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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 Jeanette Rojas, Equity and Inclusion program manager. Jeanette, thanks for joining me today.

[Jeanette] Thanks for having me, Dr Mills. This is great. I'm excited.

[Mike] So I want to talk about leadership from the lens of equity and inclusion and from your experience. Are our leaders in touch with the E&I expectations or you know what... what do you say from that standpoint?

[Jeanette] I mean I think it really depends on the kind of leader that you're aiming to be. If you want to be a leader that really takes into account you know others... um experiences and... um... and really you know include everyone I think you... you kind of have to force yourself to use this equity and inclusion lens and it... I feel like it's... it's an additional step that everyone can take that in the end it's... it's worthwhile because people notice when you're really making that extra effort to include everyone, to be cognizant of... um you know your biases and... um and really see people for who they are. So I think when you use this equity and inclusion lens it always... it opens your eyes and it opens other people's eyes because I think most people... um may feel like they're not being seen for who they are so... um I think if you really want to be the kind of leader that... um that people are going to respect and... um and look up to you... you definitely want to take the time to use that equity and inclusion lens.

[Mike] But that's hard for a lot of people right? You... you go through your career as one type of leader and then you... you may have to take a different approach... it's hard for a lot of people.

[Jeanette] It is you know it's really hard and... um and for me I know that sometimes I'm like you know I get tired because... um it... it is an additional step that you need to take and it takes you looking at yourself in the mirror and thinking okay let me look at my own biases and check myself and a lot of times we're not going to like... what we see or you know we may be embarrassed or ashamed and having to deal with shame and embarrassment and...um... uh just kind of like regret of maybe how you were in the past those are not easy emotions to deal with so you know it's always great to do it with... um with others and this is why you know when we have our programs, we always have our community agreements where we really want people to feel safe and not judged because we all have biases. We all you know judge people unfairly... this is... we're human so this is what we do... um and so it is very difficult and it could be exhausting so we also... you know... I try to talk about you know self-care and I know that's... that's a very... people use this word a lot and... um it's not necessarily just about you know going to get a massage or going shopping, it's really about you know just taking that time to

pause and I think... um doing what makes you feel at ease whether it's taking a walk in... um in your local park or just taking a breather and looking out your window. Sometimes I forget I have a window in my office and sometimes I'm like... I'm so in my head and I just turn around and I'm like wait a minute I have this beautiful view... I mean I don't... if I look down there's a parking lot but if I look up I can actually see like some mountains back there so just you know it's important to take a pause and just take a breather because it isn't easy work but it's always so worth it... it's always so worth it you know you just feel better about yourself because you know you're doing your best and people... people can tell when you're making... taking those extra steps to really you know see them for who they are and what they've experienced and honor that and... um and you know just taking that time and you know at the end of the day it's really doing leadership through your heart and making decisions through your heart which you know that may turn some people off because you know it's not... it sounds very hallmarky but it... really at the end of the day empathy is a huge part of equity and inclusion... it's you know leading with empathy and ... and maybe not even seeing it as I'm leading but just you're just trying to be a good person you're... you're... you're trying to take everyone's experiences and you're trying to see everyone... um and also keep your biases in check and... um just trying to you know be a better person each day.

[Mike] I love that phrase leadership through your heart that... that really sums up I think what we're trying to... to get across here because it is leading with compassion, leading with empathy and we probably don't do that enough.

[Jeanette] Yeah and it feels good you know like any time you do something through your heart it feels good so it benefits you as well and it takes some pressure off of it because I feel like so many of us get in our head so much that you know we get headaches we get sick we get stressed and if we just kind of shift that to our heart you know it's it's more genuine and it feels better and it kind of takes away that stress that we tend to feel on a day-to-day basis so it's also benefiting you

[Mike] when did you start looking at leadership that way what in your leadership journey was there anything specific that prompted you to start looking at things through that lens

