

Wildkit Way Transcript: Season 2, Episode 4

Announcer:

Welcome to the Wildkit Way, a podcast that gives the mic to Dr. Marcus Campbell, the superintendent of Evanston Township High School. Join us on this audio journey as Dr. Campbell shares his stories and insights and has honest real conversations with people who make ETHS and our community, the incredible place it is.

In this episode ETHS Superintendent Marcus Campbell sits down with ETHS alum Jackie Newsome to discuss her journey of being a justice seeker. Newsome shares experiences about how school can create spaces and pockets to care about and be connected to the lives of others. Let's get started.

Marcus Campbell:

Hello, Wildkits! This is Dr. Campbell here, Superintendent of Evanston Township High School, and I'm just delighted to have ETHS alum, Jackie Newsome here with me for the Wildkit Way podcast. I want to thank you for joining us. My pronouns are he and him. And Jackie?

Jackie Newsome:

She, her, hers.

Marcus Campbell:

So we're going to jump right in. I've known Jackie forever, since she walked into my classroom at 14 years old and has just matured and developed into such a great advocate for justice. But I think you've always been an advocate for justice and change since you were a teenager. And I want to say thank you for joining me, Jackie.

Jackie Newsome:

Thank you for having me, Mr. Campbell.

Marcus Campbell:

You did graduation for us last year, and here you are back now. What is it like for you to reflect back on your experience as a District 65 student and a District 202 ETHS alum. What's that been like for you?

Jackie Newsome:

So I came into District 65 in third grade, so I didn't start right from the very beginning. And I remember I can remember my first day of school and I had gone to private school prior to that, and I turned to my mom and I said, there's so many kids. And that's really a part of the theme. There's so many kids, there's

so many people. And as a result, as I have lived my life, there are so many people that I know, so many contacts, so many relationships. I remember studying abroad in Argentina in, well, maybe 2010, 2011, and I was going for a run and I had on an ETHS shirt and a man stops me in the street and said, I went to ETHS. I was in Buenos Aires, Argentina. So when I get the opportunity to come back, it's always coming home knowing that there's a piece of home everywhere because this place is just so big.

Marcus Campbell:

So I mean, I had the same experience. I've had the same experience being a staff member person here. I was standing on the corner in California, in San Francisco, with an ETHS shirt on, and somebody said, "Go eTown" from across the street. And I was like, ETHS alums are everywhere. And when it doesn't matter if you're in an airport or wherever. And what would you say about how your experience in Evanston prepared you for the work that you do today? And just share a little bit about what you do today.

Jackie Newsome:

So I'm a public defender and I'm also a clergy person. So I have the opportunity to represent folks who cannot afford their own attorneys. So you're accused of a crime and you are indigent, you are appointed a public defender, and that is me. That's who I am. That's what I do. So I think my opinion or my position about how ETHS prepared me, maybe a bit unpopular because in order to do the work that I do, you have to care deeply for the oppressed and you have to care deeply for the guilty. And I would say that ETHS prepared me for that because it created spaces or pockets with people like you who cared about those issues. And at the same time, I had to work those muscles and be that justice seeker because there were other spaces that were bigger that didn't care about those issues. And so I was actually constantly working the muscle of protecting myself and others while being in this space.

Marcus Campbell:

Yeah. And so today you get to, you're here. We're here in the auditorium because you're going to be keynoting the black student Summit, and we've been doing our student summits for about 10 or 11 years now, and it's an opportunity for our black students and we have other summits, but this one in particular is important because it's where our black identifying students and their allies can come together to talk about issues in Evanston, in schools, be in solidarity with one another, talk about equity, talk about justice, and really experience joy. And you're going to be keynoting that tomorrow. And we're excited that you're here because you get to talk about the things that are near and dear to you with this audience. And we have, as a school, kind of normalized those pockets. But there's still so much work to do when we talk about dismantling white supremacy, especially in educational systems.

Jackie Newsome:

Absolutely, absolutely. And I mean, we see the same practices and policies in the criminal legal system, what we see happening with students in classrooms, we see happening in courtrooms when we talk about, I really didn't think you were the person who taught me about the school to prison pipeline, did I?

And I remember working in our child and Youth justice unit at the Public Defender's office in Philadelphia and being mortified at how often schools were a part of making children a part of the carceral system with sort of no regard for the consequences.

Marcus Campbell:

And it's interesting that you talk about that because I heard your cousin, Dr. Dave Stovall, who keynote it today mentioned years ago. He talks about the pipeline, but he's also talks about the school to prison nexus, and what do we do to disrupt that? How do we as an educational system continue to disrupt the pipeline, the nexus of students of color particularly who end up in the criminal justice system? I know it's a big question, Jackie.

Jackie Newsome:

So I feel like my answer is a spicy hot day. It's okay. The short answer is teachers and administrators need not be cops. And I don't think folks take that seriously.

Marcus Campbell:

Say more about that. What do you mean need not be cops?

Jackie Newsome:

So I spoke to a group of college students a couple months ago in Philadelphia. It was a group of all white students saying or proclaiming that they wanted to work in inner city schools and we're having a talk and we're having a talk about school to prison pipeline stuff at an elementary school having this conversation. And we were talking about the ski mask ban in Philadelphia, and I was asking them, okay, so why is this ban a problem and who does it affect? And then I asked them the reverse, okay, well argue why it's a good thing. And so we're having this back and forth about this band, and I cannot get any one of these students to talk about race or racism explicitly. I can't get them to say it. And I'm like, well, how are you going to help students? How are you going to be a part of liberation when you can't even talk about it? Similarly, when teachers view themselves as authoritarian and their role is to enforce rules, and when those rules aren't enforced, there must be consequences that mimics that attitude and that language and that behavior mimics the carceral state. So how do we stop that nexus? Well, we have to decide that we in schools, believe in abolition. We have to decide that there's something wrong with that behavior because until we think that there's something wrong, if we're okay with the law and order, if we're okay with students need to stay in their place and walk in this line and don't be loud and take your hood down and pull up your pants, that that's the most important thing, then we'll continue to continue that cycle.

