

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

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FULL TRANSCRIPT:

Karen Marklein: Hello. Welcome to the Ayers All Access podcast brought to you by the Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation. This podcast is a chance for us to help you access compelling people, current topics, practical tips, and innovative solutions— all related to the field of education. To find out more about this podcast and all the work of the Ayers Institute, check out our website at AyersInstitute.org. You can also find us on Twitter and Facebook @AyersInstitute.

Thanks for joining us for a "My Why" episode where we feature stories of inspiration from educators. I am always amazed by the unique experiences that compel people to become educators. For some, it is a decision made after a moment of epiphany. For others, they can't imagine a time when they wanted to be anything else. They are teachers. They are leaders. They are life changers. And today we highlight one of their stories.

I'm Karen Marklein and I serve as an assistant professor in Lipscomb University's College of Education and Director of Programs in the Ayers Institute. Today, we were talking to Dr. Leslie Cowell, Dean of the College of Education at Lipscomb University.

Leslie, thank you so much for joining us today.

Leslie Cowell: Thanks for having me. I'm excited.

Karen Marklein: All right. Well, we want to spend just a few minutes getting to know you. Okay. So tell us about your role in education and like your current role and what do you most enjoy about that?

Leslie Cowell: Oh, so I'm the dean and have had this job before at a previous institution. And I love the ability to meet with people and hear their stories and see how our work can plug in to good work happening other places. So just the relational piece of my job is really fun. There's a lot of admin, unfortunately, that goes along with my job. But the relationship piece and seeing how we can work to help others at schools and teachers— and I just love that that piece of getting to work with other people and meet other people.

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Karen Marklein: Yeah, it's obvious just in the short time that I've been working with you that that's important to you. And you have such a smile on your face right now, thinking about that? The connections you've already built.

Leslie Cowell: Yes.

Karen Marklein: And so that's obviously a big thing for you. So another get to know you question: When you were young and people asked you 'what you wanted to be when you grew up,' what did you say?

Leslie Cowell: Oh, I said, a teacher. Yeah, always. I've wanted to be a teacher since I was in fourth grade so that I had a fourth grade teacher, Ms. Ballou. She knows this. I've told her many times that she was the one that inspired me to be a teacher. And my parents will tell you that I've wanted to be a teacher since I was in fourth grade, and I wanted to be a fourth grade teacher. In my first year teaching, I got to teach fourth grade. So it's just the Lord had it planned out. But yeah, I've always wanted to be a teacher.

Karen Marklein: Okay, well, that's wonderful. So the follow up questions kind of superfluous. I was going to say, how do you connect with that dream today? But maybe not superfluous. When you think about that love for fourth grade, how do you connect to that?

Leslie Cowell: Well, you know, it's interesting because I'm not teaching now, right? I'm mean, I'm leading a college of education. So I really thought that I would just stay as a teacher my whole life. And so even though that was the initial goal and plan (and I got to do that for a while) I really I always draw back to that experience and that love of teaching, even though I'm not necessarily in schools all the time today. But what a fun kind of connection to be able to work toward effective preparation for teachers and make sure teachers know that joy that I had and wanting to be a teacher when it's so hard some days and be able to lead people in that.

And so I always connect back to that initial goal to be a teacher, even though I'm not necessarily in the classroom. But I do say if I had to go back in the classroom today, if somebody said, you have to go back in the classroom, I would do it 100%. I'd walk right back in. I loved being a teacher.

Karen Marklein: Oh, I love that. Yeah. And you know what really comes out to me? And that is the joy.

Leslie Cowell: Yes.

Karen Marklein: And I think sometimes we just need to be reminded that this really is a joyful profession! You know, like, where else could you connect with all the important things about what you love and what you love about being in relationship and in community with people? It's just so important.

Leslie Cowell: Oh, so it's hard, but it's so fun.

Karen Marklein: It is so hard. Yes, but fun. Okay. So. So what was it like being a fourth grade teacher? What did you love so much about that?

Leslie Cowell: Oh, my goodness. Well, you know, thinking back to my first year teaching— I tell the story a lot! I think I changed something every day. I love change. I love seeing where there's problems and issues and figuring out a way to fix it. So, my students would come in. I remember my first year teaching, they would say, All right, Ms. Cowell, what are we doing different today? Because I had to play with how

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I wanted it to be. I wanted like I didn't like the centers where it was. I didn't like the desks the way they were arranged, you know? So I was changing things constantly.

First-year teachers always make things harder than they should be. So I was really into Mary Engelbreit and had these dreams that my classroom would be all Mary Engelbreit, and these fun bulletin boards. Of course, my second year teaching, it went all went down and went until clothespins, where I could just change out student work. I was trying to make my life, you know, easier.

