Jen Walsh:

From the American School Counselor Association, this is, I Hear You Say, a podcast for school counselors and other leaders in education. I'm Jen Walsh, director of education and training here at ASCA. ASCAs School Counselor of the Year award honors professionals who devote their careers to advocating for the nation's students and addressing their academic and social emotional development and college and career readiness needs. Today, we sit down with one of the 2022 school counselor of the year finalists Marianne Matt. Marianne is currently a school counselor at Capital High School in Madison, Wisconsin, which serves 105 students, grades nine through 12. She has been a school counselor since 2014 and received her bachelor's degree from Edgewood College and her master's degree from Concordia University. Welcome Marianne and congratulations.

Marianne Matt:

Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Jen Walsh:

I hear you say that you're a firm believer in the importance of helping students discover life, sustaining careers. What are some ways you work towards this important work?

Marianne Matt:

There's a number of ways, right? I mean just every day, being with students and having those conversations. But I specifically have created an event that has been put on pause for COVID that I call our career in college days. And I specifically use career first because I want my students to know that that's what college does lead to, is their career. This is so important because many of my students, my student population is 85% on free or reduced lunch and so may not have the opportunities to travel, for families to have them in summer camps or other enriching situations. Many of them are just working, which of course is also valuable experience, but they're missing out on some of the things that people with more privilege might have.

So my career in college days is really to help bring the outside world in so that way our students are able to experience some of those things within the school building. What we do is I organize with six classrooms, because that's what we have at each of my sites right, now we will have a school building eventually, but right now we have two sites with six classrooms. And so we have six stations basically, and the rotation of a half a day, so I get people from the community to come in and commit to this half day of being with my high school students. And I'll kind of name off those six so that way you have an idea of what we do here at Capital High. We do a trades presentation. So we have some people in our community that will present about all of the trades and then help connect students to the trades. That's one of our rotations.

Another is our local community college who we also partner with, and I'll talk about that later, but we bring in their recruiter and they talk about just all of their programming, all of their scholarship funding and everything that they have to offer.

I bring in business professionals, so business owners, people who have just been in the community a long time and can speak to the students about how to get into their industries, basically.

I bring in the department of workforce development. We are in the capital city, so we do have that right here for us. They come in and they help our students with learning how to write resumes, giving them job tips, and then even helping them understand how to use their website so they can use that in the future after graduation.

I also do a post-secondary presentation myself, because I figure, as the school counselor and as the expert in this area, I want my students to hear from me as well during this day about why we're doing this and why post-secondary education, whatever that is, whether it's a certification after high school or if it's college, the value is there.

And then we do have a room with military recruiters, but we do have to be careful with that because some of our families don't want their students to visit with military. But we have had a lot of students that were really interested in our military, in the armed forces, and so we want to make sure that they also have that ability. We don't want to be a gatekeeper for anything. We want to make sure our students have access to every possible avenue. And I think that that event alone is one way to bring the outside world into the school. Every day we are doing things as counselors though, and I'm continually working to make sure that my students are connecting with what is outside of school and helping them understand how school actually helps them get to things outside of school.

Jen Walsh:

Do you bring in [inaudible 00:05:05] your colleges in the area or anything like that?

Marianne Matt:

Actually what we do, when it's not COVID times, we are able to go out and visit because again, we're in a capital city so we do have a number of colleges in the area. We visit and tour UW Madison, we visit Edgewood College, we have gone all the way to Milwaukee to visit UW Milwaukee and down to another UW campus in Whitewater. So we do make sure, not necessarily coming into the building, we make sure that we do virtual events right now during COVID, but when we are able to, we want to get our kids on buses and get them out and exploring because once a student is on college campus, they feel that they could be there and they feel like they could be part of this, and they see people who look like them, and it's more real than it has than it had ever been before. And that goes into that idea that my students don't necessarily have that ability for their parents to take them out on the weekend to visit a college because they're working. So this is a way that we're helping bridge that gap and making sure that our students have everything that they need in order to form a future for themselves.

