

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Ayers Institute “My Why” Podcast Episode 11 – March 2021 Title: *Eric Bowman*

SPEAKERS

RM	Rachael Milligan	Managing Director, Ayers Institute for Teacher Learning & Innovation
MM	Eric Bowman	2020 Mid-Cumberland & Middle TN Principal of the Year Principal, T.W. Hunter Middle School (Hendersonville, TN)

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INTRODUCTION:

RM: 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. These are their stories.

EB: My name is Eric Bowman from Hendersonville, Tennessee, and this is My Why.

I would say that we would encapsulate what we do every single day, with the word excellence. Excellence for every kid in every classroom, because we know if we meet the needs of kids on an individual level then we're going to see great success. So, we really try to ensure that every single individual student's needs are met every single day and that happens in every single classroom. Something else that we talk about a lot, we think of the kids as our own kids.

And so— you know, I've got two children of my own— and the question is always, "Is this what I would want for my own child?" And if it's what I want for my own child, then it's going to be OK. But if it's not good enough for my kid, then let's change practice. Let's adjust what we're doing. That gives it a sense of urgency. That gives it a sense of ownership.

RM: Welcome to My Why: Stories of Inspiration from Educators. This podcast is presented by the Ayers Institute for Teacher Learning & Innovation and brought to you by the College of Education at Lipscomb University, where 21st century educators are prepared to involve, impact, and inspire.

My name is Rachael Milligan.

Today we are joined by Mr. Eric Bowman. Mr. Bowman has been a public-school educator for 16 years, all of which have been in Sumner County, Tennessee, the same place he was born and raised. Currently, he is in his fourth year as the principal of T.W. Hunter Middle School in Hendersonville. Prior to serving as principal. He was a middle school social studies teacher, district evaluator and assistant principal. He also serves as a leadership coach and adjunct faculty member for Lipscomb University's College of Professional Studies and College of Education.

Mr. Bowman has received numerous recognitions for his work as an educational professional. In 2010, he was named the Sumner County Middle School Teacher of the Year. Most recently, he was recognized as the 2020 Mid-Cumberland & Middle Tennessee principal of the year. During Mr. Bowman's tenure as principal T.W. Hunter received the distinction of "Reward School" from the Tennessee Department of Education, both in 2018 and 2019. Additionally, the Nashville Business Journal named T.W. Hunter one

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of the top ten public middle schools in the Nashville metropolitan area. Eric Bowman holds degrees from Union University and Lipscomb University and is currently enrolled in the Doctor of Education Program at Lipscomb.

Eric, thank you so much for being here today.

EB: Rachael, thank you so much for having me.

EPISODE BODY:

RM: Well, I'm really excited to get to talk to you today about your journey through education. Just talk a little bit about why you decided to become an educator and kind of your journey to that point.

EB: Thank you so much, Rachael.

You know, it's interesting when people ask me that question, it's a question that I don't have kind of the fairy tale answer to. I do know that it was absolutely God's hand and him working through other folks that led me on this path to education. I entered college ready to do pre-med and kind of had had those ambitions in mind. And that first semester of school, I really just didn't connect with those classes, with those courses. I just kind of found myself at the end of that first semester thinking, "OK, is this really what I want to do?"

So, I decided to kind of cast the net, so to speak, a little wider in college and took some orientation classes to some other disciplines. And I wound up falling in love with an education course that I had. And really that set the trajectory for me.

RM: As you're thinking back over the years, as you're thinking about when you were a teacher in your role as an administrator over the past several years. Is there a moment or is there a particular story that stands out to you?

EB: Oh, there's so many stories, Rachael.

I do remember this was my first year teaching, and I do believe that I was born to teach— and I had a good first year. A lot of people tell horror stories about their first year teaching. I remember my first year being one of my favorite years; had a great time. I was a pretty strong disciplinarian, but we learned and we had a lot of fun.

And I had a competition next door with a teacher next door where she had stolen this orange monkey that was like the little class mascot that I had won from a fundraiser. And she had taken this monkey all over town and taken pictures of the monkey all over town with these little— I guess, ransom notes that she had hung up in the eighth-grade hallway and on my door. And even cut a little fur off the monkey and taped it to my board. These hilarious little funny, all in good humor pictures of this monkey. And the ransom was that my classes had to get her Starbucks gift cards in order to get back our class mascot. Well, it just so happened that that we saw the monkey in the back of her car, and I had a kid sneak into her room, get the keys out of her car.

Well, about that time, I had recommended a teacher friend of mine to come on board and teach math for us the next school year. And the principal— who was outstanding, she's one of my favorite folks that I've ever worked for, but she was tough. She at the whole time that this is going on (when I really should be teaching the story of American history to my students) we've got this whole conflict happening with an

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orange monkey. And a tug of war kind of happened where we've gotten this orange monkey out of the car and— opens the door, this principal and the teacher candidate to see my classroom as a first year teacher (when the principal had just been bragging on what a what a great job I had done with classroom management) to see this chaos ensuing regarding a conflict with an orange monkey.

