiana and came here to start her career with her husband, my grandpa, in education. He was a professor and she was a teacher. And so they came here.....(silent gap)

02:13 Tiffany Blakely

Well, don't we just love technology? (Laughter)

02:15 David Allison

Oh, yes. Always fun.

02:17 Tiffany Blakely

The internet. It's the internet. That's not the great part about the location where I live. The internet's terrible. But anyway, I'm not sure what brought my dad here. That's a great question that I should ask him because he's from Wisconsin. But he met my mom; they both went to Arvada West High School and so that's how they got together. And there you go. That's the history.

02:40 David Allison

Wonderful. That's great. So tell me just a little bit more about your kind of... sounds like you have education in your family history, for sure, being educators and professors, that sort of thing. But what kind of drew you in or were the nuggets of your current career?

03:04 Tiffany Blakely

Oh, that's a great question. Yes. So education really is, throughout my family, especially, really, on my mom's side; my grandpa was a professor, my grandma was an elementary teacher, my aunt was an elementary music teacher. And then when I was growing up, I was actually really involved in dance, and became a dance teacher. I remember also as a child, like, because of the strong roots of education in my family, playing teacher and having all of the resources at my grandma's house to pretend to be one. And so, I just really enjoyed the ability to work with kids and to help others. I, myself, became an elementary school teacher for several years in JeffCo. Left that after a while and pursued other things. And I just really missed the education environment. I didn't necessarily want to go back to teaching for personal reasons. I love kids, but you know, just all of the things with that. But I did want to at least be in that environment and give my expertise. And so the role that I'm in now is community engagement coordinator. And that is a way for me to not only engage the community on the outside of the school, but the community internally, and just really see where there is need for our families that are in the school, ways that the community can help us with sponsorships, advertising, things like that, ways that our students can volunteer on the outside. So just really bridging that community gap within and outside. And I feel like my past other jobs outside of teaching helps me with that, with you know, some kind of marketing and lots of volunteer work and things like that. It just really, really meshed it all together into this position that I'm in to be able to do all the things that I love and enjoy.

04:53 David Allison

That's amazing. I love that and I'd love for you to just share a little bit more about that kind of role as a connector, and, you know, maybe specifically, learning a little bit more about the background of Jefferson Academy could help understand why that was important..

05:12 Tiffany Blakely

Sure. So Jefferson Academy Charter School, this is actually our 30th anniversary of being a school. It started out as just an elementary school, and then it slowly grew to a K-12. So I think the first graduating class was 2002, or 2003. Don't quote me on that, but it's close to there. And so it's really grown, and as it's grown, of course, then they had to move to a new location for the upper grades. So having that start of where everybody under the same roof was, you know, that was a really strong community. And then as you grow and have to expand, do a second building, that community is still there, but you're not seeing the same people every single day, in the same building, no matter the grade level. And so then after COVID, and everything that happened there with having to be remote, there was really just that need that our executive director, Tim Malik (spelling??), saw that we needed to

bridge that back to where we were K-12. Even though we're in different buildings, even though there's various programs, and then recovering after COVID, we really need to bring back that strong community within our K-12. So that's what started it. I was not the first person in that role. This is my second year there. So I'm the second person in that role.

06:30 David Allison

Fantastic. What are some of the things that you've seen as far as kind of connecting parents, connecting people? What is the need out there and why is it important for those connections to take place?

06:49 Tiffany Blakely

Yeah, so in my role, like I said, I am helping families that are in need in our school, first and foremost. There's a big misconception with charter schools that it is a private school with tuition and so everybody is wealthy and doesn't have need. And that's not the case; it is a public, free option. And so, we have students from all different socioeconomic statuses. And so part of my role is making sure that those students are not, you know, left behind or fall through the cracks, or those families that are struggling, can have assistance. One program that I do, that I took over from my predecessor, is the holiday care packages. And that's, you know, during a time where we see the greatest need, of course, because we want kids to be able to enjoy the holidays and have fun. And in that program, I can send you the presentation from last year on our stats, but this was the fourth year of the program. And we raised over \$38,000 in donations for 41 families, it was 110 kids. So 110 Kids, not necessarily all of them are students of ours, but they're siblings of our students. And that's across our various programs. So you know, we have the elementary, we have the secondary and then, we also have homeschool enrichment programs called the Summit Academy. So across those five campuses were the 110 kids. We also made sure that the parents also received gift cards, because we felt that they should feel loved and seen and cared for when they're going through a hard time, too. Our community, like I said, showed up and they filled every need. And beyond that, we have a little bit extra for the rest of the year, which then led to kicking off the ongoing needs program. And so it's very similar that, you know, we know that the holidays are a hard time, and we want to make that magical for kids. But the fact of the matter is right now in this economy, especially in Colorado, there's a need year-round. And so those families can reach out and submit a request and say, "Hey, I need help with an Excel bill" or "I have a car repair that I can't pay the bill for and I need it to get to work," and we just put it in there anonymously. Donors can sign up to sponsor or pay for those, whenever possible. So yeah, there's definitely a need. And like I said, that misconception that everyone in a charter is well off, really, we need to break that mindset, because that's not the case. They just, they just chose a charter because it was best for their kids, but they still have their own challenges they face.

