

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

“Ayers All Access” Podcast

*Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation
Lipscomb University College of Education*

Episode 16 – November 4, 2022

Title: *My Why with Candice McQueen – President, Lipscomb University*

File Length: 00:30:00

SPEAKERS:

Dr. Rachael Milligan Assistant Dean for Program Innovation, Lipscomb College of Education
Director, Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation

Dr. Candice McQueen President, Lipscomb University
Former Commissioner of Education, State of Tennessee

FULL TRANSCRIPT:

Rachael Milligan: 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 at @AyersInstitute.

Thank you for joining us for a 'My Why' episode where we feature stories of inspiration from educators. I'm always amazed by the unique experiences that compel people to become educators. For some, it's 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 Rachel Milligan and I serve as the Assistant Dean for Program Innovation in the Lipscomb College of Education and as the Director of the Ayers Institute. Today, we will be talking with Dr. Candace McQueen, president of Lipscomb University.

President McQueen, thank you so much for joining us today.

Candice McQueen: Great to be here.

Rachael Milligan: Now, before we really get into your career path, I wonder if you'll just tell us a little bit about— you know— you're a Tennessee native. Tell us about where you grew up and what that was like.

Candice McQueen: Well, I was born in Nashville. So I'm a rare breed that was born here and then moved overseas. My parents taught at the Tehran American School. So you can see a love of teaching from my family. Very early on when we moved back, my mother was a teacher and then eventually a principal at Fort Campbell, Kentucky. And so I grew up in Clarksville, Tennessee, and attended public school there. So I really count Clarksville as my home.

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Rachael Milligan: Okay. And so when you were young and people asked you what you wanted to be when you grew up, what did you say? How did you respond? And then, you know, how do you connect to that dream now?

Candice McQueen: I definitely responded. I either wanted to be a weather person on TV or I wanted to be Barbara Walters and do interviews. So, yes, I saw myself as someone who was in radio or TV broadcasting. And then, when I came to Lipscomb, I even pursued speech communications as my very first major. But I quickly, quickly realized that my love was really always of teaching— I think because my family members had been in education their whole life. I took this other pathway for a while, but eventually came back to teaching.

Rachael Milligan: Right. And, you know, we're making dreams happen today by you being in the podcast room.

Candice McQueen: That's right. That's right. That's right.

Rachael Milligan: So, you know, talk about what your earliest memory in an educational setting is. You know, either when you were a student or you could talk about your earliest memory as a first year teacher. What comes to mind when I ask that question?

Candice McQueen: Yeah, very early on— You know, my mother was a teacher and then school principal and my early years were always spent with her at her school. I mean, my memory was growing up literally as a school kid, and that was because she was at school. She loved her school. We always called (you know, there was my brother and I, and then her school): school was her third child. And so when you grow up with an educator, and they're that dedicated, and she was a very strong, excellent, nationally recognized principal— I think that becomes your life.

And so I was always there working on helping her in the library, working on laminating something for her, helping her with those old things called the overhead projector and helping her clean them. I mean, everything you can think of in terms of school or school supplies I was probably involved in in some way. So those are my early memories.

I also was her teacher's assistant, if you will, in our Bible class at church. We grew up in a small congregation where my father was a minister. So my mother taught a lot of the Bible courses within the children's ministry program. And I was her assistant as young as I can remember. I mean, third, fourth grade. I think I was helping her there. So I really have been teaching in some capacity alongside my mom for many, many years.

Rachael Milligan: Absolutely. As you think about your school experience as a student, what can you name a best moment like a moment that stands out as, "This was, this is, what school should be. This is what school is all about: as a student"?

Candice McQueen: Well, I'm going to tell it through a not so good moment. I remember very vividly in fourth grade having an experience where my teacher (this tells my age) she was going up for 'career ladder.' Okay. And Career Ladder was this advancement program that actually started under Governor Alexander. And she would have all of these visits from the school principal or outside visitors. And she would change dramatically from what she was like when they would come in and visit to what she was like normally at all during the day.

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

So I saw this very weird dynamic where she changed her personality when someone visited the classroom. And I remember even as a fourth grader coming out of that experience thinking, "I want to be authentic. I want to be a person that students see me the same way in and outside of the classroom," and experience that trust that comes from an adult. And so that was a really a transformative experience. It may not have been a positive experience necessarily with that teacher, but my memory was it really stuck with me on the type of teacher I wanted to be. And authenticity has always really mattered to me.

Rachael Milligan: Absolutely. Yeah. That's a that's a powerful story to anchor to and to keep going back to.