Jen Walsh:

Right. Yeah. That's why I asked that question is, I know that actually visiting can really be impactful for students who may not envision themselves there beforehand, but after visiting they are able to.

So thanks for sharing so far Marianne. Actually, related to career and college planning, we're going to pause for a quick word from one of our sponsors, myOptions. MyOptions would like to relay a big thank you to all school counselors and a happy National School Counseling week. You help shape the world of our future. As the nation's largest free college and career planning program myOptions encourage is here to help you [inaudible 00:07:02] innovative approaches to meet your students emerging needs. We have an evolving portfolio of apps and tools for students, parents, and school counselors to build college lists, track progress, match with scholarships, all in one in place. And it's free. Check us out@myoptions.org.

So I know that students who work with you can expect asset-based student driven coaching that focuses on their dreams first and the pathways to those dreams second. So how are you able to take this approach with your students?

Marianne Matt:

This is one of my favorite parts of my job. I love talking to anyone, whether it's students or not, but really my students, about what drives them. When I talk to my students about how they're able to harness their dreams, basically, what I first start with is, what did you dream of doing as a kid? When you were in first grade, when everybody said, what do you want to be when you grow up? And then what changed? What might have changed your mind in terms of that goal that you had back then? And I mean, of course everyone grows and changes and doesn't necessarily want to be what they want to be when they were in first grade, but there's oftentimes situations or circumstances that stop a student from thinking that they could attain what they had dreamed of, whether it is because something happened in school, outside of school, whatever it is.

Sometimes there's barriers that are put up in front of my students by the time they get to high school that they just have given up on the idea of going on and becoming maybe that surgeon, I just talked with one of my students last week. She is a mother, she is a fantastic mother and she has just realized that she could potentially reach that goal. It might take her longer, but for a while she really had stalled and thought, you know what? I can just do cosmetology, I'm good at doing hair, it's a one year certification, that's what I'll focus on, and maybe I'll do this later. But then she started talking with me and understanding that she could slowly move through the health field because the health field offers that you can start out as a certified nursing assistant and move into nursing, move into nurse practitioner and even move on to that. While it might not get her exactly into that surgeon career that she had dreamed of, she is really excited about the idea of still being in healthcare and still being in that field so that way she can be helping people.

So I know that for her, this young person, it has opened up her dreams again. And I know she was so excited to talk with our nurse, our school nurse to learn how her career path went so she might even consider becoming a school nurse one day. And while I didn't want to discount her dreams of being a surgeon, we did talk out how long that would take and being a mom and being realistic about what she can accomplish within that, she wanted to scale back what she was thinking.

I wanted to give that example because really once students can understand their motivation, whether it's the classes they're taking or what motivates them after high school, whether it's they want to make a lot of money. We make sure that we point them to high paying careers then. Let's look at these and what does it take to get there?

And if students are really nervous about taking out student loans for college, most of my students can qualify for many grants, but they don't know that yet. We talk about apprenticeships and how that might be an avenue prior to college, get into an apprenticeship, get into a trade, and then once you have solidified that career, see what might come next. So yeah, it really is just about their hopes and dreams and me trying to show them that there is a pathway within those hopes and dreams, despite the barriers that might be in front of them.

Jen Walsh:

Yeah. That's a really good point. So where do you find resources about different careers that are available? Because obviously there's so many, I know I don't know all of the careers that are out there. So where do you find those resources?

Marianne Matt:

Yeah. One of my favorite things to say to my students when they ask me about something is, well, first, have you looked it up? Have you Googled it? And while that's not the best resource it is the first question I ask, is, have you looked it up? I want them to take ownership over their learning. I personally really like the Department of Labor and I point my students there because it is up to date information and there are within the Department of Labor there's O\*NET other search applications and career aptitude tests that they can take that point directly to careers that are in demand right now, as well as careers that would fit with what they might be interested in doing, because really the sky's the limit. I mean there are careers that I haven't even heard of that exist.

Jen Walsh:

Exactly. Yeah. There's just so many careers out there and it's impossible to know them, right? So having a resource to identify those careers I think is really critical so that you can introduce them to your students who also likely don't know that they exists as well.