Karen Marklein: Yes.

Leslie Cowell: So you have to kind of figure out your first year teaching. Because you have these dreams of everything being perfect. But I loved getting to know my students. I loved— I always loved my real quirky ones, the ones that were kind of weird. And, you know, I could tell you some messages about just my students that just had these little quirks. But those students were my favorites and they were each individually my own little project of what do you need and what do I see in you that's really a strength, and what could I do to build that up?

We did a Reader's Theater my first year teaching that was going to turn into just like a little Reader's Theater, and the newspaper ended up coming and my students, like, totally took over and made up props and scenes. I mean, we it turned into a whole ordeal that was just going to be a simple little reader's theater. And so finding those fun things that my students enjoyed doing and really pulling on those and building on those were just fun opportunities. And I will say: I love a self-contained classroom, also. I'll just put that little plug in. I do love an elementary, self-contained classroom because I can just have the whole day to do what we needed to do.

Karen Marklein: Right. Okay. So I suspect most of those fourth graders have a vivid memory of that Reader's Theater and being involved with that. How much fun that they had. So I wonder, what is your earliest memory in an educational setting?

Leslie Cowell: Yeah. So, my first grade, I'm originally from the panhandle of Florida. From Destin. It's a huge place now. It wasn't then. So Destin Elementary was this little small school and Mrs. Cass was my kindergarten teacher. And she would give me math problems on the old— the paper that would come in calculators. That prints out on those long strips of skinny paper that you would put into a calculator. She would write these long math problems for me on that skinny calculator paper, and I loved those. And so that was just a fun I will always think of Mrs. Cass and those long math problems she would give me. Single digit, of course, because I was in kindergarten, but— single digit math. And I just thought that was super cool. These long these long math problems. I thought I was very smart!

Karen Marklein: Of course, a teacher destined to be a teacher would think that's awesome in kindergarten. That's a great that's a great story. Okay, So let's shift a little bit to your career now.

Leslie Cowell: Yeah.

Karen Marklein: Okay. So just talk about maybe a big 'aha' moment. You said, you know, you had to you had to let go of perfectionism in your first year. But, what's a big aha moment when you think about the totality of your career?

Leslie Cowell: Oh, goodness.

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You know, really, I think I really try to remember the Lord's faithfulness and how like you mentioned perfectionism, you know, teachers think that they have to have it all together and they have to do everything right. And there's no— you just feel a lot of pressure. And I think an 'aha' moment came and just trusting that the Lord has put you in the place where he wants you to be and he's building you and grooming you and giving you experiences in some cases that you're going to mess up so that you can learn. And I've seen that just throughout my career and my time as a teacher and just the way that things have built. In a way, I'm in a place today that I never thought if you if you went back to 'first year teacher Leslie', I never would have thought that I would be in the position— never would be in the position that I'm in now. Or that things would have gone the way that they would have gone for me. But that everything that you do and everything that happens is for is for a reason. There's a reason they're trying to build in these skills in yourself or experiences that you're going to be able to use on down the road.

And so don't get frustrated when things are hard or things don't go your way or if something arises that you didn't expect. Because you never know, five years down the road, you're going to look back and go, "Now I know exactly why I had to do that, because I needed to build this skillset or I needed to meet that person" or whatever. And so I think that's been an 'aha.' Here I am sitting down, been in the field, you know, over 20 years.

Karen Marklein: That's right. And it is— it's so rewarding to think. "Every step of my journey has led to this moment." But you know, when you're in those steps in the journey, sometimes they're really hard and sometimes they're really joyful. And, you know.

Leslie Cowell: You're like, "What? Why am I doing this?" Or "I cannot believe I'm actually getting through this!" I mean, there are so many times I was just in survival mode and I thought "I'm going look back and go: How in the world did I do this?" But you just— you do it. You take it one day at a time and you do it. And then, my goodness, you come down the road and, you know. Why you were put in all those situations and trying to do all that.

Karen Marklein: Right. Well, that just leads perfectly in to: when you think about those challenges, what do you think has been your greatest challenge?

Leslie Cowell: Um. You know, I guess trying to figure out where my strengths were to plug in to what I needed to do. I knew that I was a pretty decent teacher. I mean, I was always mentored and always paired with somebody to be a mentor. But really trying to figure out how to use those strengths and also how to build up areas where I was weak.

