

MC Forward Podcast
Season 3, Episode 9
Gina Marrazza
Transcript

[Music]

[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 Gina Marrazza, Creative Projects Coordinator for Achieving Collegiate Excellence and Success or ACES. Gina, I appreciate you taking time out to join me.

[Gina] Well this is just a thrill for me Dr Mills. Thank you for having me.

[Mike] Doing some background research before this discussion I uncovered that you have quite the story - music background. Can you give us a little information about that and how that helps you form your ideas of leadership?

[Gina] Of course I'd love to. So if we go back in my journey... um... I come from a beautiful Italian family, Italian American family, where my parents really valued education and they also valued the... the role of music lessons. So my brother and my sisters... my two sisters... and I were required to take piano lessons with a really brilliant... uh teacher that was in our area in south jersey... um... and the thing was that my mom felt that if you could study alone when you have a piece of music it's like for the first time you're looking at it... you have to break it down you're in sort of this foggy area. How are you going to play this Beethoven sonata? So you have to learn how to break things down and build them back up and even though it can get scary at times you sort of learn to lead yourself and you say okay, well... I see this pattern and it turns out that... uh... my mom didn't want us to go into music and it turns out that three of my... my other... other three siblings became doctors... uh it was again if you could focus on your music you can transfer that knowledge, that tenacity, that excellence and go into something and do it really well and I decided to stay in music but not as a concert pianist which I was at the beginning. I'm a chamber player now but I became an arts administrator very interested in leadership because I used to... was the Assistant Director at Levine School of Music for 17 years... got them into Strathmore. I would play on the side. Again I would use those sort of skills that I learned... in what does it take to do something well and then I transferred that as an administrator and finally to where I am here at Montgomery College which I love the team that I'm a part of because all of them are trying to teach our students our ACES what I call ACES scholars and in my program the ACES ambassadors to lead you have to lead yourself first and we work on those skills so that's sort of the whole circle of life for me .

[Mike] So when you were growing up and... and you were learning those... those skills needed to be a concert pianist what were they...what... what skills were involved that then translated into the leadership opportunities that you had?

[Gina] Sure so at the beginning you would learn pieces of music and then you had to compete if you wanted to play with orchestras so I went into this competition to win the Philadelphia. To be able to solo with the orchestra to do that there's memory you have to be able to memorize over 35 pages of music you have to be able to do chamber music with the orchestra that you play with, you have to have tenacity you have to have... I mean you don't win all the time and one of the things that you learn as a leader is that it humbles you to lose. It is important to learn how to lose. I mean we can sort of bring those into those concentric circles today when you lose, you lose. You got to go back to the drawing board and you must do it better. You must think of why... how could I have done it better and then you try again. So if you go into competitions when you're young, whether you're a skater, whether you're in sports, you have to be able to want to excel and accept when you don't win. Because excelling is always important... winning wow that's such a joy in everything but it's not the only thing. But if you do win like the competition you got to play with wonderful musicians and that became very important to me. I didn't want to just win little competitions. I didn't go into many but I always wanted to play with members of the orchestra in chamber music or solo with the orchestra which I did three times which was very exciting for me. And then I... you know sort of applied those things when I went to school I got to work with great musicians that I went to school with and eventually when I came here to Washington I applied those skills when I went to Catholic University to get my master's. I had gone originally to go as a solo pianist and I met Father Hartke who you know at that time was running the Hartke Theater and he used to run USO tours and he said you look like you could bring everybody together and uh you'll be the music director so we did tours in the Sinai, we lived in Poland, and we did these USO tours and again I had to sort of reach in my black bag and I said okay gotta write the show we have to rehearse the show you gotta learn how to work with other people which became more exciting to me than being a solo pianist because I got to work with people. So it's almost like if I was a senator or congressman I would love that to be able to say all right I disagree with you on this. Let's try to make this work better and I found that I did that, when I was Father's music director and then when I came to work at Levine School you had brilliant musicians there... well... how do you build a program together you just can't say we're doing it this way and we had staff and we... we just had a marvelous time building it. I was responsible for getting the Levine School of Music into Strathmore. Got to work with the team at Strathmore because with excellence you get to work with people that want to keep building things and that was very important to me. So those were the skills I applied throughout.

[Mike] Moving into organizational leadership... this concept of... of team is important. Working with the team... was that... that obviously was something you found enjoyable yes but did you find it hard?