So you have two incredible goals for your school counseling program. One surrounding African American and multiracial students earning dual credit in college reading and writing and then the other regarding FASFA completion. So how do you involve your students in meeting these goals?

Marianne Matt:

Well, first, it's key to involve the students, right? I can't create these goals and then assume that they might just magically happen. Talking with our students and helping them to meta-cognitively think about their learned is so important. For some of our students, this is the first time they have thought about how their test scores correlate with real life, right? So many times we're providing these standardized tests to our students in schools and not talking about how they actually correlate. So we partner with our community college, that's where the dual credit courses are also coming from. We have high school teachers that teach our dual credit classes within our school, but we take the ACCUPLACER test, that's basically the community college entrance exam as well as the ACT, but the ACCUPLACER, we find it to be a better measure, it's an un-timed computerized test. And students usually are able to take it in about half hour to 45 minutes for each of the three tests.

But basically the ACCUPLACER, those scores directly correlate with our dual credit classes, so then I can have conversations and talk about the value of that reading and writing class that is a support course at the community college that leads directly into English 1. So if I have a college bound student and they might not be meeting that standardized test score, but their skills are showing in their dual credit class that they are capable? That is what the community college has that support course for anyway, and then my students see themselves within this class as college students being successful and knowing that they don't have to worry about that test score anymore, that maybe would have place them into a support course, rather than English 1 they get to go directly there because their skills have been honored. If they get that C or better on their college class, then they're good to go.

That right there, the students, once they're they realize that, the light bulb... And every counselor knows what that is. That light bulb goes off when they recognize, oh, okay, I see the value, I'm going to do this, I'm going to dig in, I'm going to get this college credit. That's just so important.

And then that goes directly into college and their ability to think that they could go to college, because they're sitting in that dual credit course, they're understanding that they have the skills, they're getting that college coursework done. And then, they're able to say, okay, I might actually complete the FAFSA, which is another one of my goals, right? Well, I know it is a form that students fill out and just the completion alone doesn't tell you much. but for my students, once they complete that FAFSA and they get that award letter back and they actually see the money that is available to them, the free grant money, because like I said, my students, 85% of them are on free or reduced lunch so they are going to get some free grant money and they qualify for scholarships. So once they see that award money, we can fill in the gaps with scholarships so that way they don't have to take out any loans and they can go to college and they can then, back to that first question you asked me, they can get a career, gain a career that's life sustaining, this would be generational change within my community. And that's what I want to see.

I want to see all of my students be able to rise and to be able to help their families rise with them. And so that's why... Oh this gets to be very, very emotional actually, because that's why we do this work because we want to see our community improve and we want to see our students thrive.

Jen Walsh:

Absolutely. So just to be clear, are you transparent about, hey, I have this goal and this is how we can work together to meet it?

Marianne Matt:

Actually no. I think maybe a couple of my students know about it because we've talked about my work as a school counselor, because they have interest in that, but this is something that I need to share with them because I think if they knew that I'm tracking it and that I'm watching their success and that's why I'm speaking with them about this, it might motivate them even more. I'm not sure.

Jen Walsh:

I don't know how many school counselors share their goals with their students, but could that make a difference? I don't know.

Marianne Matt:

Yeah. I think I'm going to start sharing today actually.

Jen Walsh:

Let me know how it goes.

Marianne Matt:

I will.

Jen Walsh:

And now for a word from another one of our sponsors, the United States Marine Corps.

The United States Marine Corps is honored to partner with the American School Counselor Association. As educators concerned with the advanced of young Americans, we believe that you provide your students with the knowledge they need to thrive, the discipline to apply what they have learned, and the desire to achieve more. Just as you make every effort to prepare your students for life beyond the classroom, the Marine Corps strives to help every Marine reach his or her potential. We look forward to building relationships in your school community and working with you to identify those individuals who possess the fighting spirit to take on the challenge of securing our nation. Please accept our invitation to learn more by visiting connect.marines.com.

