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“Ayers All Access” Podcast

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

Episode 7 – April 20, 2022

Title: *My Why with Morgan Rankin – Tennessee Teacher of the Year 2022*

File Length: 00:28:09

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Ms. Morgan Rankin Tennessee Teacher of the Year for 2022
Second Grade Teacher, Johnson City Schools

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.

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'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, and 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 Lipscomb's College of Education and I'm the Director of the Ayers Institute. Today, we will be talking with Morgan Rankin, a second grade teacher in Johnson City Schools and the 2022 Tennessee Teacher of the Year. Morgan, thank you so much for joining us today.

Morgan Rankin: Thank you for having me. I'm so excited to be here.

Rachael Milligan: Well, we're excited to talk to you. I've been looking forward to this— looking forward to hearing your story and understanding how you arrived at the place you are now: Tennessee Teacher of the Year for 2022. Congratulations on that, by the way. That's awesome.

Morgan Rankin: Thank you. It still doesn't feel real, even several months later.

Rachael Milligan: That's amazing. That's amazing. So, I'd love to start with— Why did you decide to become an educator and what was your journey to get there?

Morgan Rankin: I was definitely that kid who if you asked me when I was in elementary school age, I was going to be a teacher. Definitely teaching. I was that kid. I took the babysitting course like the second I turned 12 because I wanted to babysit. As I got older, my focus shifted a little bit and I thought

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maybe I'd pursue that veterinary medicine. I worked in a dog boarding kennel all through high school, which it was— my goodness— that was a wonderful job. You went home absolutely filthy, but it was so fun.

But it was when I was in university, I was really enjoying my science classes. But I was realizing that the veterinary medicine, I just— I was definitely too soft at heart to be able to handle that. And I took a class in developmental psychology and I was absolutely hooked. I was fascinated by children's development and learning. And I switched my major psychology and never looked back.

As I told my family I was going to switch to teaching, my mom told me a story that had absolutely no memory of. So, my mom told me that in first grade I came home and I cried every day because nothing made sense to me. Was not familiar. I had learned all the letter sounds in French. I was saying French words and I was so frustrated. And I don't remember this at all. She told me I would sit in the hall and just cry. And she and my teacher worked together. She taught my mom how to use phonics and my mom worked with me at home and that got me reading. And I don't remember that at all. All I remember loving reading. I was I was that person that comes home with 20 books from the library every week— from a very young age— and read them all. I always had a book in my hand and I've always kept that story close to my heart. Because if it wasn't for my mom and that teacher working together to support me, I don't— Maybe I wouldn't be a teacher today. Because that I don't even remember that frustration. What I remember is loving school and reading.

And I think— I just take that very close to my heart. And as I continue this profession, because I have students that are 'little Morgan,' that they go home frustrated because they don't understand something I'm teaching. I try to remember that. But that connection with families and students is powerful. I want them to leave, knowing that school was fun and amazing and that they learn things and accomplished things.

Rachael Milligan: That's an amazing story. And, just like you said, what a what an impression that made on you from a young age and increasing your empathy for students in the same situation that you were in. And like you said, you don't even remember it, but it had such a profound impact on you moving forward. You know, it just goes to show that students don't always remember what we said, but they remember how we make them feel. Right?

Morgan Rankin: Exactly!

Rachael Milligan: That's amazing. So, you you're a second grade teacher now. What is it like being a second grade teacher?

Morgan Rankin: If you ask me what my favorite grade is, it's always going to be the grade that I'm teaching. That's always historically what I've answered, and it's always been true. Coming right my heart. With second grade: second grade is a sweet spot. I taught it in Canada and I taught it again here in the United States. And they're young enough that they still think I'm funny. And my jokes are not funny, but they think I'm hilarious. They still love hugs, they bring you flowers, and you get handwritten note all of the time. If they're out for sick for a day, you usually get, you know, 'I miss you' card or they'll come and tell you how much 'I miss you.' But they can also tie their own shoes and blow their own noses and zip their own coats. So, they've got this wonderful independence that you can really see who they're going to grow up to be as adults.