[Gina] You know I... I at that point I think I was more of an extrovert so I wanted to do this. You know if I look back in my high school years, I was like president of the class like three years out of four. I love to bring everybody to do something whether they voted for me or not. I think they didn't want to do it and so they knew that I would do it well. I had the ability to sort of get the energy going of everybody that we were all going to go to Oz if we all locked arms. We'll do it together so I applied that... um... loving to sort of lead that and I also did in my music organizations. I was very involved in extracurricular in both high school and college and I loved that whole idea of... like... you know when you put a show together you can have... at the beginning everyone looks horrible... I mean it's like a first draft of anything that you write it's horrible but that's where you start and then how do you build on that how do you say let's rehearse this. Let's do this better. So I did that with my shows and then I did that when we were building programs at Levine. Whether it's for the early childhood program, whether it was even here at ACES, building the ACES ambassador leadership program it has evolved from year one it has to and we get together and we talk about it the kids give me feedback because you can always make you can always tweak it and that's very important there are times you have to pivot you have to sort of throw everything away so that's... that's I... I enjoyed that whole idea that you know we're gonna go we might not make it and we always seem to make it...uh because we... uh you know you could have a group of people you don't even like but if you have something in common that you're going towards it really does work... uh it takes time though so you can't give up and you know leadership... I think tenacity is very important, not to be tenacious with the same idea but to stick with something you say you're going to do and maybe you do it like a variation on a theme which is very musical too. You know Brahms would write a theme and then he'd do like 20 variations on it you have to be able to vary that and know when to pivot... knowing to vary...

[Mike] Well let's pivot to the ACES ,the ambassadors leadership program and your role in that and the response from the students on learning about leadership.

[Gina] Yes it... it is the most... uh cherished thing that I do and that I've done I think in my life... so it's called the ACES ambassador leadership program... uh I was asked to be a part of it five years ago at that time I was just doing the arts and culture program while I was working at Strathmore, at the young artists of America and I had met Karen Callendar who was a dynamic leader of our ACES program and she believed in the arts and culture program and then she said you know I really love this leadership thing if we can get these kids, we'll get them together we'll talk about what are the leadership skills. I reached into my black bag of my friends who I knew that were in leadership positions whether I went to Nancy Roman who at that time was running the food bank in Washington DC and then she went over to work with Michelle Obama's organization - the Partnerships for a Healthier America and they all wanted to be a part of this whether it's her... whether it was Luis Schiavone, from it was a friend of mine who came from NPR because they're all leaders within their circle and I tried to work with the kids and

say you don't have to be a congressman or a senator or the president, there are things whatever you do you could leave within your sort of realm, whether it's in health care, public health... which a lot of our kids started to do as opposed to you know sort of saying this is what leadership is about... uh you know we read all the David Rubinstein books... you know we sort of pick things out of that we have mantras... like you don't know what you don't know. That's... you know brings in your humility but and then I brought in leaders and the kids actually told me we want leaders within where we want to get to. So ACES remember is based on a pathway you know you come from the high school ACES program you go into your MC program and then you go to USG and you finish that four-year degree and that sort of subject that you really want to delve into and we're finding a lot of the kids are going into the STEM programs, public health and so it is changing to... that so we start... sort of... every year we start out with sort of a an overview view. Like this year we're talking... we're doing a whole read of the constitution. Okay so that'll take one of the workshops and we're going to go visit the original constitution but in the meantime we're going to also bring in some ACES students, remember the ACES program has been around for about 10 years. They've graduated we're going to bring those leaders back because they're really very successful in their careers and kids like to see kids who look like them you know. I'm... I'm... I'm old... I'm you know they know that I have a great energy for it but they must see examples of those leaders... um and that's ... that's where we've gotten to year five. This is going to be a really powerful year... um it will be leadership of meeting leaders. I'll still bring all my friends and... What is leadership based on? I mean and we're talking about the impeccable... you must be impeccable with words and we go back to the constitution. You must be able to amend things. That's the beauty of the constitution but you first have to read it you won't understand it. At the beginning again it'll be foggy but we'll get through it together so it's a... it's really something I cherish and I see that the kids come back they usually stay with me for two years. We've built in a feeder program in the high school thanks to the Herb Block Foundation and we're starting to build in internships of leadership that we're trying to get for our kids in the summer, because it's hard for kids to get internships. It's essential to have internships and mentorships so that's the recipe. Now we're gonna make a really good cake this year because it's year five.

[Mike] As you work with these students, what have they taught you about your own leadership?

