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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 Rebecca Thomas, chair of the biology department on the Rockville campus, co-chair of faculty council ,and a member of the return to campus advisory team. Rebecca, thanks for joining me today.

[Rebecca] It's great to be here. Thank you for inviting me to be a part of this series.

[Mike] You wear a lot of hats at the college. It's been a trying time for leaders. Can you talk a little bit about how this semester and the previous semesters have tested your... your leadership?

[Rebecca] I could fill up a full 20 minutes with that discussion. That is... that is um... uh a big question and it's... it's something that I think about a lot because I stepped into this department chair role so I'm in... um my fourth year now, so really I started this department chair role and I had all of my plans laid out for the ideas of the things I wanted to do as a department chair and the goals I wanted to accomplish as a department chair and then Covid hit and all, I kind of was... I was... um reflecting on some of that recently and I looked back at all those things that I thought I was gonna do in these four years that I really haven't had the opportunity to do because we've... we've had to totally switch gears. So in some ways my official leadership role at the college, my formal leadership role at the college, I feel like has been trial by fire for learning how to be a leader... um and it's been so... it's been tough, very, very, very challenging in lots of different ways. But I also feel like it has really accelerated the pace of my growth as a leader. I have learned so much... um over the past few years over the pandemic about leadership and what kind of leadership is needed in different times, leadership during a crisis like this has been... um obviously Covid... the Covid pandemic has been a huge tragedy... um but it... you know has opened up opportunities I think for... you know to think about how to do things differently. To think about how to... you know move into... it's really forced out of the box thinking I think and it's been just an honor.. like that opportunity to serve on the coronavirus advisory team at first and then now the return to campus advisory team. I've learned so much and a lot of that has been learning by watching the other strong leaders at our institution. I've been able to watch some great role models during this time.

[Mike] So two questions – one, what have you learned from watching others and what have you learned about yourself as a leader during this time?

[Rebecca] Excellent questions! Okay, what have I learned from watching others? I will tell you a very concrete example of... of this. I remember one of the very first big meetings that we had when Dr. Pollard was holding her... her you know... executive...her larger group that she held, I forget what she called it... if she called it the executive

coronavirus group or so... this was the group where the CAT team came in and met with the larger leadership at the college to really discuss, okay we have a pandemic, what are we going to do as an institution to respond to this? And I remember walking into my first meeting and watching how she organized that team to make decisions and watching that clear layout of a grid of all the different key areas we needed to address as a team and then what the team's follow-up actions were going to be and then who was going to be responsible for moving those actions forward and to me to see that large-scale problem solving in a large team broken up and laid out that way was really like an aha moment! Like... aha this is how you solve a complicated... this is how you... not solve... you move forward, starting to chip away at a really complex, complicated problem. And I've told her this since, I told her... I... that next day or sometime that fall in the following week I had my meeting with my own department to figure out okay how are we as a department going to move from this face-to-face situation to this very quick transition to remote. I used what I watched her do. I took that back to my department and then used that to help organize and transition my team. And I will tell you, Rockville biology department, my faculty, my staff did an amazing job with a quick transition. I had really important... you know... I had faculty who stepped right up to the plate to take leads on part of this... you know I'll say a number of my faculty stepped up and ran and organized little mini training sessions for part-time faculty to make sure everybody was on board and how they they needed to move materials over to Blackboard. everybody was aware of software technology that they could use and add in to convert to remote teaching. Everybody knew what was going to happen in each course. We did this... we met one day, we made the plan. People stepped up to the plate... my full time... some of my full-time faculty leaders stepped up to the plate, we implemented that plan in three days and I felt so comfortable that as a department we were moving forward with everybody feeling as supported and ready as they could be and we did it in record time...

[Mike]...and that was reminds me, yeah it reminds me of the... um the Frank Sinatra song New York where... where he says if you can make it here you can make it anywhere right? And I... I feel like so many of the departments, mine included, because we... we ended up training so many people those first couple of months and then through the summer that if... if you can get to that crisis, yeah the rest of it is gravy. It doesn't mean that they're not going to be leadership challenges, right? But they're going to be plans that you can fall back on and say look we... we did this once we we've gone through this we can do it again or we can do it with another problem that may not be as that's complex to solve.

[Rebecca] Absolutely! It really is learning how to, as a group, really engage in flexible open-ended problem solving like here is something we've never seen before there's no playbook for this we are writing the playbook as we're moving forward and it you know it's only going to be successful if we're working together as a team and... and I feel like that's what... I'm... I'm lucky because I feel like I already have a group of faculty that tend to work that way naturally anyway, so it was easy for... well... it was... I want I don't want to say it was easy... it was relatively easy for us to come together you know and move

forward with that and... and I will say and this is just credit to... to ELITE and what ELITE does. Some of the huge benefits that we saw during those planning came from some of our faculty members who had already had ELITE training on distance learning education and remote learning education and just two faculty who jump out in my mind, who were able to really step up and offer some of... they jumped in, they volunteered to offer some of those kind of intensive mini-training sessions... um where... I know.. you know Leah Allen and Antonio del Castillo Olivares... um both of them had already kind of been working towards distance learning teaching and they just, you know showed everybody else some really great tools to use... um to help everybody get over that initial anxiety of what am I doing, you know, how like... like how do I do this? So you know that was I think a way that some of our institutional forward thinking benefited us in ways that... that we might not have anticipated... you know, four years ago.. um sometimes...