So, I'm thinking about you and your career path and your career journey, and you've worked in all different levels of education from K-12 and then to being at the at the Department of Ed and to working in other educational institutions and then in higher ed as well. So I wonder when you think about your own learning during each of those career experiences, what kind of connective themes emerge across all of those experiences?

You know, 'an educator is an educator,' like you said, you've been educating since you were helping your mom in Bible school. So what kinds of themes have stuck with you throughout each of those experiences?

Candice McQueen: Now, I think as we've talked about vocation a lot at Lipscomb this year and what does it mean to find your vocation and what your strengths are? That some anchoring pieces for me is whatever role I've been in, whether it truly was in a teaching position or a leadership position, or maybe I was on a committee or working with a group of students very informally that my vocation has truly always been teaching. I like to teach. I like seeing growth, and that comes in lots and lots of different fields and it comes in different ways.

And so even if I was not a teacher in a classroom and I was in a leadership role, I always still felt like teaching was who I am at my core and a good leader or a person who is a good team member. At some level, they teach, they listen, they learn and they continue to help others grow. And so that's been that anchoring piece is knowing what you're good at, knowing your strengths and whatever role here in continuing to use those.

Rachael Milligan: Yeah. What is it about teaching that makes it the thing? What is it about that experience that makes it the thing that you gravitate toward?

Candice McQueen: I keep going back to authenticity. This idea of helping others grow and being very understanding of where you currently are. I like that. Let's find truth. Where are we currently? And let's grow from whatever that is, that goals and move forward. And that's really what teaching is about. It's understanding where you are now, knowing reality. Here's what I'm good at. Here's what I'm struggling with, here's what I want to get to. Setting those goals— that's like your class objectives— and then moving forward with really interesting high energy collaboration and conversation and assignments and presentations and all the things that we know are good teaching strategies.

That's all kind of what happens in between. And those are really powerful. But I love the growth. What is it we're trying to accomplish? Let's set those and then let's figure out the best pathway to get there. And

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

authentically acknowledge along the way, "Are we getting close? Are we almost there? What do we need to do to backtrack or to accelerate or recalibrate where we need to be?" And so I think for teaching it is goal setting, it's seeing growth, and it's being able to sort of bring your authentic self into a conversation or a teaching experience and help students continue to move forward.

Rachael Milligan: Okay, Thank you.

The students at Lipscomb University are so excited that you're their president and they love you so much. What do you hope to convey to them or to leave them with? And that question might even be expanded beyond the students here at Lipscomb right now. You know, you've had countless students over your career. What do you hope students walk away with because they've had you as an influence?

Candice McQueen: That's a great question. I mean— I one... I love our students. I told them that the very first day I was here a year ago. That you're the reason I came here. I mean, I love our students. I love this age group. (I say that about every grade I've ever taught. But there is something special about this 18 to 21 year old who is becoming very independent, searching for their career pathway and really trying to improve their skill set and find their purpose.) And so I love that age group and I love partnering with them to in their growth.

I think the anchor for me within sort of the student population is I want students to leave knowing that someone cared about them. And woke up every day dreaming about, thinking about, planning for, being very intentional and serious about making sure they have what they need spiritually, academically, and certainly socially and emotionally. Because we care so much about that here at Lipscomb and that there are people, me being one of them, that truly are in their corner every day. And that should give them, I think, the confidence and hopefully ultimately the confidence to be really successful with whatever career path they choose.

Rachael Milligan: Yeah. Is there a story you can think of or a particular student you can think of who you feel like walked away with that I felt cared about today or a moment that comes to mind.

Candice McQueen: Oh, I can think of so many. But I went strictly back to an experience that I had when I was in Austin, Texas. When I was teaching fifth grade there. We had just had the very horrible Columbine shooting at the high school in Colorado. And I remember having to come back into school the next day and process that with a group of fifth graders who really didn't understand. This is one of the very first massive school shootings in our history. And the conversation that we had was so real and deep with a set of fifth graders and their fears about the future and the school safety generally and just politically, you know, where they were and challenges.

And there was a particular student who came up to me afterward and said, you know, this is really helpful. I really appreciate you having this conversation with me. You know, I'm struggling in school. And he was and we just built this friendship really out of what I'd consider a very authentic conversation. And he was really good mechanically and he could fix things. He wasn't great and he didn't love mathematics and he didn't love science. He didn't love English. But we would spend almost every day together after school, like working on what he needed to do academic. He'd fix everything in my room, from the air conditioner to the computer to the, you know, the mechanical pencil sharpener.