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And in second grade they get school. They know lining up. They know that they're going to gym, they know they're going to— how to go to music. They know how to handle library checkouts and things like that. So, you can really get into some really cool learning in second grade and have to worry a little bit about lining up and sitting on the carpet and how to go through the lunch line and recess rules and things like that. So that's something I really love.

Rachael Milligan: Yeah, yeah, that's great. So, you mention that they still laugh at your jokes. I wonder if you can describe a particularly funny moment in your educational career, whether it be in second grade or not. You know, being a fellow educator, I can recall all kinds of just really funny days at school. That's one thing I love about school. So, is there anything particularly funny that comes to mind for you as you're thinking back on your experience as an educator?

Morgan Rankin: Oh, all the time. I think one of my favorites is I was walking out at dismissal one day and this little girl looked up to me and she wasn't in my class, but I knew her from other activities at the school. And she looked at me and said "Mrs. Rankin, you have a lot of sprinkles." And to this day, I don't know if she met freckles or wrinkles, But I'm going to go with freckles. So that's one of my favorites.

Or I had a student come up to me and tell me he was "feeling really obnoxious."

Rachael Milligan: Oh!

Morgan Rankin: And for the life of me, I could not figure out what he meant until, all of a sudden, he grabbed his stomach and I said, "Oh, you mean nauseous!" That— just all of these little funny things.

Or I had one year, a class that really strongly identified with their little jobs. Like there's someone who was the lights, someone who did the door. And we kept our doors locked, so the door was shut. You would have to knock, and the door person would come in. And this little girl had gone to her reading room and she was coming back. And knocked on the door to come back into the classroom. And for some reason, another person opened the door. And she looked at them, just actually aghast and said "You are not the door person! And she shut the door and knocked again. And she stood and waited. And she was not coming in until it was the door person that opened that door.

So, it's just— if they just say and do the funniest little things, but it's all so pure and from the heart.

Rachael Milligan: Yes, I love that. I love that.

Well, think back to about your career as an educator and, you know, all the things you've experienced. Is there kind of an "Aha!" moment that you've had? You know, as far as 'this is why I do what I do' or, you know, is there a point that you were feeling down and then something helped turn it around for you? You know, are there any moments like that that come to mind?

Morgan Rankin: I've made some pretty big leaps in my career. You know, I was in a wonderful teaching position, teaching first grade in Canada and I left that to become a reading interventionist, which was a new position. And that was nerve racking and ended up being one of the most rewarding positions. But also moving to another country to teach in the United States. That wasn't easy either. Figuring out licensing and things like that was the challenge.

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But I think, you know— I think the same thing 'can I hack it?' Can I hack it in another school system that hack it with the needs, the demands of education in another state? And, you know, yeah, I could! It was— if anything— it was very similar. Teaching is teaching, no matter where you go. Ultimately, it's teaching: no matter where I go. So, I guess that's my, "Aha."

Rachael Milligan: Yeah. "Teaching is teaching wherever you go." And kids are kids, right?

Morgan Rankin: Yes. Exactly. And you know whatever you doing, if you build those relationships with your students and your colleagues, then you're still going to be able to make a positive impact.

Rachael Milligan: Well, I'm thankful you brought up your colleagues because I was reading about you when you were first named Tennessee Teacher of the Year. And one of the early articles that came out, you mentioned that you wouldn't be here if it wasn't for your colleagues and the opportunities that they have brought to you. So, I wonder if you talk just a minute about the importance of that community in the field of education with your colleagues.