[Jeanette] You know I think working with youth made it happen because... um I used to be an ACES coach and when you work with youth or with kids they... you can't... you can't fake it... like... you have... they see... they see you and if you're faking something or if you're stressed out they pick up on that and you lose them so when you're working with youth you really have to be... um as genuine as possible and when you're being genuine you have... you're working... you know you're being your authentic self and you're doing it with love and so... um when I was an ACES coach and I was working with students that were going through so many... just... things that you can't, I mean it's like kids should not be going through the things that some of these kids were going through... um I really... I couldn't help, I'm a mother so I couldn't help but feel love towards these kids and it

really created... I mean miracles because... um you know most of them just needed someone to really listen to them to really... like just offer them a safe space... like just sit in my office and if you need to cry, cry no one's gonna judge you... um so I think that's where I realized wow there's... there's something to this... like this is... this shouldn't just work with kids. I think it works with adults and I kind of just started doing it more with... um with adults and you know with peers and I... it... and it just felt good you know, it just felt nice and... um and it felt authentic and so I think that's where it began just working with... with kids working with youth like they... they see you so you cannot fake it.

[Mike] Well they don't have a filter either, right? So, exactly, just tell you that you're... you're posing, um you're faking it,

[Jeanette] Yep they will tell... they tell it like it is that is for sure so you learn a lot... you learn a lot from children because they're... they're still a little bit of innocence and... um and... uh you know I think everyone could use a little bit more love and genuineness because it's funny like we're all wearing these masks... um and it... you know when you think about it, it's like even before the pandemic I feel like so many of us hide behind masks because we may be scared to be judged - no one wants to be judged and you know it's like removing that mask and now just with like everything that's happened with Covid, I feel like people are you know figuratively speaking they are starting when they remove that mask they're really trying to be more of... more genuine because life is short and you know it's... it's all about just having more kindness and now with the holidays I think it gets a little bit easier but even after the holidays are over just, you know, practice kindness, practice empathy, and... and it's for you; it's going to make... it's going to make you feel better so it works, it benefits, it's a win-win situation and I think in equity and inclusion is it hard, yes but the... the joy you get from seeing people just like you know telling their story and... um and... and feeling free because you know they're showing you who they really are the... the good the bad the ugly and... um and you sit there with them and you're empathetic and it just... it's... it's very transformative and um so yeah it is hard but it's worth it.

[Mike] The... the last few years um have been tough in this country from an equity and inclusion standpoint there's been a lot of rhetoric you've had to address that on the... on a college level with a number of the programs and types of programs that that you offer. It's had to test you as a leader a little bit I would think.

[Jeanette] Definitely. We're always being tested that is for sure it is yeah because I feel like because of what's been happening in the real world... um sometimes it feels like you know people are looking up to us like okay what is equity inclusion going to do, what is the office of equity and inclusion going to do about this, and um we accept that challenge but equity and inclusion doesn't just belong in the office of equity and inclusion, it belongs in every single department, it belongs in your house, it belongs in your bedroom, it belongs in the gym, wherever - it's something that we all have to work on in our families with... with ourselves and it doesn't stop. Equity and inclusion work is

something that... um you have to see every day, you have to kind of... you know look through this lens and when you feel that... that scary. ugly thought entering your head after years and years of being conditioned to see certain people one way and other people another way... like just breaking all of that, that's... that's... they... you have to work on that every day and... um but don't look at it as work, just look at it as you're trying to be a better person, that's what it comes down to. So you know I think shifting from seeing it as work to you know... um basically an energy like you want this energy of equity and inclusion in the college so we're gonna put it out there and we're going to work through it day in and day out but also have fun with it... it doesn't always have to be so serious... um so you know just it's... it's a balance because it is my job but it's also something I believe in... very... it's very personal as well so it's just you know maintaining this balance of... um trying to do the right thing but also doing your job and reminding people this is not only the work of the office of equity and inclusion this is... this is um this is a responsibility as a... as a human being. You should want to be inclusive and you should want to be equitable you know have equity in your home and in your... in your office so it's a balance.

[Mike] That's why I love talking to my grandkids and they... they range in age from five months to 19 years old and you know they... they have different experiences. I have two eight-year-old grandchildren and I... I love talking to those two because they they're in... in those years at school where everybody is just equal. They're... they're... they're friends right... they... they see people for who they are just as... as individuals and as we discussed earlier you can learn so much just from listening to children because they will teach us if we listen to them that everybody's equal, everybody should be included.