09:24 David Allison

Right, right. No, thank you. That's a really good clarification and an important point, for sure. I was also wondering too, just for you personally, what motivates you to do what you do? Like what are the things that drive you and keep you going in that sort of role, which I imagine has a lot of difficult things and hard conversations sometimes and, you know, seeing people who have, you know, maybe very extreme situations. How do you keep it going?

09:58 Tiffany Blakely

Yeah, It's funny when I, when I reflect back on all of the positions I've been in as an adult, even as a child, I guess when I was working as a teenager, it was always in service. I think that I was raised with that service mindset. And then on the other side of that, with so much need, and yeah, it can be really emotional things that come up with helping people. I myself have, you know, dealt with mental health stuff in my family and with myself, and I just really am an advocate for making sure that people feel supported, people feel seen and heard and loved. And so the way that we can do that is to find ways that we're finding where the needs are, and find a way to make it work. And so that's the motivator. And just making sure that people have what they need and feel seen in this community where, as we're growing so big, over 2,500 students. It can feel easy to be lost in that, and especially the families, not just the students, but the families on the outside. And so we just really want to build that community and make sure that they're seen and supported. And we can't always guarantee the help that they need, but at least we're a champion for them, to try to connect them with resources. I tell you what, when I delivered those packages in the holidays, the hugs, the tears, the stories, the thank yous, all of those things like, that keeps me going for a while. That's obviously not why you do it, but it's nice to hear the impact that it's creating, and then you know, then that increases my goal of how can we impact more people and, and help more people. So that's what keeps me going.

11:38 David Allison

I love that. Thank you so much. I appreciate that. Could you share maybe a little bit more about the kind of role of Jefferson Academy in the community? And maybe like, you know, thinking about Broomfield, but, you know, it's also the building is located in a kind of an interesting geographical space, right? What does that feel like? And what does that maybe mean to the school? Or, you know, maybe you personally, whatever. Building off that idea of being in the Broomfield community?

12:13 Tiffany Blakely

Sure. Yeah. So what's great about our secondary building in particular is like you said, it is in that position that is right on that weird border. You know, we're right on the edge of Westminster and Broomfield. Broomfield actually helped us with expanding parts of that. So we are in a partnership with them, where they use our facilities, our fine arts and our fields and things for Rec and other activities of that nature. So that's nice to have that partnership, even though we are in Westminster, it's so close. And it's nice to have just that crossover that also allows for students because we are a choice school. We're not a neighborhood school, everybody has a choice, so that bridges that, you know; we can have people from Broomfield and Westminster, even in Adams 12 and Thornton. Our location is so centralized to so many different school districts and counties that it allows us to be an option for so many different people outside of Jefferson County.

13:09 David Allison

Yeah, very cool. So can you just share maybe a little bit more about some of the things you had mentioned, that you had a couple of children who are now maybe on their own? Maybe not? I don't know, but at least they're kind of past the age of 18, that sort of thing. You know, what's that process been like? And I mostly asked, because I'm personally curious. I have two teenage daughters; one is a junior, and one who's a sophomore. So I'm kind of entering the phase of starting to think about, oh, there's something different going to happen soon. What's that process like?