And years after (he had graduated thing), but think, that was fifth grade. Years after he sent me a note. He said, you know, "You didn't know this, but my parents were going through a divorce at the time. And

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

I needed an adult in my life that cared about me. And you were the person who invested in me in ways nobody else did." And it was very meaningful. But when I was going through that moment with him, it was like, you know, this is somebody who I care about and I want to make sure he knows that. Little did I know that was really life changing and meaningful for him. And he ultimately became a mechanic, which is sort of interesting to look back and very successful, married with kids and doing great work.

But I look back and think that was a— I told him, you know, "You're good at this. You should pursue it." If you don't love English, that's okay. But let's get better at it and continue to grow. But if that's not what you love, like you need to find your talents and you need to pursue that and you're going to be able to do that in school. And I'm pleased that that's what he did.

Rachael Milligan: Yeah. Yeah, that's a great story. I'm thinking about everything you've shared, about being authentic and caring for students. You're also such a great leader and have had a lot of success in that area. When you mentioned the Columbine tragedy, I was reflecting back. I was a school administrator when Sandy Hook happened and coming in and having to process that. So I wonder, how do you translate that authenticity and that caring and all of that, not only to the students that you encounter every day, but to the other educators that you are working with? How do you lead people through tragedy? How do you be authentic? How do you show care for the other adults who are trying to educate the students, too?

Candice McQueen: I think you have to start with just showing who you are and what your thought process is. I've always loved leaders who told me what they were thinking in a particular moment because you can't read people's minds. You only know what people share with you, Right? And I have always enjoyed working with people who in a moment, whether it was a celebratory moment or a tough moment or a moment where people were in disagreement, like just put out on the table, this is this is what I'm thinking right now. This is how I'm feeling and allow that process of unpacking that and then reprocessing it and building it back up to happen. And if you don't really share that with others (particularly your coworkers, your peers and educators in particular), then you never can see that sort of collaborative growth that comes as well.

We stay in our silos and educators tend to be siloed. I certainly see that in higher ed, but it was true in K-12 as well. You have expertise. You've gotten a doctorate or you have a master's degree. You know your stuff and you're typically in a classroom of kids or adults or kids by yourself. So it can be isolating. You're doing your thing. And so I think it's important for educators to put on the table how they're processing in their thinking, because then that allows them to do that for their own students.

So when I'm in a meeting with adults, whether that's educators or a set of leaders, I try to walk through, "Well, this is what I'm thinking. Let's put on the table, what you're thinking about, whatever this topic is. And then let's build out what we want to do together," because then other people will own it differently.

Rachael Milligan: Right.

Candice McQueen: If it's I'm going to tell you what I think and here you go, go to it. And I'm not going to allow you to process it with me. Then you haven't really grown. You've just gotten what I've given you.

And so I'll go all the way back to teaching is about growth. And leading is about growth. And so when you really connect the dots, it's about processing, thinking aloud, saying what's on your mind, reading

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

and growing and listening to make sure that that's not where you stay. Because ultimately, you know, listening makes you smarter, Reading makes you smarter. Being in a collaborative group makes you smarter, and that's the way you ultimately grow.

Rachael Milligan: Absolutely. Thank you.

So I wonder if you'd shift gears for just a minute and talk about the role of a Christian worldview within higher education and what that means to you and how you live that out each day.

Candice McQueen: I did not grow up at a Christian K-12 school. I went to Lipscomb [University]. That was my very first Christian school experience. Certainly, I grew up in a Christian home. My father was a minister and my mother was a minister in other ways as a school principal. And so I felt like I had a great upbringing from a Christian worldview and Christian perspective. But I remember coming to Lipscomb, and it was by far one of the top 1 to 2 decisions, right? Marrying. Who you marry. Getting baptized, you know, making that determination become a Christian. But making a decision to come to Lipscomb in that very formative time period of your life. And I think that 18 to 21 year old is grappling with so many things. I made the decision when I was that age to come to a Christian college, and it was by far one of the better decisions I've made because I was able to grapple with issues— that you're going to grapple with anyways at that age— in an environment where there were people who you could trust were going to bring you God's perspective. And you can't get that everywhere. You can't go just to any place and say, you know, you're going to get the perspective that's a godly perspective, a Christian perspective, in that conversation. A lot of time trying to get the opposite.

And so to have that balance, because, by the way, you can find the opposite of that anywhere I can pick up social media, I can turn on the news, I can listen to the radio any time of the day, and I'm going to get an opposite perspective from a godly or Christian perspective. So going somewhere where you're intentionally seeking a godly perspective helps you with some balance.

