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MIKE: Welcome to this episode of MC Forward, a podcast that focuses on Montgomery College individuals who are leading from where they are. I'm your host, Dr. Michael Mills. Joining me today is Elysse Meredith, Manager of the Writing, Reading, and Learning Center on the Germantown campus. Elysse, thanks for joining me.

ELYSSE: Thank you so much for having me. I'm so excited to be here. [Laughs]

MIKE: I want to start off with a quote that you provided about a year ago, and you were asked what your favorite quote is. And I want to get a sense of how this quote fits into your...your leadership style. You said, this is from Fred Rogers: "When I was a boy and I would see scary things in the news, my mother would say to me look for the helpers. You will always find people who are helping." How does that fall into your leadership style?

ELYSSE: Oh, I...I love that quote so much. Um, partially...partially from an emotional connection because I grew up watching Mr. Rogers and I had the honor of meeting him when I was a teenager, which was an amazing experience. But I love that quote from him because for me leadership is all about pitching in and making sure that, um, the things that happen need to happen. And, I...I really love that quote because when we are in scary times, it can be so easy to be consumed by our fear, and it's all about redirecting our minds and our energy and our thoughts and looking for, okay, but what...what is being done? What can I do? How can we make a bad and scary situation into a good one or a better one, and really step forward and do what needs to be done? Not looking for self-glorification or achievement but working towards a common purpose.

MIKE: And a lot of people didn't necessarily see Mr. Rogers as a leader.

ELYSSE: But he really, I mean, oh, gosh, he really was. And, um, when I had...when I had the honor of meeting him, I was with a group of, um, teenagers at a summer camp. I was one of them, and you've never seen, first of all, a group of very cool kids suddenly turn into about five years old so quickly, but also he had such command of that room because we also deeply respected him, because he was this leader on screen for us who made us feel comfortable and confident as very small human beings. [Laughs]

MIKE: Well, and he didn't necessarily do that with a heavy stick. Right? [**ELYSSE:** No.] So, I think he demonstrated that leaders don't have to be heavy-handed and [**ELYSSE:** Yeah.] boisterous. They can be mild-mannered and get the job done.

ELYSSE: And gentle, and just making that space. That was one thing that I think Mr. Rogers did with, um, such gentleness. And through a screen not even knowing who was watching that he was able to create this amazing space for people to grow. Um, and

that's always such a priority for me is that anyone I'm working with I want to see them grow into their best person. And so, I think a lot of that started with, um, you know, sitting down as a little kid and watching Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood, and seeing him, hearing him tell you that, um, he was proud of you and wanted to see you be the best person you could be.

MIKE: Well, and that...that calm demeanor, I'm sure, helps you when you're dealing with students in the...the Center when they're frantic, have assignments due, it probably helps them.

ELYSSE: It...it really does. And that he really had a way of, um, that calmness and empathy and but also acknowledging the reality of a situation. And that, I think is so important when we're working with students or in any sort of high stress situation is being able to empathize with what someone's going through. Um, to be the calm steady rock in this sea of turbulence that they're going through, but also be honest about the way forward because there's been times when, um, when I was tutoring more and I had to work with a student...you'd have a student who was deeply in distress and you looked at their paper and you'd be like, [Laughs] you have a reason to be distressed. This is not where you want it to be. This is not going to get you the grade that you want. But let's work together to move forward. Figure out what's not going right and hope this, you know, you still might not get the grade that you want, but we can help you learn the skill that you need to get you on the path to actually master the material and worry less about that grade and worry more about actually learning and bringing this into your life as a skill.

MIKE: What other traits do you look for in a leader?

ELYSSE: A big one for me is--two big ones--are honesty and transparency. Um, I think those are often misinterpreted as, um, over sharing. There are people out there who hear transparency and honesty and think, oh, I need to share everything. And that's not necessarily true, and that shouldn't be true. There are things as a leader that you should not be sharing with people. Um, but being able to be honest and transparent and open about the things that are on your plate that you see creates a safer space for people to make mistakes, to fail and then recover and do well. Um, one of the things that's really important to me is, um, sharing why I do things, because I always think that if someone knows why you're doing something it's gonna make more sense. I had a great conversation, actually, with one of my student aides the other day who's an Early College student. This is her first job ever, and we were talking about, um, the student aid schedule for the spring, and she was like, is it going to stay the same. And I'm like, I honestly don't know at this point. There's a lot of factors that go into that. I have to look at our budget, what we can actually afford. I have to look into what our needs are. I have to look into, once I know kind of the General Center needs, when are our tutors actually available. What times are they going to be here? That might change when we actually need student aids. And she was like, you can see her kind of eyes going wide and her

going, wow, there's so many more dimensions to just creating one schedule than I thought. I was like, yeah, I love doing this. This is something I enjoy doing, um, and I think it's great for you to know kind of all the things I'm taking into place. Um, ah, [Laughs] so, you know, down the line if you're working with someone or just with me and being like, so, why haven't we got the schedule yet?, you'll already know, oh, maybe they don't...she doesn't have this information or this information. And so, she's not able to share it with me yet. And that makes it an easier conversation to have. So, that's...that kind of honesty and transparency and, you know, she doesn't need to know every single step that I'm going through, but knowing the kind of complicated nature of these small things can, even if you are, you know, the, uh, just a student aid in your first job, can only be like, oh, okay, I get my place in this a little bit better. I get your place in this a little bit better. And that we'll be able to work together even better now.