[Gina] Um... they've taught me that I have to be more impeccable with my words. They taught me that they want to talk amongst themselves. They want to hear someone speak. They love meeting the people but they want to spend more time talking about things. One of the big things we want to talk about that they asked to sort of have more saying is about mental health... um where that needs to get to for them because of what they've been through. So we are always having sort of a mental health review. We build that into the program... um again. They want to talk to students remember, this pandemic has been horrible. Most of our meetings have been... uh online. The last three years were the pandemic so now we're starting with hybrid they're going to be able to

come in and meet one another. This summer a lot of my students came to meet me in person it was like... uh ... uh so exciting, like we cried when we met each other because there is something about being in the same room being at the same table. Even though we tried with zoom, they stuck with it, they really worked hard... um but I think it'll be more joyous for them to interact and to be in person so that's what they want. We always have a review - what worked ... did work... some of and I really want to listen to them ... um sometimes leaders don't listen enough. Your good leaders do so I've tried to blend that in for this year five as we walk forward.

[Mike] So what I'm hearing you say is that leadership requires flexibility.

[Gina] Yes which is the hardest because sometimes you have this sort of your blinders. Are we're going to go here, we're going.. to... so Oz maybe looks a little different. I mean it's also... um like being a parent I mean we all have sort of these goals for the kids and then you realize at a certain time and my kids if they listen to this they'll probably laugh. It took me a long time to realize that that okay you know you set but it is important to set those sort of the structural things of excellence, tenacity, compassion, including people reaching out and being part of things... um which my husband and I really did and again. That was all transferable you know. I see my kids they're doing their thing with a twist of what we... we brought into their lives and that's what we want my goal is to bring clarity that the kids bring clarity to themselves as to what they want um... meaning not my personal kids. I want that for them but also my ACES ambassadors then I've really succeeded.

[Mike] Those characteristics you just identified compassion, empathy, listening, why is that so hard for leaders?

[Gina] I...I think...um leadership maybe has something to do with power and I think power does something to people once they get into that role and the goal is to sort of every night sit down I mean I used to read about... uh President Bush, the father, President Bush 1, and he would write in his...uh write in his diary no you have to be able to look at yourself and say did I do this well; could I have done better? Because you have to stay... stay grounded... um I know if I were the president of the united states I've always wanted to be. Every night I would cry to think what if I didn't help someone, what if I hurt someone? I think it's such a role where I see power. Some people see they don't turn the coin around it's very humbling to have that power. So leadership... I mean... I guess if you get enthralled with yourself which some leaders do that's not what we want that to me is the antithesis of leadership. That's just the hole you fall into. You must see the hole and you must walk around that hole and you say no I must believe in compassion and that does come with clarity. I mean you don't have to be like a willow in the wind. You have to be strong like a tree but you have to be able to bend when it's really necessary. But it seems to be hard once people get into a position of power. We have good leaders there are also other leaders. I think of Dr Pollard - she was a brilliant leader that way. She talked to all my kids - I have pictures of her hugging the kids, you know

before the pandemic and my ACES ambassadors she always reached out. she had a great because she herself was balanced I think if you stay balanced whether you're spiritual you say prayers whatever you say your mantras and then you come back and you say okay let's get back to what our goals are.

[Mike] As we wrap this up, what are you still working on in on your leadership journey?

[Gina] Um I want to be... because I... what I see around me I think facts are very important. I think being even more clear... um listening more to my students because their journey has been. The ACES students are very brave and so you need to hear their stories and you're just... you just... your heart just opens up and you just say I'm so proud to be with you on this journey and you know where they want to get to that's the exciting thing. So I want to listen more. I want to develop a program that they... these six workshops that they come to. I want it to be so valuable to them... um as well as fun. I also think there needs to be that sort of... um you know there has to be lines even if some of the kids still stay on the zoom they still need to feel included. They still need to whether you're in the high school program. one of the greatest compliments was the high school kids still that were we had five of them last year this year we'll have 10. they felt part of the MC kids it's neat to be with the college kids and the college kids felt very comfortable with the high school so we built a team. So I hope I continue on that. I hope I listen a little more and I hope I make it very effectively important to the kids.

[Mike] Gina, this was wonderful. It was very enlightening to me to hear about your musical background and your connection with leadership in ACES. I appreciate it. Thank you.

[Gina] Oh, it's been an honor Dr Mills. Have a great day. Thank you.

[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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