13:50 Tiffany Blakely

Oh, goodness, it is interesting. With my oldest son, like I said, he's 20, he's been graduated for two years, almost three. He was a young graduate, of course, just based on his birthday. But it's an interesting thing to navigate. Every kid is so different. And so that's what's so interesting is with him, and then my middle son, their paths are so different, even though they're always in the same home and they have different interests and all of that. So what I found interesting was, you know, we tend to go towards, okay, now you're graduating, let's get into college. And that's, you know, been so ingrained in all of us. And so we did that path with my oldest, and after just two semesters, he was, "This is not what I want to do. I don't know what I want to do. There's a lot of pressure. This is expensive. I don't want you guys to go into debt over something I don't think I'll use." So there was just a lot of this pressure and I just let him know, "okay, you don't have to continue on; work full time and figure out a little bit about yourself." I mean, he was only 19 when he moved out and when he was graduated and everything and so it's like, you have so much to learn about yourself. And I think it's okay not to know right off the bat at that age, what you want to do. I certainly have changed my mind multiple times in my adult life. And so I fully am supportive of whatever path is right for each individual person when they're leaving education, whether that's trade school, whether that's just getting into a job and figuring out what you like, or what you don't like, and getting that experience. It's really just about encouraging each of them to follow their path and let them know it's okay not to know, and just support them along that way. As far as moving out, I had my oldest son living here for a year and a half after he graduated, working full time. I made an agreement with him that he didn't have to pay any rent, as long as he was saving up with a goal in mind. And so we sat down, we did a budget, we looked at what it costs to live in Colorado, that's hard. And be able to see like, Okay, this is how much you need each month. But then, you know, also talk about groceries and gas and, you know, renewing your license plate every year and all those extra things that kids maybe don't realize. So he lived with me that year and a half, saving up, and I let him. I mean, he paid his phone bill so that he'd have some regularity on paying bills, but not so much that he just never could get out. And he ended up moving out with \$10,000 saved.

16:37 David Allison

Wow.

16:38 Tiffany Blakely

Yeah, so it was really good for him to go out, and in March, it'll be a year that he's been moved out. And he's never once come to me like saying I can't make rent, I need money, can I borrow anything? He is sufficient and doing it on his own. And he'll reach out to me and ask questions, you know, about certain bills? Or how do I book an appointment at the doctor for this, like, I've never done that, you know, those kinds of guidance things. I feel like that really set him up to be able to, like I said, learn more about himself and explore what he wants to do, and to learn all of those ins and outs of adulthood, like making appointments, without that stress of money month to month.

17:21 David Allison

Yeah, trying to make it. That's great. Thank you. Appreciate that. Yeah, so I'm wondering if you could just maybe share a little bit more about how you ended up at Jefferson Academy specifically. And in

that role, it feels like both a pretty unique kind of position, but then also, something that sounds like some of your previous experiences really prepared you for well. So what did that look like?

17:54 Tiffany Blakely

Yeah. So as I said, well, I was actually a teen mom. And so I graduated from high school and then immediately had my son a few months later, and stepped into that stay-at-home mom role with young kids at a young age. It took me 10 years to get my degree, because I was doing it from home with two littles and waiting until they were in school to be able to go full time and really finish it. So it took me 10 years, lots of little jobs here and there to make it, while I was with them and helping them with, you know, growing up. And so then once I finally graduated, and got my degree, that's when I became a teacher. So I taught second, third, fifth in a two three split in a Title One school in Jefferson County. It was a big challenge, a big eye opener. I realized there's a lot of things that are outside of teachers' control, that impact a lot of different things and it can be really stressful. With things going on with my own children, I didn't feel like I could juggle all those for much longer.

And so that's when I left education and I actually became a social worker. I was a case manager at North Metro Community Services, and did case management for folks with developmental disabilities. I did that for three years. I absolutely loved it, especially towards the end, I started working specifically with kids getting them approved for the Medicaid CES waiver, so that they could get support for their family and in their home. That was super rewarding. It was hard work but it was very rewarding.

All during this time, I was living in Colorado and choosing jobs that are maybe not the highest paying jobs like, you know, I would clean houses on the side for extra money. Whenever I had a break, or for social work, we had Friday's off and so I could clean houses on Friday. When I was a teacher I could clean on summer break or spring break or things like that. So I made that work.

And then right after the pandemic, or during the pandemic, I guess, I was bombarded with requests for more cleaning clients, because people were tired of cleaning their own homes after quarantine. So that resulted in me creating an actual cleaning company, which I had never had a dream of doing. I didn't have a business plan, I didn't have any plans. It just kind of fell into my lap. And I was like, "Okay, we're doing this." And so I created Outstanding Cleaning Delivery, started hiring cleaners. And so for 14 months, we were in operation. And in that 14 months, I hired over 60 people, we did half a million in sales, it was wild.