You know, it was one of those days in May where you've got a week left with a group of eighth graders that are just like hanging from the rafters. Anybody who's taught middle school can relate to that experience. But anyway, it's one of those moments where I look back and I'm so thankful that my principal smiled, showed grace, realized that in that moment, kids were safe, they were having fun, and they were connecting with their teacher. And we had worked hard all that year and were having a moment of levity.

RM: I love the story. I love the idea of a class mascot. What a great story. Do you have any other funny stories that come to mind?

EB: I can think of one individual student that kind of sticks in my mind where I was standing in line in the grocery store aisle. I think it was in the canned food section. And all of a sudden from behind me, somebody just grabbed me and like a bear hug and kind of lifted me off the ground. And most people that know me know that I'm not a big toucher. I kind of was like shaken for a minute and turned around. And it was a young man— who I'm six foot three and he stood taller than me at the time; huge build, heavysset guy— that I had in eighth grade American history class.

I'll never forget him. He sat in that back row seat because that's where he wanted to be. And he was the tallest kid in the class. And he said that that's where he could see the best. And he wanted to be back there. And you know, there were there were multiple times that I would push him and he pushed right back. And we had that relationship where I kept pushing and pushing and pushing and he kept pushing right back. As most people that understand challenging students can kind of relate to that relationship you have with certain individuals.

But he embraced me in that canned food section of the grocery store and just said, “Mr. Bowman, I just wanted to say thanks.” And I said, “Well, for what? I don't know what you're talking about.” And he said, “You just never let up. And I appreciate that.”

And so, it was just a unique little moment. And there's probably 50 or 100 stories like that or a certain maybe not that I pushed on, but some other little thing that they remembered. Maybe at the time, for me, it just seemed like inconsequential and something that you do. Obviously, it mattered so much that he decided to embrace me in the canned food section.

RM: You know, speaking of challenges, challenging students, but just challenges in general, what would you say has been the greatest challenge of your career?

EB: Oh— I like order and I like structure and I like to kind of control. But education is such a people business. It's a service to people and working with people. And people are not order and they're not structure. And so, accepting this— that I don't have control or that there are things that impact the work that I do that are beyond my control.

There's so many external and even internal contributors to the work that impact kids. Impact the teachers that I work with every day. Impact the families in my learning community. And so, when those things

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cannot be controlled by me, that's a challenge for me. And it's something I've got to accept and something I got to push through on. But let me focus on what I can control.

RM: What encouragement would you give to an educator who perhaps is new to the profession, doesn't have as much experience as you have, who is struggling with that same idea that they don't have control?

EB: You know, I had that conversation just about a week ago with a young man that I can kind of see myself in. He's a brand-new teacher. And so very gifted, so intelligent, so committed to the work. And he'd had a, I guess, one of those bad lessons where you teach it and you just feel like, "Oh, man, I laid an egg today."

I was talking to him after school in the hallway and he kind of made that comment. And I just kind of asked back, "Were those kids loved today?" And he said, yes, they were loved. And I said, "Well, then you did your work today." And sometimes it just comes down to that. Did you take care of kids? Did you love them? And did they feel safe? And were they respected? And if you can do that in a day, sometimes the standard maybe didn't get taught the way you wanted it to get taught but kids were in a safe environment and they were cared for. You know, sometimes that's not just enough— because I don't want to downplay it— that's more than enough. That kids felt safe and secure and they were cared for.

RM: That's amazing. That's amazing. I want to ask you to sum up your "My Why" in six words or less.

EB: I think I would sum it up with one of my favorite scriptures, and it is: "Let your light shine before others." I think that is applicable for educators to be always aware that you have a very public role in the community, in the school building, in the classroom. "Let your light shine before others." And in the same way as you shine your light, hopefully you empower other students to let their light shine as well.

RM: Eric, thank you so much for taking the time to talk with me today and to share your story.

EB: Rachael, thank you for inviting me.

CONCLUSION:

RM: As we close today's episode we encourage our listeners to consider your own sources of motivation. What inspires you to do what you do? What is your 'why?' Share your ideas on social media using @AyersInstitute and the hashtag #MyWhy. Also, check out the handout including some of Eric Bowman's favorite resources, lessons learned, his six-word memoir, and other helpful information. This handout can be found on <https://eduTOOLBOX.org>.

Connect with Eric at @JEric_Bowmen and also connect with Sumner County Schools at @CO_Sumner. We also invite you to connect with the Ayers Institute on Facebook and Twitter at @AyersInstitute.

I'm Rachael Milligan, producer and host for the My Why podcast. This episode was directed by Karen Marklein. Forrest Doddington handles editing and technical production. This podcast is brought to you by Lipscomb University's College of Education.

Thank you for joining us for "My Why: Stories of Inspiration from Educators." Look for other episodes of this podcast and other Ayers Institute professional learning podcasts at <https://podcast.ayersinstitute.org/>.