[Mike] ... someone asked me, you know not too long after that first summer passed how did we train 800 faculty? And I said you have to understand that we've been building for this moment for about 10 years now. Certainly you don't build something with the anticipation that there's going to be a pandemic, right? But you put into place and I think this is what leadership is all about - you put into place a process that will benefit you when you have to scale up and... and really that's all we did that summer was ... was scale up... uh we ... we created the SRT training which really was a combination of what we were already doing with a few other tools but it was just scaling up because the process had already been put in place for people like those that you just mentioned ... um what ... what did you learn about yourself as a leader during that time or ... or what have you learned about yourself as a leader now going forward?

[Rebecca] I think there are a few things and... and I think some of them are some of them are positives and some of them are negative and I think... I think... I've you know... and again I see leadership is... it's a journey and so I'm always asking myself how can I be a better leader? You know, how can I accentuate my strengths but how can I always work on being a way... acknowledge, be aware of and then work on my... um my weaknesses... um and so I think a few things that have come out and... and... I so I want to... I'll talk about one that I think is an obvious weakness I've realized about myself during um the pandemic and this goes to... um back to what you said in the introduction about my multiple hats I... I... I feel... I love Montgomery College. I love our students. I love my faculty who I serve in my department and the role that I play. I love my colleagues across the college and when I look at... at situations that come up I like to problem solve... like I don't like to let situations that aren't working sit there. I like to... to help... help our institution find ways to brainstorm, problem solve, think outside of the box and find those solutions but sometimes that means I have trouble saying no and you know... is... someone you know will come to me and I just I feel that sense of responsibility of hey if we want solutions to our problems we've got to be part of the solution, but it also means it's easy for me to stretch myself too thin so that... um... so that I'm bordering on being ineffective in any one given role and so I've recognized that of myself during Covid and I'm... I'm trying to think about ways to... to work on... on that

and it really actually hit me... I was at a conference recently where some discussions were of... of leadership and... like... stress during leadership and... and being pushed to the edge during leadership and there was this like little interactive quiz while we were waiting... kind of... and scoring kind of what was our own personal level of stress and I think I scored out on that quiz as being like in the extreme areas of stress. And... and one thing that really hit me with that speaker was she's really like, okay if you were in this area, you are not being effective in ways that you don't even know you're not being effective, because you can't see them anymore. You're stretched too thin and that really hit me. I'm like okay that's me. I need to step back. I need to reevaluate and I need to make sure that my good intentions and the good in... you know the good energy that I'm bringing to the table are actually being deployed in a way that is effective for our institution and effective for all those roles that I'm... I'm in and just...

[Mike] ...we don't do a good job and certainly in higher Ed but... but also in in the corporate world acknowledging that leaders are allowed to burn out right? We're not supposed to. You know, I... I was in a meeting yesterday and we were talking about burnout and it was the... the assumption was okay you're... you're an administrator you're not supposed to burn out, right? You're a leader... you're.. what are you talking about you're burned out and... and we don't allow leaders to express that and I think that's what you're talking about. We need to acknowledge that across all... all areas.

[Rebecca] Across the institution and I actually... this is totally something too that I was thinking in this conversation. It was something I wanted to bring up and I think I think this is this issue of burnout is so critically important and it's so critically important across our institution... I... you know I see it with our students. I see it with our faculty and I know I see it with our staff. And I know that gets a lot of attention and discussion and rightly so but what if there's anything that I think I would like our... our broader college community to hear, I also see it with our senior leaders and I think we as an institution really need to be sensitive to the load that everybody has been carrying for the past two years and the complicated, convoluted, stressful, difficult, no good answers, no good solution situations that we've been dealing with and you know just like... just like our faculty have been going at 150, 200, 200% we have staff members that have been going in that capacity too. I think about our facilities folks and you know they haven't ever been away from the office, you know they've been here on campus dealing with all of this stuff from day one and they've... they've had very stressful decisions to make under time short time spans... um you know our... our public safety and security have carried a lot of... of load during this time, our senior leaders have not stopped and, right? And in cases they are now adding a whole extra job to... extra to jobs that they already have that have content that have continued through this pandemic. It... it is a problem across the board that I see everywhere and I think what I just try to do is remind people on all sides of the aisle that patience, grace, sensitivity, that... that going over and... go... going over and beyond to assume the best of all those people that are operating in other parts of the college than... than you are... is... that's just how it's gonna have to continue to be our mantra for a while.

[Mike] Well for at least for the foreseeable future I think and what I hope is that we take these lessons that we've learned and just carry them forward whenever we get a handle on the pandemic because I think there are lessons in leadership that will cut across no matter what phase we're in but it's it definitely has been a trying time. I want to thank you for your leadership... um because as I sit on the periphery of a lot of these discussions you certainly have done a great job of... of helping the college move... move forward and thank you for taking time out today to talk about leadership and... and what it means to you.

[Rebecca] Yeah thank you! This has been really fun! I feel like I could go on talking all day [laughs].

[Mike] Thank you, Rebecca.

[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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