20:43 David Allison

Wow.

20:44 Tiffany Blakely

But it was not what I wanted. (Laughter) Like I said, it just fell into my lap and there were parts of it that were good, that I was good at and I enjoyed and we obviously grew. But the stress level of that was way too high for me and my family. And so I ended up selling that and going back into social work.

And at that time, I went to Jeffco Human Services, and was a case manager for the elderly, blind and disabled. And that was all remote still. So that was nice, that I could have that balance at home. And then they were starting to want us to go back into the office and then starting to go back into homes and our case loads were so high. It's really, really a crisis in that industry, that there is not, I think, because of the pay and because of the demands and the emotional things, there's not enough case managers. And so the load was enormous and I started to feel like there's no way I can sustain this and give the

level of service and care to each of these individuals when I'm managing this many people. So that's when I started to look at, Well, what do I want to do? Do I want to stay in social work? Do I want to go back to teaching? No, especially after COVID. And so I found the listing for Jefferson Academy's Community Engagement Coordinator. And I also do a lot of volunteer work. I work with the Broomfield North Metro Kiwanis Club, I was serving in a leadership role at the time for Polka Dot Powerhouse, which is a women's connection company in the area. So lots of service and volunteer work. And so when I saw the job description for the community engagement, it was kind of a mishmash of all of those things, social media, website, marketing, advertising stuff, bridging the community, lots of volunteer efforts, it was just like, picking a little bit of each of the favorite things into one position. So I really, really advocated hard for that. I was very persistent in reaching out to the team there to say, I want this job, and here's why I want it. So I'm grateful for that.

22:55 David Allison

That's awesome. I love that. Yeah, it definitely feels like, what a fascinating career trajectory, too.

23:05 Tiffany Blakely

Just all over the place (Laughter)

23:06 David Allison

Fascinating, fascinating. But yeah, I think that heart of service that you were mentioning, I think I can really see that coming through in what you do; and yeah, absolutely those caseworkers are ... Our son, who we adopted, has special needs and we worked with North Metro while we were down there. We're up in Longmont now, but just really appreciate that it's hard work and there's difficult things all the time with that. Anyway, thank you so much. And I'm curious what you would see that would make Broomfield, and maybe you could expand it to, you know, this area, Westminster, Jeffco, a better community. What do you envision that would be?

23:58 Tiffany Blakely

Hmm, that's a tough one. I feel personally like it is already a great community. So many of the people I grew up with and went to school with, have all stayed and there's a reason for that. When I'm with friends and things like that, I run into people all the time. They're just like, "how do you know so many people?" Part of it was my jobs and things like that, and part of it is that people stay and there's a reason for that. Especially with the cost of living, you would think that there'd be more of us choosing to go somewhere elsewhere we could maybe live a little bit more comfortably. But it is just a nice community. And so I mean there's always room for more understanding and more learning about each other's differences and volunteering or donating or things like that to better the community. But yeah, I don't know that I can pinpoint one thing that would make it better. I think it's just, in general here and everywhere, taking the time to get to know each other and each other's perspectives and experiences and things like that without judgment. And I think that all goes back to really our mental health stuff, like giving people compassion and grace and understanding and, and trying to listen instead of jumping on judgment and maybe trying to put our own views or what should be on each other. That's everywhere. That's not just Broomfield. That's not Westminster. That's just what's needed everywhere right now. But I do feel like, in general, Broomfield especially is a great community.

25:37 David Allison

Thank you so much. I appreciate that and that's definitely something, you know, as I've been doing these interviews over time. It's just great to hear people say that and to talk about Broomfield as a place where you know, there are great organizations and individuals trying to do good things to build each other up and support each other.

25:58 Tiffany Blakely

I will say affordable housing. (Laughter) That's one thing we could work on in Broomfield as affordable housing, because it's such a nice place to live, but it's got to be a little bit higher up there, socioeconomic statuses.

26:15 David Allison

Yeah, for sure. I think that's definitely true. And yeah, this is such a tough one and I know there's a lot being done, but yeah, it's still hard.

26:24 Tiffany Blakely

There are a lot of layers to that, too. Like, we don't need to get political. We don't need to go down that route. But yeah, I just think that the options are a little bit limited. That would be one thing that would be nice to see. But I don't know how, all the ins and outs, to make that happen.

