

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

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FULL TRANSCRIPT:

Karen Marklein: Hello, and welcome to the Ayers All Access podcast brought to you by the Ayers Institute for Learning & Innovation at Lipscomb University. 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 <http://AyersInstitute.org>. You can also find us on Twitter and Facebook at @AyersInstitute.

Thanks for joining us this week for a real-life school story. I love to hear about teachers turning bad days into good days and teachers really connecting with students to make learning fun. When I first heard this story, I knew it was something I wanted to share with all of you on the Ayers All Access podcast.

I'm Karen Marklein and I serve as the Director of Programs for the Ayers Institute. Today, we will be talking with Mandi Hill, a middle school English teacher at St. George's in Memphis. Mandi, thank you for joining us today.

Mandi Hill: I'm so glad to be here. Thank you for inviting me.

Karen Marklein: OK, so before we get started, tell us a little bit about your school. What is the story about your school?

Mandi Hill: So St George's is, I think, the best school in the whole wide world. I actually think it's a lot like teaching at Disney World. Every day is really fun, even on its worst days. This is just a really, really good professional experience.

It's in West Tennessee. We are actually a three model school where we were built in 1959. Our Germantown campus was just an elementary school. It went through sixth grade and there were a group of parents that got together and said, "Hey, we really wish that we could keep our kids here for graduation instead of scattering to the four winds." And so there was a group of people who decided, "Well, let's build a middle school and high school." And at the same time, we built a second elementary school in Memphis: our Kimball campus. So we actually have two elementary schools, a middle school and an upper school. And the middle school in the upper school are both housed under the same roof in Collierville, which is a suburb of Memphis. And we have this beautiful we call it the ski lodge. It's just the most beautiful place.

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And so we're set on a hundred and twenty five acres of beautiful wetlands, and we have the Wolf River running through our backyard, and it's just really a beautiful, beautiful place. And I actually teach eighth grade English. I have two honor sections and I have three accelerated sections. So, I basically teach all the things English vocabulary writing, you know, literature grammar heavy on the grammar that most recently. But that's a little bit about our school.

And I guess this is my 17th year here. I've been a teacher for 20 some odd years. So I feel like that this is just the most wonderful, wonderful school that that I could ever have hoped to land in. And so that's a little bit about St. George's.

Karen Marklein: OK. Well, thank you so much, Mandi. Something I did want to mention is that Mandi and I have been friends for— way before we even knew ourselves. So I'm thrilled...

Mandi Hill: Longer than I've been a teacher.

Karen Marklein: Absolutely. So and I'm so excited to hear... So I'm just going to give you a chance to tell me the story that, you know, I want you to tell. So however you want to set that up and how you want to go through that? Just go ahead and walk us through this compelling story.

Mandi Hill: Sure. Sure.

Well, at St. George's, I have regular English classes and then I have a group of students that are my advisees and my advisees are like my little family. And so... You know how it is with teaching, there's just one hundred and fifty thousand things that have to happen every single day. And I want to do them all very well. And I find that sometimes I can't do them all. So I will employ frequently my students to help me.

And one of the things is decorate my classroom for Christmas. And I had I told my kids, my advisees, I said, "Hey y'all, I want you to. If you if you can, I'm going to pull out my Christmas decorations. And y'all, just if you can help me, great if you can't, no biggie, but I'll pull out my Christmas decorations and maybe at lunch, you guys can bring your lunch up here and you know, just do what you can do to get it done and no stress." So I put out my stuff and I had a couple of girls come in and they brought their lunch and I said, I'm going to skip on out. And I went to the dining hall to get my own lunch, and I guess I just forgot about them. I was sitting there eating my lunch and enjoying some funny conversation with a couple of colleagues and headed on upstairs because lunch was just about over and when I came into my class room, there was the most wonderful sight to see. And that was my kids had decorated one of my students.

And his name is Derek. Derek is the life of the party. I mean, he is an awesome, awesome young man. And the girls had taken Derek and wrapped him, and Garland had stuck a pencil on his head. I had turned this gold ribbon into this gold bow and I have some fake poinsettia flowers, and they had put that in his head. I have some ornaments that previous advisories have made, and they're just they're really cinnamon-y, and they've painted them in years before. So I told the kids, I said, you'll be really careful with these ornaments when you get the tree up because these are extra special to me because these are ornaments from 'ye old times. And I look at those and I think about my former students and how precious that is. But anyway, they hadn't taken one of those ornaments and they had just placed it right at the tuft of his hair on his forehead.

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He was held in a he was held in a Santa Claus, and they had positioned him so that obviously I would see him as soon as I walked in the door, and I have every belief that he volunteered for. This is probably with his idea, and the girls was like, "Let's go with it." So I walked in and I fell out laughing. It was just the funniest thing. And about this time it's like two minutes before we had to get micro. Micro is our basically a 45 minute steady hall in the middle of the day.

And I was like, "Derek, this ain't over." I said, "How do you feel about me pulling you out into the hallway? And maybe you could, you know, spread Christmas cheer?" And he was like, "Let's do this. Like, okay, man." So without even standing, we pushed this student chair with Derek in at Christmas Tree, so pushed him to the front of the middle school office. So all classes converge in front of the middle school office. And as kids came up from recess (we still have recess. It's a spectacular thing) and as kids came from recess and from lunch, they would walk up the stairs and they would see Derek and their eyes would light up and they said, "Ahh! What's going on?" They were absolutely delighted. So, you know, kids would stand around Derek and he would say, "Merry Christmas." And so as kids were trickling into their classes, I said, "Derek, do you have a micro to go to right now?" Is like... No, I think what I said was, "Do you have work that you have to do?" And he was like, "No ma'am, I'm good."