MIKE: Your passion really comes through. Talk to me about passion and leadership and...and how they go hand in hand.

ELYSSE: Oh, I [Laughs]...whenever you have to do one of those icebreakers where you have to like do the same first, like an adjective that begins with your the first letter of your name. I always end up with either enthusiastic or effervescent. Um, passion is something that is just part of my day-to-day life. I don't know how to not [Laughs] be passionate about things, which can sometimes be a problem because I just get too excited about too many things. Um, but for me that's...that's what keeps me going. That's what keeps me motivated. There's always something exciting, new...and new to learn about, to share with someone, um, to just discover in everything that you do. I'm the person who gets really excited about both learning a new bit of a language and setting up a really good spreadsheet. Um, I think those things are really fun and, um, I just...I think if you're...if you're having fun with what you do, even if it's something really hard, that you're going to be able to do it better because you have your whole kind of self behind it. Um, I was actually leaving work yesterday and I just kind of looked up at the side sky and there were, um, crows caught me on the Germantown campus. I was just like I'm really grateful to be here because even when things are more challenging, I love every minute of it, and I know that what I do on a day-to-day basis is going to help people achieve what they want to do. And there's nothing greater than knowing that you're having a real impact on people's lives.

MIKE: And I think based on what we do, that impact may not be immediate. Right? And [ELYSEE: Yeah.] it may not be seen except for four or five years down the road. And, [ELYSEE: Yes.] you know, I think as a leader, especially at a higher ed...ed institution, we don't realize the impact we're gonna have on someone down the road. Um, if we're looking for that immediate feedback, oftentimes, it's not going to exist.

ELYSEE: And that...that can be so hard, and that's something that I've thought a lot about as I've become a manager because I'm no longer in front of students every day. I have some interaction with the students, but I'm not sitting down with a student, you

know, three, four, five, ten times a day and getting a little snapshot into their lives. Um, so, when I do get that, I'm really grateful for it, but I've had to kind of seek out ways to see those things happening being a step removed from it, and being okay with that. It can be really hard sometimes to be like, you know, there's going to be a payoff for this, but you might never see it. You just have to trust that there is going to be one. And, so, for me, clinging to the things that I, um, that I knew I had achieved and those great moments, and the exam--few examples that I have and reminding me that there's far more out there than I'm ever going to see has been a major motivator for me.

MIKE: I want to shift gears a little bit [**ELYSEE:** Okay.] and talk about your passions and how that's helped you become a leader. You...you learn nine languages in college.

ELYSEE: Not fluently, not fluently. [Laughs] I'm only fluent in English.

MIKE: But you're passionate about English dialect [**ELYSEE:** Ah-ha.] dialects and including Hawaiian Pidgin, which I didn't know existed. [**ELYSEE:** Ah-um.] How has that helped craft your view of leadership, that...that quirkiness that you have described to me.

ELYSEE: So, I mean part of it is part of the fact that I am like a super quirky person with lots of, you know, very unusual interests and things that people have never heard of is, that's one reason that I do prioritize kind of honesty and transparency and authenticity as a leader. Um, because, um, those unique things that people bring are often--that they often feel kind of uncomfortable about--um, are often the roots of their strengths. Um, so, being able to let people be comfortable with those things that they might not, um, view as strengths and they might be like, oh, if I...if I let my coworkers know about, like, this interest, they're going to think I'm a weirdo. Um, but being like, no, that...that interest that you have is one of the reasons that you have this strength that you bring to...to work. Um, and languages get so deeply into that because, one reason I love languages, and I've attempted to learn so many, um, with only being fluent in English, is because the languages we know affect the way we think. And that's, um, that's a scientific fact from linguistics and psychology. Um, the language that you have affects your ability to communicate and what kind of thoughts you can communicate. And so, being able to learn another language or speak with someone who is a native speaker of a different language, um, you can learn so much about different outlooks on life and different perspectives that you would never have had because you literally just do not have the language for it, um, in your own language. Um, Hawaiian Pidgin is one of my favorite languages because you also get, you get so much from someone's culture, um, from their language and Hawaiian Pidgin, which is a creole between, um, English and Hawaiian, and, uh, it has a lot of, um, I think Filipino words in it. Um, Tagalog, rather, um, a lot of Chinese and Japanese influences. And that is such a language of Hawaii that, like that is the modern Hawaiian culture in a nutshell. Um, and the late--the words that they use for each thing tell you so much history about where it comes from. I'm like--I'm such a word nerd. I am that person who will go and be like, don't be like, I wonder why

this word is this way? I'm like, I'm on the Oxford English dictionary right now looking that up and I'll tell you the etymology, um, because those thought processes, it's not just the kind of contemporary thought processes and how you think about things, but it is a history of thought processes and how that's changed over time. And it tells you so much more about culture and where you sit in history and, um, just affects far more than we actually realize. [Laughs]