Morgan Rankin: It's crucial. I think that is actually probably the only thing that's going to keep teaching afloat right now. So that network of colleagues. You know, you need to find your people because they're the ones that are going to keep you going on those tough days. They're going to be the ones that are going to have your back when you— sort of— "What if?" So that— I don't think I would have pursued so many of the wonderful things that helped me excel and be representative of the Teacher of the Year for Tennessee if I didn't have Holly— that when I said, "What if we do this?" hadn't said, "Well let's just try it!" or "Of course!"

And it's not just my colleagues, it's principals and it's instructional supervisors at the central office as the district level. Same thing that has supported us and provided either time or financial support or just even the encouragement of "Yes, this is something worth doing. You should definitely try this."

Then it extends all the way back to my first year having a relationship with a mentor teacher who is actually experienced but also really welcomed a two-way street. And I think that that's always made an impression on me that she knew more than me, but she was more than willing to listen to the ideas I brought forth and help me work my way through them to make them work in my classroom.

And I think teachers are amazing. I think, I love— I love working with kids. The day-to-day with kids is enough to keep me teaching. But what refills my educator cup is working with other teachers. Sometimes it's just a hallway conversation with a colleague or mentoring with a new teacher who's trying to try something new, or even teacher, social media, like "Teacher TikTok", "Teacher Instagram." They're just some really great stuff going out there. Especially if you find— find the right people. It's okay to say, "this isn't for me" and not listen to that person or use that person for a little while. Because they're human too, and they're going to put things out into the world that maybe aren't for you at that moment.

But you know, I think we do the digital learning days sometimes it's like a whole school breakout. And the first time we did it, we thought we were crazy! but we had the support of one another. We had sort of our principal who provided us with the time to coordinate this for the whole school. There's just learning opportunities too as well. Johnson City Schools has this technology leadership academy that has been one of the coolest opportunities for teaching as well.

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You really need that network of people to help you learn, but also to help push yourself and to grow. You know, there are some people who work best— they work well on their own. But I think teaching is a very difficult and demanding job when it's never done. And without that network and without those people to help not only share the load but push you want it gets hard and also recognize when it's time to tell you to take a break, you're going to find teaching even harder. And you don't want to— Don't that yourself. Teaching is already hard enough.

So, find your people. And build a network.

You know, I thought was just like 'luck' at first that I landed with like all these great teachers that they're inspiring and I work so well with them and you just do things together. But moving to an entirely different country and then finding more people that fit with that pattern and that friend— and built those relationships, working relationships with. I think it's just it's just what teachers need to do to support. You need to build that network of colleagues, those people that are going to put you to take risks, they're going to— when you say, "What if we...?," they're the ones that say, "Yeah, let's try it." They've got your back when you've had a bad day, but they're also the ones to tell you, "It's OK to put the work down. Don't be the grading tonight, you need a break. You need that network of people to do all of those things.

And so, you really want to be sure you find your tribe, find your people in take those risks and don't be afraid to try new things together and push each other to learn new things and grow because that's what has made me a better educator. And that's where all of these kind of formative education experiences for me come from. Because I pursued something, because a colleague mentioned something. I said "That's interesting. I want in on that." Or I said something to them, and they said, "That's Interesting. I want in on that." So, you want to maintain that that network, because that was going to help you grow as teachers.

Rachael Milligan: Well, that's— You've mentioned a few times and I love the phrase "find your people" and also to not, you know, not be afraid to distance yourself from people who aren't your people. Right. When it comes to feeding yourself as an educator in community. I think that that's so important. And you also mentioned something about taking risks and thinking, having a great idea and saying, "Let's do it, let's build it, let's make it happen."

So, to that end, you are a co-founder of the Blue Ridge Literacy Project. Tell us about that and why is it important to you?

Morgan Rankin: So, the Blue Ridge Literacy Project is literally us 'walking the walk' of that entire answer that I just said.

So, this project comes from Dr. Shelley Burton and I went to this Ohio conference and the next year I wasn't able to go through with Adrian. And on the drive back, they were talking about how— you know, "Why can't we do this?" She came back and said, "Why can't we do that? We have a bit of a lack of opportunities within a close range of the tri-cities where we are in Johnson City. And she said, "We're knowledgeable. We have a ton of expertise in this area. Why can't we make this happen?"

