

MC Forward Podcast
Nancy Newton
Transcript

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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 Dr. Nancy Newton, Grants Manager, in the Office of Advancement and Community Engagement. Nancy, thanks for joining me.

NANCY

Thank you so much for having me. It's lovely to be here.

MIKE

A few years ago in a spotlight article for MCRPA you said your favorite quote was this, and it's from Ruth Bader Ginsburg: "Fight for the things that you care about but do it in a way that will lead others to join you." Why is that special for you?

NANCY

I think sometimes, um, it can be... you can have a passion and a cause that you are just so, um, passionate about, and if you keep it to yourself, then how do others know that, you know, it's important to you? And how do you make a difference if you're a one-woman band? So, I just really appreciate the fact that we can't do anything alone whether you're in a, you know, at work, whether you're in your own life, I think that we as humans need people to come along with us to get things done. And there is a great power in word, in demonstrations, in fighting for what is right, and what we think... what we think is right, um, and just and social justice, and... Um, I... I just think that we can do it in a way that inspires others, and if you can inspire one to come with you, they can inspire one, you can inspire one who can inspire ones. So, I... I, yeah, I really appreciate that quote.

MIKE

Prior to your becoming Grants Manager in the Office of Advancement, Community Engagement, your passion was very evident in your work with the prison population and providing educational opportunities for that group of individuals. Why were you so passionate about that work? And it was very evident that you were passionate about it.

NANCY

Right. So, the work that I did was actually in jails not in prisons. So, that's an interesting... there's an interesting difference. A jail is for those who may not have been sentenced yet, um, or have been sentenced to 18 months or less. And prison is for people who've been sentenced to 18 months or more. Um, so the work that I was doing was specifically in jails. And it actually came about very strangely. Um, my former supervisor Donna Cannani, she received a, um, a trickle down from Dr. Pollard which said we're going into the jail and we're going to do this

educational program. I'm sorry, we're going to do what? Um, and so, my title time was Special Programs Director, and so it came to me. When you have that title, you get lots of things that don't fit anywhere else [Laughs]. So, it actually came about, um, because of that, but by going into the jail and seeing the... working with the population... Um, and I don't know. I didn't go in as a, you know, trying to save people or trying to be, um, you know, on my white horse going, yay, we're here to save the day and to help everybody! But I just... education is so important and can really help people to make choices that don't land them back in the system. And so, seeing results that we had in and from just our little program that we had there... seeing the effect that it could have on the learners, both inside and outside, you can't beat that as an educator. Um, and we... I just... I'm a high school dropout, um, who now has a doctorate. So, I've always been, um, somebody who's had to fight very hard. Of course, I've had immense privilege, but I've had to fight very hard because I'm not a... I'm not academically inclined so to speak [Laughs]. Um, and so, I just wanted to be able to do a little bit to help others either get their GED so that when they got out they could, you know, come to Montgomery College and do their associates, get a certificate, go on and do a master's, get their doctorate. And it was... um, so, a very small part of me is a lived experience, but the biggest part of me is just doing what's right. Why does education have to be within the walls of a school system? Walls of, um, you know, a college? Why can't it be where the learners are? And I think that's one thing about the work that we do in Workforce Development Continuing Education is that we are in the community, and we have the title of community college. So, going into the jail, we're taking our educational expertise to this... the door of our learners because the majority of them will return to the community, and they'll return to our community. And I remember when I was doing my dissertation and I interviewed Dr. Pollard. I gave her a pseudonym, um... [Laughs] And she said to me, um, when she had originally gone in to talk about this partnership, how the... the Director of Corrections said to her, how do you want your citizens back? So, that struck a nerve with her. And then also trickled down to me. I'm like, well, if we can help a tiny bit with education, we should be doing that. We have an obligation. We are the community college, and it's our responsibility to help learners wherever they are. Education shouldn't end because you're locked up.

MIKE

Did it transform your leadership? Or the way you view leadership?

NANCY

Oh, yes, it really did. I've always been, um, well, I like to think I have. You may have to talk to some of my staff to get the true answer. I've always liked to think that I've been a, um, a transformational leader, you know, where I... I like to help my staff members then go on and become leaders themselves. Um, but the... being in this partnership helped me to work with leaders who are completely opposite to me because of the situation. So, for example, my direct counterpart at the jail was a deputy warden. And if you can imagine coming from a community college where we're all like, Ahhhh... And you're going to a jail where it's like, Ehhhh. And not sure how you're going to translate that in the transcript [Laughs]. Then, we butted heads. We, you know, she's all about control, order, correction. We're all about educating, nurturing... That's our nature. And so, it really made me look into myself as a leader and become, um, a lot more flexible and not... and understand that my way was, I think it might be the right way of doing things, may not be the right way for the situation and for the context. So, it really helped me to understand, um, who I was as a leader. And then also grow as a leader so I could better serve our learners, my faculty, my staff, and ultimately, the partnership between the College, um, and

the jail. And it took us a couple of years to get where we needed to be because we took a model of adult education that had worked in the community and planted it in a maximum security jail. That went well. [Laughs] Not really. [Laughs] So, it was many years of communication, many years of, um... not failure because I don't feel we ever failed, um, but getting to the point where we were both on the same page and we had a goal and a mission that we both could agree to, different ways of getting there, but together as leaders, being able to say, you know, reflecting on our own journeys but then working together to get where we needed to be to serve the learners.