And so, as a first year teacher, the first thing that I did is I paired myself up with my reading coach. And I wanted her. She came in and that was one of the most valuable professional developments I've ever had. I've said that it was just— we met on Thursdays for (we read a professional book) we would meet for breakfast at 6 a.m. and read the professional book together and talk about it. She would come in and teach my class. I would watch her teach my class. We would back-and-forth give each other feedback. And so figuring out, "Okay, these are the things I'm really good at," and this is probably followed me all through my career. "These are the things I'm good at. I feel like I'm okay. Here's some things that I need to work on and how do I find somebody to help me build those areas where I'm weak?"

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And that still happens today. I mean, even I'm like, I don't know what I'm doing with whatever and I'm I'll find somebody. I'll ask questions. So a challenge has been really self-evaluating to know what am I good at, where are my weaknesses, and how can I find some support to fix those areas so I can continue to grow?

Karen Marklein: Okay. Wow. Sounds like such a significant relationship with your coach.

Leslie Cowell: Oh, it was fabulous. I tell every first year teacher: make friends with your reading coach.

Karen Marklein: Find a coach!

Leslie Cowell: Find a coach. I would sit at lunchtime in my classroom (I didn't have to eat lunch with my kids; we had lunch off, which was a huge blessing), and I would sit with my salad in my classroom and watch reading videos. I mean, it sounds dorky now, but it was just one of those things where I really knew that reading instruction needed to be really solid. And I had to intentionally find people to help me fill in those gaps to say... And it got me very good at being able to receive criticism or critical feedback in a way that didn't seem like I didn't have to be defensive. Right. That I was able to take it and go, "Okay, this is what I do work on and I'm just going to practice."

And kind of back to what I was saying. You know, first year teachers, I think, really tend to feel like they have to have it perfectly. And teaching takes so much time! It takes so much practice! I mean, it's years. I mean, even today, if went back in the classroom, there'd be so many things I would miss on! But find those supports. Don't feel like you have to have it all together and find those supports. There's people that can help you fill in those gaps and it turns a challenge into a huge blessing and growth opportunity.

Karen Marklein: Yeah. Okay. Well, my next question was going to be what is what is your biggest triumph like when you think "I am really proud about that! You know, and not necessarily in your in your K-12 time, but just something that sticks out as being a success in your career."

Leslie Cowell: Well, I got my doctorate. I graduated when I was 30, so I was very young. I started my doctorate when I was 25 and I had a baby in there. I was also— So I was principal of an elementary school, working on doctorate, had a baby, and I was running an after school program in a real marginalized community in Montgomery. And so I think, just getting through that, I heard— that's one of those times I mentioned. Just thinking, how did I do all of that? Because so much of that was good work. I was trying to be a good first time momma. I was trying to be principal, you know. And that was— although I look back was— I don't know how I did it.

But I look back on that time with such fond memories! Doing an after school program with a baby strapped on my chest. Helping kids after school. And anyway, it was just it was a crazy time. But I do think that was a good meld for me of being able to live out my professional goals, of being a principal and making an impact there, being able to work with children that really needed some good support and then had a baby and being able to be a mama. And those things to me are very important. And that was just a fun, fun time to be able to do all of that.

Karen Marklein: Yeah. Quite a victory!

Leslie Cowell: It was. And I got through it and I'm live. I can live to tell the tale.

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Karen Marklein: Yes. Okay. Well, I know your most recent academic work has been in urban education.

Leslie Cowell: Yes.

Karen Marklein: With a focus on cultural relevance and diverse and equitable teaching practices. And when you were talking about your work with the after school program, it made me think about that. So talk about the importance of that work in just the field of education in general. Just the focus on cultural relevance and diverse and equitable teaching practices.

Leslie Cowell: Yeah. So much of education is geared toward white people. And many of our— most of our teaching field are white females. And so we just don't have, in my opinion, the focus on supporting students that are people of color that come from different diverse backgrounds because so much of our educational system is white focused. And so, I kind of came at this work backwards. I started working with that nonprofit and built a relationship and just found this love for this community of people that did not look like me and was not living in a way that I was used to. It was just it was just a different it was a very poor neighborhood. But I came to love these children and love these families. Eventually started a preschool in that neighborhood that I ran for eight years and then thought, "How did we get this way? How did how did the education system get to be where we are so poorly serving these children who are wonderful and these families that are wonderful?" That I went into thinking, "I'm going to save the world and fix this whole thing" and came out with, "Oh my goodness, I'm so broken. And I was so blessed by— I got so much more than I gave. 100%.