So, we formed this group and we have held three conferences. We started in 2018. We called it the "Teach, Read, Lead" conference. Milligan University was kind enough to host us all three years. And it is just absolutely the coolest thing. I've learned so much. Just like when we started it, it just seemed like a

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huge, insurmountable task. It's not just coordinating it all, but the cost. How are we going to seat people? How are we going to make sure people know we exist and this conference is happening? All of these things seemed insurmountable and every year it got a little bit easier and a little bit bigger. But we made it happen! Just, you know, six elementary school teachers— just said, "What if we do this?" And then we did it. And we're really proud of that.

But our mission of the Blue Ridge Project is to align literacy research with practice and provide high quality professional resources to educators. Because we all kind of have that heart that, you know, teaching is about the learning that you do, not necessarily just the work of learning that your students do. So that's kind of where we come from. We're in a bit of a holding pattern right now, but that has been one of the best experiences of my life.

Rachael Milligan: Yeah, that's so powerful. And I want to highlight too, you know, you mentioned you were riding home from a conference and started talking about it in the car and then this is what was born from that. And, you know, truly— those germs of ideas can expand into something great and something meaningful for so many. And so, congratulations on that effort. And I hope that it's able to continue as well.

I also wonder: you get to interact with a lot of teachers in your Teacher of the Year role. What is your big idea or set of ideas that you're that you hope to leave them with when you come away?

Morgan Rankin: What a great question. Many of us share in this. We all really want to make sure that teachers understand the importance of their job. It's not just teachers, but the community as a whole: from teachers to central office, district level employees to Department of Education, politicians, family members, community members— truly understand the importance of education and the demands that educators are facing and how hard we work to meet those demands. I think that we are all kind of looking to almost safeguard teachers a little bit, and especially the pre-service teachers. We're all concerned about educator retention right now. Not just the new teachers. And that has been a focus of a lot of conversations, and that is something that's pretty near and dear to my heart.

I obviously feel really strongly about teacher learning and teacher relationships among educators to support one another. And I think that we have to really protect our profession going forward to keep our experienced teachers, to keep our knowledgeable teachers, and to really pull in people that are going to be dedicated. You know have the right heart and the right mindset.

And so, I think that's my message is "show some grace and support one another and let's find some ways of maintaining our teachers that are currently teaching and lifting up those pre-service teachers so that they feel supported." Because I mean, before the pandemic, we knew that there was that 4-year mark that was typically where our new teachers felt either, "yes, I can do this for the rest of my life," or "this isn't for me" and they decided to leave teaching. And I'm concerned that with, you know, how difficult education has been in the last couple of years, that so many teachers are going to hit that 4-year mark and say, "Maybe I would have stayed before, but it's hard and it's demanding and they need a break."

Rachael Milligan: Yeah. To be there for one another. And I really appreciate how you emphasize focusing on both pre-service teachers, in-service teachers, and the veteran teachers who've been in the field of education for a long time. Everybody needs support and support in different ways.

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Morgan Rankin: Oh yeah. I've been doing it for 16 years and I still feel all the time like I'm the rookie or like, I don't know what I'm doing and that's crazy. I know what I'm doing. I've been doing this long enough. I'm an experienced— I call myself a veteran now. But there are there are more days of the year that I feel like a rookie, and I probably really should talk about that. And I think that's something to keep in mind with teaching for all of this. We're using the information we've got to make the best decisions we can in the moment that we can.

Rachael Milligan: Absolutely. So, thinking about all those relationships that you've built with students over the years and all of these, you know, important interactions that you that you've had with them—

What do you hope your students remember most about you?