MIKE: Well, and it helps, I would think, in your adapting as a leader [**Elysse:** Yes!] because if you're looking at the languages and their adaptations, leadership is...is pretty similar to that. You have to...to be adaptable.

Elysse: It really is. It's, um, and it's because communication is such a huge part of leadership. Having that kind of perspective lets you go, oh, maybe I'm getting stuck in this thought process. Maybe the reason this situation isn't going well is because I haven't thought of the right way to communicate it. Is there a way to communicate it? I, one of the things I kind of wrestle with a lot is finding the best words for things to communicate things because no one is a mind reader. No one is going to be able to guess what I wanted them to do or what I'm hoping to see unless I can really communicate that well. And being able to have a wide vocabulary from, drawn from multiple different languages, can kind of help me shift my thinking and reach people better. It also just leads to some really fun in-person instances where you're having a conversation between English, French, and Spanish with some co-workers, um, someone else walks by and says something and you reply in Chinese because that's the first language that you reach for. That happened to me once [Laughs] and it was really funny.

MIKE: But on the other end of the spectrum, you said you would love to raise sheep and goats.

Elysse: [Laughs] Um, yes. I, one of, one of the many unusual hobbies that I have is, um, I guess the catch-all term would be fiber artist. Um, when I was in college, I learned to crochet as a stress reliever and in grad school this turned into knitting because there was a knitting shop just around the corner from me. Um, and since then, that has turned into also weaving and learning to spin yarn. And, um, [Laughs] I now buy fleeces and will take them from fresh off the sheep to finished product, though I don't have as many finished products as I would like. Mostly, I just spin them and they sit there for about three years. Um, and those are just...those are hilarious independent creatures that you are just in a constant struggle trying to keep them from not causing complete and utter chaos, which I think is a, um, we call that a fun management challenge [Laughs]. Um, and when I first...when I first learned about goats and, um, discovered goat cheese, as a like 12 year old kid had goat cheese for the first time, was like goats are insane. I want to raise some when I'm an adult, hasn't happened yet because again, they are a lot of work. Um, but it's something that I hope to maybe someday. [Laughs].

MIKE: But corralling those goats and [Elysse: Uh-um.] getting them to go in a direction you want is not much different than leading people.

ELYSEE: It is. It's really not. It really taps into that kind of...I love...I love solving a good problem, um, and trying to keep goats...keeping goats, from what I've understand in my research into it, is mostly about just accepting that a goat is going to be a goat. It's never going to be a different creature. It has...it's a goat. It's going to be strong-willed. It's going to want to climb over everything, and it's going to eat all sorts of things that you don't want it to. And, so, what is responsible on you as the goat herder is to create an environment that is therefore goat friendly, um, and constantly work to, um, instead of trying to change the goat's nature, create an environment that works for the goat to thrive in. And [Laughs] that really is like a really good metaphor for leadership. Um, it's not on you to change the people that are under you, but to create an environment, um, where they can succeed at whatever you guys should be doing together. [Laughs]

MIKE: That's wonderful. [Elysse laughs] Absolutely, wonderful. As we wrap up, I just one bit of advice, if i can give you.

ELYSEE: Yes, please. I love advice.

MIKE: Get back out there and engage with students. Your...your passion is...is needed. Your exuberance is needed. Um, and I'm sure they would welcome it. I think, you know, one of the things that I regret as having gotten into administration is that I lost my connection with students [Elysse: Uh-um.] as a faculty member. And your...your students in Germantown deserve that, to feel that passion. So, please, if you get the opportunity to engage them in these conversations because you're just absolutely wonderful for them I'm sure.

ELYSSE: Well, thank you for that. I appreciate that advice a lot [Laughs] because it's really just...it's really just a compliment wrapped up into advice. [Laughs].

MIKE: Thank you for taking time out of your busy day to meet with me. I've had so much fun i very much appreciate it.

ELYSSE: Thank you so much for having me. This has been great fun, and I hope that the people who are listening also enjoyed it.

MIKE: If you know someone who you think would be a great fit for this podcast, have them reach out to me at michael.mills@montgomerycollege.edu. Meanwhile, keep moving MC Forward. Thank you.

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