[Jeanette] That's right, they keep it very simple you know and... and with children it starts with play you know it's not serious. You see them playing with... um you know with all kinds of kids and they're not looking at their social status, they're not looking at their titles, because they don't have titles and they're still at a... at a level in life where things are very simple, things are very playful and I think as adults sometimes we have to remind ourselves that you know... we... it's okay to be playful, it's okay to make things simple, it doesn't have to be that complicated so you're right, you know children are cons... they're constantly reminding us of what's important and how the perspectives that we need to take in regards to life where...you know we need to get out of our heads and have a little bit of fun talk to people we don't usually talk to... you know get out of our comfort zones... um but you know, keep it simple and keep it light.

[Mike] What kind of leader is Jeanette Rojas?

[Jeanette] I mean it really depends on who you ask, so um I think you know I I try... I just try to be who I am and... um really try to make decisions... um as I mentioned before through my heart... um and because when I go to bed at night, I wanna... I sleep really well. I sleep seven to eight hours and I think it's because throughout the day I'm trying to be in the moment you know. We hear a lot about mindfulness and... um and it's... it's

tricky because we're always consumed with what are we gonna do, what meetings do I have in two hours, or what am I doing this weekend? But you know trying to be mindful and trying to lead through my heart and I don't... I honestly don't use that word often which is weird because here we are doing a podcast on leadership but I don't... I think I try to keep... I try not to label things too much. I just try to do the right thing... um as it presents itself in the moment so I would say you know I'm trying to be... um the best version of myself... uh and because you know I want people... I want to help people I've always been this kind of a helper. I like to help. I love... I love putting smiles on people's faces you know. I was a teacher before... um I taught ESL and you know just again going back to kids, just working with children and you know they crack us up so much because they just say what's on their mind and... um as adults we get so scared about you know is this going to offend someone and you... not to say that you still have to have a filter... but you know so many times I think we get caught up in... um just you know trying to say the right thing when in fact you know people just want you to be you and... um and I really just you know try to do that, just you know this is who I am if... um that's weird to you that's okay if... um if you don't get it that's okay, if you get it that's awesome. So it's just one of these things where you know taking it one day at a time and being in the moment.

[Mike] I... I love that because it... I think it means something different to everybody right doing... doing that living in the moment... um and... and not judging one way or the other. You know I... I often tell people when we talk about work-life balance and they say to me well your work-life balance is out of balance so it's... it's working for me right as... as... as... an individual, I'm okay with it so why are you not okay with it? There are only a handful of people who should be concerned about it and none of them are employed at Montgomery College. They all live in my house or are family members and I think we get so caught up in thinking about what others are going to look at us or how they're going to look at us, and as you said we're not true to... to who we are, and I think we.. we have to be true to who we are in order to be the best leaders that we can be for our teams and... and our colleagues.

[Jeanette] That's right! You're definitely right about that, and I think you know what I... the sense I get from you... um is that you love what you do. So you know I feel and sometimes I question if this is ...if this is even right but I don't necessarily see this huge shift like I'm at home and then you know I wake up in the morning and I go to work. I kind of see it all like and... and this is where sometimes you do have to pause and say okay, I need to separate things and not answer this work email when I'm with my child. At that point you... I do need to separate the two, but I think when you really... um when you're passionate about what you do there may be a Saturday morning where you do want to answer that work email because you genuinely care and... um and you're not seeing it as work versus personal life. It kind of... it's for me many times it's kind of the same you know it they... they merge together so... um I think there are moments where you need to pause and say okay this is where I may need to separate the two but a lot of my kids know what I do, they use the same vocabulary you know they use words... um

such you know we talk about biases and we talk about being inclusive and my...my daughter will even question me and say well that's not very inclusive because we're leaving so and so out, and so it goes back to you know it... that's where it's like... wait I'm having these same conversations at work and it's like it ... it because I do what I love... um then yeah the two, family life and work life sometimes they do mesh and you know it's okay. Sometimes that happens and um we just need to know when there's times like if... if you are... um sitting in a holiday dinner then that is not the time to think about work so that... so yeah there is again... we... it's that balance but when you enjoy what you do you shouldn't feel bad about it. You enjoy what you do and it is what it is.

[Mike] And you're leading through your heart when you do that.

[Jeanette] Exactly! There you go. Yep.

[Mike] Jeanette, thank you. This was fun I...I learned a lot. I...I really enjoyed it.

[Jeanette] Me too! Thank you so much, this was great... um and yeah I look forward to future conversations.

[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.

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