Morgan Rankin: I hope that they remember that I pushed them to learn. But that I cared about them deeply. I knew this in that moment, like, this isn't just teaching second grade. This is helping to form adults, you know, citizens. I hope that they remember that I saw something in them and something for them that was great. And that I knew that they could do it.

Rachael Milligan: That's so inspiring. I wonder, too, as you're thinking about, you know, all of the different resources that you have drawn from as an educator over your sixteen years. Is there a favorite strategy, a book, a resource or something like that that you would want to share with other teachers that you would point them to if they're feeling like that 'first year Morgan' and not knowing what to do and feeling overwhelmed that you would point them to. What are some of your favorite "go to's"?

Morgan Rankin: So, I think that, you know, seeing in that same vein, I think that there's lots of academic things I could talk about right now, but I'm probably going to call on Weston Keischnick right now. He wrote the books "Bold School" and the second one was "Breaking Bold." And his focus is blended learning and technology and how to integrate it effectively.

But one of the most important things he talks about is how you can't ignore the tried and true strategies that have worked for hundreds and thousands of years. He talked about the importance of relationships with students and how important that relationship that you build your students is and how crucial it is to their work. So, he talks about technology and how important it is. He wants you to really consider how you're going to use that technology to improve the student's lives and learning. And the best way to do that is by knowing your students.

And, you know, in second grade it's as simple as just knowing they have a dog or that they have a sister or that they love to play soccer. They don't forget those moments. And it's going to win over their hearts and they will do anything for you, even write three sentences when they don't even want to pick up a pen.

So, he's a wonderful resource, even just following him Twitter. Lots of little Twitter bits of gold on there.

Rachael Milligan: That's a great— that's a great resource. Thank you for sharing that, especially since we spent so much time in a relatively disconnected state, at least physically, and not being in the classroom for a while, remembering those tried and true strategies while still incorporating the really important, you know, new technologies that we've learned. But connecting with students on that fundamental level is so critical. And so, thank you for sharing that resource.

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So, Morgan, would you sum up your 'my why' story in six words or less?

Morgan Rankin: Absolutely! So, I've been thinking long and hard about this one. But ultimately, what I came up with is that: "Teaching is shaping what might be."

Rachael Milligan: "Teaching is shaping what might be." That's really powerful. Can you talk a little bit more about that and why you landed on that?

Morgan Rankin: So, I say that regularly. I say (I tell parents this, I tell colleagues this) that we're not just teaching that child that's in front of us. 'Cause yes, you are. I have curriculum standards. But I always keep in mind the bigger picture. We're making adults here. That the interactions we have with students and the things that we teach them now is going to be what carries them forward in life and help them grow up to be this wonderful person that I can already see in them.

And that's what I love about second grade. You can see the little person that that is in them. You can see what they're going to be as an adult. And, you have an opportunity to help encourage that and help them blossom and grow in little bits and pieces now. And it's tricky because teaching is hard. You don't see the results of your work. But ultimately, I teach because this is my way to make a difference in the world. This is my way to make life better. And I do that because you can look at these little people and think, I see amazing things in you. You're going to be a wonderful parent, you're going to be a wonderful employee, you're going to be a wonderful contributor to our community and you're going to help change the world. And that's what teaching is, is seeing that bigger picture for your students and encouraging that.

Rachael Milligan: That's really powerful. All of that that you shared about really working to instill this idea about learning for the betterment of your community. Just so powerful and so powerful that you are working toward that in your classroom each day. Morgan, thank you so much for sharing your story today and thank you for all your work in education. It's been a pleasure to talk to you today.

Morgan Rankin: This has been wonderful. I always love to talk about teaching. It is one of my favorite topics, obviously. And I just really love this opportunity to chat with people and I hope that this is comforting and inspiring to teachers.

We're still doing it. We can keep doing it. Just find your people!

Rachael Milligan: Absolutely. Thank you so much.

And to all of our listeners, be sure to check out the show notes for this episode where you will find links to helpful resources and anything that 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 podcasts 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.

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