And I thought, OK, because, you know, an academic first, right? So I'm all about playing as long as the business has been taking care of. So be Elvis. Take care business, right? It's in my blood. Absolutely. So anyway, I was like, Derek, have you taken care of business? Have you? He's like, No man, I'm good. I'm good. Okay. Well, how do you feel about staying here? Because really, what I wanted was I wanted the adults to have some cheer.

So he was like, I can stay here. So Derek is not exactly a still child. He's not exactly a reserved person. But I want you to know that that child today for forty five minutes in front of the middle school office just is poised and feel as if he could possibly be. And if kids would, you know they need to go, but they're locker blah blah blah. I would say, OK when I walk by just say, you know, like, Merry Christmas or something. And they were just fascinated. They just loved it and it was it was that it was the talk. It was the hubbub at the time. What I had expected, my director and our chaplain to head on upstairs from lunch. And so I was really holding out for that. And so I finally text them. I had to cover my press. I was with a group statement and I texted them a picture of Derek, and I said, Y'all, you've got to come on up now. I said, because Derek is just really, really waiting for you to see him as a Christmas tree. And they were like, "Well, 'ha ha', he's missing from servant leadership right now." And I was like, Work after Derek, you're missing from servant leadership if I work. I said, "Well, you'll just have to take care of business. You know, just watch your videos and do your journaling. Okay?" So I actually went back to my micro and I would go check on Derek. And actually, in the meantime, I'm also texting his mother precious pictures of him. And she was like, "That's my baby, that's my baby. He's the gift to the world." I'm like, Wow. So when I go into micro, I got one down there. I got one on my, my brother says to be steady and get ready for the afternoon classes.

And I said to them, "Can I trust you?" And they said, "Yes, of course, you can't miss it, so I said, okay. I said, "Well, it's 12:40. We're going to pack up everything and with the most self-control that you can muster. We're going to go stand around Barrett and we are going to sing Christmas carols as everybody's going to their next class. And so we practice. And I was like, "Listen, no funny business, you know, like, we're going to sing quietly and sincerely. And I say, we're going to practice right now. So we ran through a couple of bad renditions of We Wish You a Merry Christmas. At 140 times, we all head out there. It's probably 15 kids around. And as kids start coming out of their classrooms, they already know

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he's out there, but we're just making it icing on the cake, right? Manna from heaven, I think, is what I said, because anything that is surprising and fun and spontaneous. That it is actually is pushed by a teacher, they just think it's like manna from heaven. They just think it's like the greatest thing. And they were like, "Wow, what's going on?" And we would sing these Christmas carols and the kids were wishing each other 'Merry Christmas!' And it was warm and it was fine. And it was it was really a beautiful thing.

And I just thought in that moment. Why do all the yucky things in the world happen. And I thought it's so important for me as a teacher. To create an environment where kids feel safe and happy and that this is a place of relief and not stress. Obviously, there's going to be stress, you know, schools are seasonal like you ride that roller coaster of when it's stressful and when it's not stressful.

But it felt like a day of healing because previously the day before there had been a school shooting and there were some high school students who died at the hands of another student. And there were people that were injured. And that night, my son (who is 24) said "Mama, what makes that person do that?" So school shootings have not been new to a 24 year old. It's kind of part of his life and part of his experience. It's not rare anymore. And he was like, "Mom, why do a lot of people do that?" And I said, "How many people do that because they don't feel the like they, they feel overwhelmed, they're hurt, they're in pain, they're damaged, they don't recognize their own value. Therefore, they can't see the value when someone else."

And so when I saw Derek— as the Christmas tree. I didn't think, hey, let me make this moment a repair moment. It just kind of happens naturally, and part of it was because I embraced it. I was like, "Let's take this thing and let's go even more with it." And it was just so much fun. And that day I thought, I want these kids to be able to look back on their eighth grade year to be able to look back on their middle school years and say, yes, some parts of it were hard and I had some, some real bad days and I struggled with Prince and I struggled with academics and I struggled with my sports and I struggled with my relationship. But I do remember those days that were really bright. And my hope is that that brightness that really just came out, it over does everything else.

So actually, I did see Derek again, and when I looked at him, I thought, "Hmm, have you gone? Have you taken care of that makeup work?" We're having this conversation with you right now, Karen. It has made me write in my planner, follow up with Derek to make sure that that stuff got taken care of.

Karen Marklein: Thank you so much for telling that story. It's the connection of the feeling that Derek must have felt and all those students, you know, just the connectedness, the fun, the warmth, the joy, you know, juxtaposed to some really sad things happening in schools, you know, and how important it is for us as teachers, as just the adults in the building to make sure that we are cultivating those relationships. I know that's a real strength of your teaching is the cultivating of relationships, and our connections are so important.

Mandi Hill: I don't mean to interrupt you, but one of the things if I could think about— one of the cornerstones of this school is that emphasis on the connections that we have with each other. Connections that make kids feel comfortable going to adults. "Who is your person? Who is your person in the school?" That's one of the things that we talk about frequently. When you're having a bad day, who is it that you can go to? So it's important that I think everywhere kids have a person in their school that they can go to.

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And so, so connections. Absolutely. That's where learning starts. You know, you're going to be able to learn when you feel comfortable and valued and all of your needs are met. And that's where that's where the real learning is.

Karen Marklein: Absolutely. Well, Mandi, thank you so much for agreeing to tell your story, and thank you for your work in education and the obvious impact that you're having every day on your kids.

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 <http://podcast.AyersInstitute.org>, on Apple Podcasts, and anywhere podcasts are found.

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