And so that was really how that came about in my mind. Was just I really wanted to know how did our education system get to be this way? Why are we so vastly under serving these communities and these children that are so wonderful and have so much to give. And are just like my children. And can make an impact in the world and we're just not serving them well. And so that's how that, kind of, all came about for me came started with relationship and ended with academia. And I learned so much about just instructional methods (that was one thing), but also just this framework— as I kind of go back to what I mentioned before— about how our system is just really white centric and how teachers need to be really intentional about making sure that the practices and instructional methodologies that they're using are inclusive to our diverse learners. And that we make sure that we are meeting every child where they are because every child is somebody's baby, right? Every child has value and can do wonderful things in their life. And we shouldn't think that certain children or certain populations can't can achieve because everybody can.

And that's the awesome work of a teacher, right? That we have that opportunity to say to every child, "You were created in just God, you are wonderful, and let me see what I can do to help build that up in you so that you can make a difference and use your strengths in whatever capacity the Lord has planned for that."

Karen Marklein: That's right. Every child is somebodies, baby.

Leslie Cowell: Yep.

Karen Marklein: That's so precious. So that leads me to think, you know, your career really has spanned from PreK to now you're in this higher education setting. So, what caused you to span the entire spectrum? Let's start there first. What caused you to want to work at every area?

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Leslie Cowell: Oh, my goodness. You know, when I started my doctorate that young, I had no intention of even going to higher ed. I thought I was just going to be a bang up, awesome, fourth-grade teacher. And I loved it. And so I was like, "I'm going to be the most highly qualified fourth grade teacher there is." And I had no intention of doing anything.

And really– the Lord. It was the Lord. You know, I have learned in my life the Lord puts these opportunities in front of me that are completely out of the blue, and I was not expecting. And then I've just kind of followed and gone, "Okay, you know, what's the worst that could happen?" And that's really how I got into higher ed, I was teaching fourth grade and my the president at the school I was working at kind of noticed something in me that I was leading. And so he asked me to come out and be an assistant principal one year. And then I took over as principal.

And then as I was a principal, I was struggling with trying to do all the principal staff behavior and parents and all that. And then my real love of instructional practice and just being a really good teacher. And so I wrote a job description as an academic director and went to my president, said, I really don't want to be a principal anymore. I really want to just do this. And so I was able to spend a year working with teachers K-12 on a good, effective, instructional practice across like PreK through 12th grade AP calculus. I mean, we just spanned all that.

And then a college emailed me and said, "Hey, would you be interested in coming to be a faculty member?" And I'm like, "Okay." I had a baby at the time and I thought Higher Ed might be a good mom job, kind of give me some flexibility with my family. And so the Lord opened that door and that's how I got into higher ed. So it really wasn't anything that this goal that I had. I just kind of took roots where I was and tried to do a good job and the next opportunity came and came and here I am.

Karen Marklein: Yeah, okay.

Leslie Cowell: So it wasn't really an intentional goal, but it's just been great.

Karen Marklein: So faith was a big part of that.

Leslie Cowell: Oh my goodness. Yeah. And I remember my first– when I became Dean at my former institution– I remember, I read through the Book of Exodus twice because I just wrote this real strong connection with Moses like, "Okay, Lord just put me in this position. I have no idea what I'm doing." And I just felt this very strong connection with I am totally ill equipped, I felt like, to do what I feel like I being called to do. And so Moses and I became like real good buds. And I had to take a lot of, you know, lessons from him and just follow in the Lord. I'm doing okay. I think I'm supposed to be here and I hope the Lord's going to equip me and tell me what I need to be doing.

So yeah, definitely. And I mean, that's actually how I ended up here. It was just, you know, sort of a random out of the blue opportunity. So, yeah, definitely taken the Lord– just taken me where he needed me to go.

Karen Marklein: All right, well, another podcast might be your Moses lessons. I would love to hear a little bit more about your Moses lessons.

Leslie Cowell: O my goodness. I read through Exodus. Started over. Read it again.

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Karen Marklein: That might be the start of a book in there, somewhere.

So I'm going to go back to the span: the pre-K to higher education. Which— if you had to say, which area you think is the most critical in terms of the impact you can have on a child?

Leslie Cowell: Oh, my goodness. Well, I mean, you know, I, I think every area is. But before I came to Lipscomb, I did a lot of work with PreK, which I was I taught fourth grade. I taught elementary. And so I really didn't have a whole lot of experience. But I started a PreK in that neighborhood I mentioned and then started ended up starting another one in Montgomery. So I was running three PreK's. So in that experience and just writing the grants and trying to figure out what effective early education look like, I really would say those early years of like 3 to 6, 3 to 7 are critical for a couple of reasons.

One, I mean. Reading is my field. So we know that, you know, there's a lot of that happens in those early years. But also just building a child's character is so important in those years because they're going to take that stuff with them. Even as a mama say, my job is just to pump my kids with truth, especially at that age, because you want them to know their value and for them to go ahead and begin building that moral system.