And so think about you go to a secular institution, you never hear that perspective. You may not be engaged in any church community. You didn't have that in a family upbringing, and you're not getting that in most of the secular outlets that we engage in. You're never getting it, so you never have that balance of what was God's plan really for my life. So I think Christian education is that I'm going to call it one of the most important bastions of hope we have, because people can balance their life with seeing what it takes to live out God's plan in their life, in an environment where they're also growing at a pretty critical age in their life and trying to find their purpose in their career pathway. I think it's one of the most important decisions that someone can make.

And, you know, with my own children, when I've talked to them about college, I have said to them (and I've said this to prospective students at Lipscomb), "You absolutely can get a great education anywhere you go and you're going to find Christian friends and a Christian home almost everywhere you go. But to be in a place that actually has a mission that's intentionally Christian and ensures that that's part of everyday experiences is not something you're going to get in probably any other time of your life." And so to be growing in this age group with all the questions you have in that environment is pretty special. And that's why I think Lipscomb has a very special sort of offering for people.

Rachael Milligan: Absolutely. What would you say to an aspiring teacher or leader? How would you encourage them or what advice would you give them to be a light in whatever school they find themselves? What advice would you pass along?

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Candice McQueen: Sure.

You know, I think the best answer to that is to be who God created you to be and keep searching for what that is. I mean, when you grow in your own character and your own sort of spiritual focus, then you're going to find those everyday moments that allow you to be that light. It's when you seek it and you're not growing yourself and you're not making sure you're in the word. You're thinking about positive things.

I always go back to the verse about what you're thinking about, what you think about matters. Are you putting good things in your own mind or are you doing good things in your own life? And then that's going to naturally come out in whatever teaching environment that you're in. I'd also say teachers should be cognizant of being who they are in that environment. If you feel like you need to stop and ask a student if you can pray with them in a public school, ask them. You know, if that's on your heart, you should ask them. If you are in a situation where you're struggling with what the line is, it never hurts to ask in that situation. Because if you don't ask, you'll never know, right? This was an opportunity for me that I somehow missed.

And so I think the teachers should feel like they can be themselves. And Christian educators are needed everywhere. And so wherever you find yourself, be who you are in whatever that environment is. Be smart, but be who you are.

Rachael Milligan: Thank you for that. That's really encouraging.

I wonder, you talked about your mother, who was a big influence in your life as far as your pursuit of the educational field. I wonder if you could name another favorite teacher and why they were your favorite?

Candice McQueen: Yes, Ms.. Martin. Ms.. Martin was a teacher for two reasons that I would point to her. One, she had very specific loves that were personal loves that she brought into the classroom and shared with us. And I think that produces an authentic classroom environment. So she loved wildflowers. I mean, she loved wildflowers like nobody I've ever seen love wildflowers. She would bring wildflowers that she pressed into classrooms. She would intro— You know, every day was something about wildflowers. But we really got to know her and who she was through this love of wildflowers that she shared with us. Now, of course, I left knowing a lot about wildflowers. And more importantly, I just love that she shared her passion with us.

Second, my brother is special needs, and so he was at the same school where I was. He was in the special education program, and she took Craig under her wings. She made sure, you know, after school, if he was waiting she would give him work to do in the classroom, like, "Oh, you want to help me with the wildflowers? You want to help me erase the board? You want to help me take off the trash?", which he loved. And she would always make sure he was invited and engaged in the classroom. Well, she didn't have to do that, but it was the type of person that she was.

And, you know, when you're in a middle school environment and you have this awkward situation where your brother has special needs— and yes, there were kids that made fun of him— and you were trying to sort of navigate that as a young kid yourself, to have a teacher who sort of recognized that: that was very special. And so she was special.

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

The other one I have to mention, though, was my high school forensics speech teacher, forensics coach, Leland Beech, who just retired from a high school in Clarksville, Tennessee. And I got a chance to visit her when I was commissioner and wish her well on her retirement. But one of my favorite teachers, very influential on my own sort of pathway. She lost her daughter tragically some years later, after I'd had her as a teacher. And she walked through that with such beauty and grace (and still ministers to her students herself), that it's just a reminder of how special educators are and what difference they can make in the lives of others.

And so both of those teachers stand out to me as phenomenal people individually, but they were also fantastic teachers.

Rachael Milligan: Absolutely. You mentioned that word minister or ministry a couple of times talking about teaching. How is teaching truly a ministry? What makes it a ministry?