MIKE

As you embarked on this growth... this leadership growth, this... this path that... that you took, you ended up leaving that position, and you have mentioned that you feel guilty about that. Let's talk a little bit about this, what I think is often under discussed, um, leadership growth and guilt. Why did you feel guilty as you were growing in your own leadership skills?

NANCY

It's so interesting because I... I've always been the type of person who I'm... once I'm in something, I am in it. And I want to do it to my utmost ability. Um, from, you know, when I was a child, all the way up to still today. I'm a middle child, so I don't know if that has anything to do with it. [Laughs] But, so, I... we started this program at the jail in 2016... January 2016, and we built it for five years. It was, you know, me, my program director at the jail, Donna, of course, and support of Dr. Pollard, and the support of the corrections department. And so, when this new opportunity came up, it took me a long time to think, do I go for it? Do I not? Because I didn't want to let anybody down. I didn't want the program to flounder. I felt we have enough... we have an obligation to see this program flourish, and I had all these ideas. And if I suddenly leave, you know, what's going to happen to it? What's going to happen to the learners? What's going to happen to the faculty? What's going to happen to the students? And feeling guilty about that. Some may say it's a bit silly to feel guilty because I'm still at the College. Um, I still have all the connections, but when you're not in on the day-to-day, I'm like, oh, are they doing it right? But then I have to think, but for five years, I've laid a foundation and created relationships and brought in the right people to build on the work that I've done. So, it's getting over that hurdle of guilt and turning it into opportunity for others. Um, and that's not an easy thing to do. Um, but it's—

MIKE

How did you manage that?

NANCY

Well, I'm still working at it, Mike. [Laughs] I still check in with people. I am... I made sure that people knew I was available. I may not be the leader of that program now, but I will always and forever be a part of it. Um, it's on the periphery now, but I make sure that I'm available to Donna who, um, is, was, you know, taught me everything I know. She's phenomenal, um, and knowing that she could contact me at any time, my program directs her up there... see, I still say I'm program director because it still feels like my baby. [Laughs] Um, that I am open and available and accessible, but also, you have to trust yourself that you've done the right thing and that you can let go and move on to other opportunities to further the, um, to bring in more opportunities for other learners who may be underrepresented and underserved. Not easy to do.

MIKE

Is having a little guilt healthy?

NANCY

Oh, I think so, yeah. Because if you don't have guilt then, you know, do you care? I mean, yeah, I think... I think guilt's good. Well, in moderation, I think guilt is good because it shows, for me, it shows a passion. Um, but it doesn't as long as it's not naughty guilt.

MIKE

It helps us grow, I think, in our... in our leadership. And like you said, you've reconciled it in a way that has benefited you because you realize you've set the foundation, and I think as... as leaders, and if we're good leaders, we keep growing. We are going to have to leave things behind that we have started or been intimately involved in, and that's not always easy to do, but I think it can be healthy if we... we have that passion attached to it.

NANCY

Yes, I agree. And I think if you, for me, relationships is one of the biggest things in being a leader. And establishing relationships and really working on them, and if you have developed those... the... um, relationships, and as a leader having instilled in your, um, team, uh, passion, your same... not the same passion because everybody is different, but a similar passion for the mission, um, then, I really think that those who come after can carry on not the legacy but carry on, you know, the journey, um, and take it in directions that you may not have thought it needed to go, which is the joy of education.

MIKE

You mentioned that you see yourself as a transformational leader. What does that mean to you?

NANCY

To me, it means not only transforming myself into the best leader I can be but also providing anyone who wants to be a leader with the skills to transform themselves into a leader as well. I don't... when I did LDI (Leadership Development Institute), I... I took a... I took a lot from it, but something that stood with me was you don't need a position to be a leader. And so, I think that for me as a transformational leader having staff members who then feel comfortable enough to say, can I take the lead on this project? And you'd be like, yeah, of course, you can. Instead of, can I take the lead on this project? Oh, well, you know, I'll still oversee everything. And you have to let people come in and, um, because if you don't, then, where's the growth? Then, you turn into one of these authoritative leaders, which I don't think works well. It works in some situations, possibly the jail, but I don't think it has much place in the education system.

MIKE

I'm a firm believer that a good leader doesn't have to take credit for everything but has to take responsibility for everything. When things go well, credit goes to the team. When things go bad, it stops with the leader.

NANCY

This is... yeah, that's true. Um, yes, and then... and also, um, a good leader will say, let's go and be in it together. I was... I always remember, and somebody once told me that a manager manages and no a manager says go, and a leader says let's go. So, if you're in it together, then the responsibility does lie with you. But I think also the responsibility lies with all members of the team. Um, and if you have created a really strong team under your leadership, then you won't have any problems. [Laughs]

MIKE

Well, Nancy, we have just about run out of time, but I want to leave an invitation to have you back because I want to explore this difference between managers and leaders at some point, because I think it's a fascinating discussion. And it's, to me, one that demonstrates a huge difference between the two. Um, so I'd like to have you back at some point so we can further discuss that if you're open to that.

NANCY

I would be delighted. It's lovely talking to you. Um, and I love sharing whatever little pills of wisdom. Well, I think they're pills of wisdom, others may disagree. Um, and, you know, it's been an absolute pleasure, Mike. Thank you so much for having me.

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.