And so I think we miss a lot of opportunities in those younger grades because we think we expect children to already know when we should be focusing on training. Right. A four year old doesn't know innately some of the things. But if we can focus on we're going to train we're building— be really intentional about that training, not only in academic areas but social emotional areas and personal things and then just realizing their value. I think that's a really a really critical, critical age.. Those early childhood ages. And if they can really get that solidified at those younger grades and teachers and parents, all those people have an impact on that, then I think that you really set the child up for success.

Karen Marklein: Yeah, it's almost like you're smoothing the way for the child.

Leslie Cowell: Yeah, exactly. Exactly.

Karen Marklein: Yeah. Okay. All right. So, how do you hope— when you again, we're going— we're doing on the whole span. I'm going to say what would you go back and tell yourself as a first year, first year Leslie? You could have a conversation with yourself. What would you say?

Leslie Cowell: I will never forget my first day of teaching. My first year, I had a wonderful student teaching experience. I student taught in fifth grade and I became really close with my teacher. And I remember standing there my very first day, I shut the door and I was like, "I cannot believe they are letting me in this room with these children by myself. I do not know what I'm doing!"

And so I think I would go back and tell myself to: One, do some self-care. Because I spent every waking moment in that classroom and I just felt like I had to do everything just right. Not just for my sake, but I really wanted the kids and the parents— As a first year teacher, you— The parents come in and you're this young 22 year old standing there. And they're going, "Oh my goodness. She doesn't know what she's doing." So you just feel like you have to prove yourself, you know, in everything, even with your colleagues. You know, in my case, there were seven other fourth grade teachers and all of them had been there. Because I taught my first few years where I went to school, and actually got to teach with my fourth grade teacher who inspired me to be a teacher. Her last year. So it was her last year teaching

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and my first year. And so we got to teach together one year, which was just amazing. And she gave me all kinds of stuff.

Karen Marklein: What a full circle moment!

Leslie Cowell: Isn't that awesome. It was just it was so fun. That was great. But you just feel like— So, I was surrounded by all these experienced teachers who had been there forever, had been there when I was there. And I just felt like I had to prove myself. And so I was just there all the time. So I would say, take some time for yourself, you know. Find something that you enjoy doing and you're going to have to spend time in your classroom a lot. That's fine. But invest in yourself.

And then also just, you know, take a deep breath. You know, it's going to be okay. You're not going to damage children. You know, you just have to just trust that you do know what you're doing. You gonna have to— it takes practice. I think I did a good thing by connecting with those support, you know, finding those supports, but just knowing that you don't know everything. And that's okay.

Karen Marklein: Mm hmm. Yeah. So practice some self-care and take a deep breath. Yeah, That's what you would say to that, Leslie.

Leslie Cowell: Absolutely.

Karen Marklein: Okay. All right, So we've come to one of my favorite parts in the In the Mouth podcast is to talk about your six word memoir. And so how would you sum up your story in six words or less?

Leslie Cowell: So I said, "For the Lord, not for man," would be my memoir. Because I really I think we try to prove ourselves and be perfect and do all these things. That's been the case for me. Even today. There's so many things in my life where I've just felt inadequate and I just felt like I'm not doing what I'm supposed to be doing. But if you are— if your intention is to do what the Lord wants you to do and do it to the best that you can (not because somebody else wants you to or because you think you should, but because that's what we're called to do), that's what I hope I would be left with.

In the end, all of this is just stuff and tasks. You want it to be something more lasting and work to the glory of the Lord and not because I'm going to get anything out of it or because I'm going to be recognized or because I feel like I'm supposed to or I'm going to be evaluated by it. But because we're called as Christians to do our best, and as long as the Lord thinks I'm doing my best and that I'm working to please him and glorify him in the way that I act and the things that I do and the things that I say, that's— that's what I want to do.

Karen Marklein: Okay. Well, thank you for that. "For the Lord, not for man." So powerful. All right.

Well, thank you so much for sharing your story and your 'my why' today. And I just want to say thank you so much for what you've already brought to the College of Education here. And it just feels like such an exciting time, you know, to be a part. Leslie, thank you so much for sharing your story and thank you for your work in education.

Leslie Cowell: Thank you. I enjoyed it.

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Karen Marklein: And to all our listeners, be sure to check out the show notes for this episode where you'll find links to helpful resources and anything we've mentioned today. I hope you've been encouraged and inspired by Dr. Carroll. You can find more episodes of Ayers Institute podcasts at <https://podcast.AyersInstitute.org>, on Apple Podcasts, and anywhere podcasts are found.

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