Marcus Campbell:

It's so interesting that compliance becomes the lesson and not the lesson. And in some of my courses at NU, we talk about the similarities between schools and prisons, the lines that kids have to walk in the

cafeterias. I mean the bells, having the devaluing of humanity and asking for permission to just be a human being and go to the bathroom and all of these kinds of things. And especially when you have to color within the lines. And I tell the students over there, I said, give an A+ to the kid that colors outside of the lines because that's where true liberative liberatory thinking can begin. And you can harness, you can harness that. And so why do you think that we are such a compliant culture or as schools as such a compliant institutions?

Jackie Newsome:

Because how else do you make little machines in little wit? I mean, let's think back to education. Let's think back to a time when we were trying to be a world power. And so we needed to make sure we were teaching and indoctrinating and ingrain the same things in all of our children. And that often didn't include black or brown children until the country decided it would. And then it was like, well, we need them to get into line too. It's the same reason why we went and took indigenous land and cut their hair and made them follow certain rules. I mean, because it's a means of control. That's what this is about.

Marcus Campbell:

Yeah, and so as a school, so what we've done is we've eliminated our dress code. It is pretty much what is good for, mostly for the public, it's good for school, and it really has changed our culture. We're not chasing kids about hats and all of these crazy things, and we can really focus on what really matters in school. And we've really engaged a process now around restorative practice, reducing suspensions and all of these things. But there's still this desire for some within our system about penalty and to penalize and to judge and to throw out and to not, and we talk about solidarity and all of the things, but get, and still, we wrestle with these vestiges of tradition and really just want to punish often. And we're like, hey, let's have a more restorative culture and a restorative attitude around kids and adults.

Jackie Newsome:

Sure, absolutely. So Professor James Foreman Jr. wrote a law review article years ago where he talks about taking victims seriously. And so when you're talking about folks who are having a hard time and still want to sort of penalize and punish, I think if we're reading them graciously, what they're saying is, well, I'm worried that there's no consequence for the harm. And we've been talking about this theme in this poem, if I do harm to you, I do harm to myself. And we're all worried about harm and the consequences of harm. And I think there's a complexity in that conversation, and folks just aren't yet willing to say, harm may be a part of life, but we can reconcile so that harm doesn't linger. And instead what's happening is people want to get in front of any harm by creating structures and rules to suggest that it won't happen. Well, that's actually not reasonable, but as long as we're giving people tools to work through harm, then everything can be okay. It's when we take away the tools and the options and the opportunities that we have an issue.

Marcus Campbell:

And often, we don't even know the tools that can adjust and make and reconcile the harm, right? Those kinds of ideas and skill sets are kind of not a part of our reality. So that's a part of that too. And I love that you say, if we read them graciously, it's like you've been to seminaries. So yeah, the poem In Lak'ech referenced, that's the theme of our summit this year. And I've also shared with our faculty that this is our district pedagogy, right? It's In Lak'ech because In Lak'ech is restorative practice, right? In Lak'ech is how we can go about our day to day and how we want kids to treat each other, how we want staff to treat each other. And when we talk about everybody discusses the positionality in schools and all of that, you've got to be at the top. And everybody has power and the negotiation of power in school. Well, if we're In Lak'ech, then it sort of diffuses the power because you are my other me. And what does that poem mean to you, and what do you think you're going to say to the kids tomorrow?

Jackie Newsome:

So I mean, I love that you asked me this because, and I loved your seminary comment because that's exactly what came up. So we know that this poem is a part of a larger work and reading through as best as I could, the rest of the larger work, there is very clear indigenous religious traditions and Christocentric religious traditions coming out. And this notion of loving thy neighbor and also this notion of being proud of who you are, the author talking about being Chicano, meaning not hating someone else or being proud of who you are, your culture, your traditions in your rituals. And I think that what I want to do is to remind students that things that they think are almost unimportant are actually deeply important to how they engage in solidarity. So the example that I may or may not give tomorrow, I may be dating myself with this one, right, is this notion of pouring some out for the dead homies, right?

Marcus Campbell:

Well, we did libation today. See? Yeah, they don't see it. They don't hear it like that. But yeah, go ahead.

Jackie Newsome:

So this notion of pouring libations is what we do. I can remember growing up going to funerals and actually just officiated a funeral last year, last July, maybe two Julys ago, and there was a pouring of libation at the cemetery. While that's wrapped about, or talked about or discussed sort of in some level of hip hop culture, that ritual is saying that there's some connection between the living and the dead. And that connection matters because that is my other self. And so helping students understand that things that we do every day, there's going to be an energy in the room tomorrow where I'm not going to have to say words. I can give a look and the students are going to know what I'm saying. That's that interconnectedness and that matters.

Marcus Campbell:

Well, I'm really happy that you're here. I'm happy that you're keynoting the summit for us, and I can't wait to hear what you have to say. I still think about you walking into class and telling me that you didn't play with toys. Like who's this student? What's your name again? Newsome. And it's just been a joy to

watch you grow over these years. Jackie. I'm very, very proud of you. Thank you. Thank you. And thank you all for joining us. Until next time, see you later. And thanks, Jackie. Thank you.

Announcer:

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