26:41 David Allison

Yeah, it's tough. And thinking about the history of Broomfield, too; you go back and it really started in the 1950s in earnest, you know, there's a longer history before that. But in the 1950's you know, this model suburban community was really planned with single family homes, that sort of thing. And so there's not much infrastructure that's beyond single family homes in Broomfield and not a tradition of that, either. And so I think that that has, you know, as the cost of living rises, as you know, inflation happens, that sort of thing, it becomes really difficult. I'm talking way too much for an interview.

267:20 Tiffany Blakely

That's okay. I agree with you. (Laughter)

27:24 David Allison

Was there anything else that we didn't talk about, that we didn't mention yet that you wanted to share?

27:29 Tiffany Blakely

No. Nothing important. I was just kind of laughing when I first read your email; there was, I think a question about , how have you seen Broomfield change as I've been here, and I always have to kind of laugh. The one that is the biggest for me is, by JA secondary, the railroad tracks on 112th. I remember driving, you know, when I was in high school, to Standley Lake, and that big, big curve around and going back into old Wadsworth, and just the changes of that is wild to see all of the buildings. Now I'm gonna sound like my dad, like back in my day, those were just fields, you know, that whole thing. So that's pretty interesting to see happen here in our own town.

28:14 David Allison

Yeah, it is. And it's interesting, even that area as you go down old Wadsworth, and even further into Westminster, behind the Target, and that kind of area, like you can see the remnants and the vestiges in little glimpses of what it might have been like. But it's such small glimpses, because so much has grown up over the last 20 years.

28:34 Tiffany Blakely

Yeah, or like 287, where 120th turns into 287, that whole intersection, and that whole place is crazy. I worked at that Dairy Queen in high school over there.

28:46 David Allison

Okay.

28:34 Tiffany Blakely

So it's just wild to see how different those roads are and what connects to what.

28:53 David Allison

Yeah. What do you remember about that area? I'm just curious now, where the Dairy Queen was? What were some of the other businesses around and what was it like down there?

29:05 Tiffany Blakely

Yeah, there was Knievel Photography, I went to high school with one of the Knievel's and, you know, the railroad tracks kept going. And it was all of those buildings that we'd create stories about, that we didn't really know anything about. And so I feel like it's pretty similar, Just Burritos, and all of those things, all in that row. It's just really behind there and that new big intersection that connects to Wadsworth, you know, that's a huge change. It still feels like it just happened. I know. It's been there for a little bit now, but it's just so it's just so different. It used to feel very small town in that little section. And now with that big intersection, it's a little bit different, but I understand the need for it, but it's fun to reflect back and be nostalgic.

30:00 David Allison

For sure a lot has changed over there. Yeah, the Depot Museum where I work, the Depot was right, actually behind Just Burritos, which was the post office for Broomfield, originally. So that's crazy to think about everything that's changed in that area.

30:17 Tiffany Blakely

So that's fun. Yeah. But other than that, I don't know if there's nothing else that you have for me, I don't have any other questions. Awesome.

30:25 David Allison

No, thank you so much. I really appreciate it and it's been great talking with you today, Tiffany, really, really appreciate you.

30:32 Tiffany Blakely

So yeah, thanks. I will do one little plug, I guess. I will say just kind of going back to what we talked about, you know, that JA is a choice in school. And so that's the great thing about Colorado is anyone can place into any school they want, you know, with the lottery system. So it's just really about doing the research and touring the schools and getting the information instead of, you know, believing the misconceptions that are out there about options. We always want the best choice for every student and whether that's us or not. But we want to make sure that all of the correct information is out there about what a charter is, or what choice is and how that all works. So we're always happy to answer your questions for the community on that.

31:15 David Allison

Fantastic. Thank you so much. I think you're right there aren't a lot of misconceptions about it. And you know, I moved here from the Midwest, my wife's from Colorado. And when I moved here, I'm like, "what? You don't just go to your neighborhood school, what is this? What's going on?" I just was not used to it at all. And so yeah, it's very different.

31:34 Tiffany Blakely

It can be confusing for young families, especially with their first kiddos going into kindergarten, how to navigate when to start; the fact that you know, enrollment starts in December for the next year. So if you missed that boat, then you might not get your first choice. And so there's a lot of education that needs to be done around school choice in Colorado, so we're always happy to help with that.

31:57 David Allison

Awesome. Well, thank you so much.