Candice McQueen: Well, I heard these two gentlemen not too long ago talk about how we have used the term 'business as mission' in our College of business. And they said, I would encourage you to call it 'business is mission.' And so I would use the same sort of phraseology. With ministry, 'teaching is ministry.' At the end of the day, what a minister does is they determine where you are, what you need. They help you grow. They bring in their faith, obviously, into that. And that's what a teacher does. They find out where you are, where do you need to grow? And Christian educators bring their faith into those conversations.

And I think the other sort of fruit of the spirit, "love and hope and peace and patience" and all the things that we would care about that an educator would have. That's those are things that you take on to be a better minister. And I think those are the same characteristics that a teacher has.

Rachael Milligan: Thank you. What advice would you give yourself if you could go back in time as a first year educator? What advice would you give that soon-to-be Dr. McQueen?

Candice McQueen: Well, every job I've ever had, I am always 'all in.' So if that is what you're being asked to do, then I'm going to be all in. And I remember that first year I was so all in. I mean, it was all consuming. I was doing everything. I was directing the fifth grade play. I was, you know, writing the most stellar lesson plans that anybody could ever look at. Right. I wanted to make sure if I was gone, the substitute would know exactly what to do. So I was very 'over the top.' I did every kind of assignment under the moon that took away too long, the grade. And so if I look back, I would give the advice that my father gave to me when at some point I said to him, my very first year of teaching, "Wow, this is like super overwhelming." And I remember my Dad said, "So, who made those assignments?" I said, "Well, I did." He said, "Well, could you adjust them or make them different or, you know, create balance in all you're doing?" And I'm like, 'Oh, that's a really good point. Like, I can do that.' But I had this vision of what an exceptional teacher looks like and I was going to be that my first year and I was going to do. Everything that needed to be done.

And I would say this to a first year teacher or anybody who's changing jobs because you're 'all in.' I think most people are 'all in' they are in a new profession. You really have to step back and say, "What is what does balance look like in this role?" And make sure you don't overdo it to a point that you're burnt out and then you don't stay in that profession for a long time. I never got burnt out, but I did have to really rethink some of my time to make sure I could give to individual students the way I wanted to when I was also doing all of these other things. And you've got to remember the individual students space is margin

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

you have to create in your day. It may not be on your calendar, but you know what's going to happen. And if you don't have margin, you never take advantage of those moments. And so I thought I'm doing a lot of activity, lots of things. I really need to create margin for individual conversations with students. And that was life changing for me in my second, third, fourth, fifth (and so on) year.

Rachael Milligan: Yes. Great advice. Well, before we asked you here today, we asked you to sum up your 'my why' story in six words or less. Also known as a six-word memoir. So I'd love for you to share that now, if you don't mind.

Candice McQueen: So I did six words. Mine is: "Whatever my title is, I teach."

Rachael Milligan: Hum. I love that. Love that.

Candice McQueen: Very profound, Right? The idea of whatever is my profession, really, I teach. And my funny story about that is I had a moment with my daughter when she was probably in middle school. She said, Mom, I was just talking to one of my friends who knows you well, another middle schooler, and she said, "You know what your mom likes to do?" And my daughter said, "What?" "Your mom really likes to explain things." I didn't know quite how to take that. But conceptually, I think she was probably right. Whatever it was, I was like explaining, well, this is how this works or this is how it happens, right? Trying to take this teaching moment. And I found myself in whatever profession, whatever the title is, I want to explain things and help and help folks grow.

Rachael Milligan: [You] want to teach? Always a teacher.

Candice McQueen: That's right. That's right.

Rachael Milligan: Well, President McQueen, thank you so much for sharing your story and thank you for all your work in education.

Candice McQueen: Thank you. I enjoyed being here.

Rachael Milligan: 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. You can find more episodes of Ayers institute podcasts at <https://podcast.AyersInstitute.org>, on Apple Podcasts, and anywhere podcast are found.

Do you know of an educator who you think should be featured on a future 'my why' episode? Let us know using the suggestion box on the Ayers Podcast website or send us an email at AyersInstitute@lipscomb.edu.

If you would like to receive a professional learning certificate for listening to this episode, fill out the online reflection form on the Ayers podcast website and enter this 'Secret CE Code': [Code excluded from the transcript. Listen to the podcast audio.] The Ayers All Access podcast is brought to you by the Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation at Lipscomb University's College of Education. Learn more about our work and how we can partner with you on our website at <http://AyersInstitute.org>.

Until next time, remember: "Educators change the world!"