And we're now back with Marianne. So Capital High School, it sounds like it's a newly-created, unique, alternative school and it was a shift in how your district worked for the past 30 years. And I know that you had involvement in creating this new school. Because of that you had to shift your programming and also had to shift to adjust to this new type of school. So how did your school counseling program adjust in a way that honors the resilience that students bring from their lives and builds on this so that they can foster a college capable mindset.

Marianne Matt:

Thank you for asking that. And honestly, I'm trying to flip the narrative as well. And instead of saying alternative, I feel like it's antiquated and I feel like it's stigmatizing for students, because I've seen it in scholarship applications, I've seen students write about it, so we're a choice school because the old alternative idea was that you might be sent there. Students and families choose to come to our school and they can choose to leave. So that's why we say choice school.

Jen Walsh:

That's a good point.

Marianne Matt:

Yep. There's two choice schools in our district actually. So we're privileged for that, but we're still small and we still need to grow so we can serve more students. But truly we did. We collapsed about seven in programs that were serving ninth through 12th graders across the city. I had taught in one of them. They were wonderful programs, but students weren't able to start and end their high school career within those programs, so they were bouncing between programs, which then interrupted their learning for these students who were already marginalized. That was why my principal at the time decided to close those programs and start Capital High, so students had that full continuous experience that shifted my programming because I was traveling to seven different sites within my first two years of counseling. And that was challenging. You can only do so much when you're traveling all over the place and trying to see students when you're able to see them.

I didn't have comprehensive school counseling curriculum at that time. I was really just piecemeal-ing together what was needed because there was a ninth grade program, a 10th grade program, an 11th and 12th grade program, a full senior program. So everyone needed something different and so I wasn't ever able to build that. So then once we became a school, then I was able to really start focusing on that full comprehensive school counseling curriculum so that way my students have a through line from ninth through 12th grade building upon lessons that they've had in ninth grade, 10th grade, 11th grade, 12th grade. So that way, by the time there is senior, they do have an idea of where they're going. They do understand what it takes to get there and they will have a plan. They'll graduate with a plan, whether it's to go onto school right away or to some kind of career, but they will graduate with a plan. And that is I think the biggest key of becoming a full school versus a bunch of programs.

Jen Walsh:

Going from six different sites into one, I mean that in and of itself requires a lot of change and adjustment. That continuous experience in one school can make all of the difference.

So your principal, Karyn Stocks Glover, she described you as a school counselor committed to disrupting systems of oppression. And she goes on to say that you are committed to the personal work of examining white supremacy culture and how it permeates your professional and personal life. So what are three quick ways someone can start disrupting systems of oppression in their school today? I think that is such a daunting task, right? And there's so much that needs to change. And a lot of school counselors may not know where to start. So what are three practical ways that somebody could start that work today?

Marianne Matt:

Thank you for asking. I think this is the work of our time, and especially as school counselors, it is part of our ethical duty. There's an ASCA position statement around this, so it is part of our ethical duty to be culturally responsive, to disrupt these systems of oppression.

So my tips are, start with yourself. It definitely starts with ourselves. We have to be able to check our biases. We have to be aware of them and we have to continually counter them. It's not work that stops. This is lifelong work because these are deeply ingrained things. How you were raised, where you live, all of those things, you have to be able to recognize them within yourself. So starting with that. There's a book I would recommend called Interrupting Racism. It's a great book to start with just personal work.

The next thing would be to examine your comprehensive school counseling curriculum because what you're doing in your school building, you want to make sure that you're not causing any harm. You want to make sure that you're not excluding anyone. You want to make sure that, for example, when you're talking about FAFSA, you include students that might be independent students or considered independent on the, FAFSA foster students, students who are parents, students who have been in the criminal justice system. We want to make sure that when we are speaking, we are including everyone and not excluding everyone, anyone I should say. Again, like I said, this is continual work. So you might find something one year that it was really glaring and you make that change. And then three years later you find something else because you have learned that much more. So again, continual work.

And then school counselors, we're leaders, that's part of who we are. So we're leaders in the building. We want to encourage our colleagues to join us. We can lead an affinity group. We could lead a book group. We can offer suggestions to our administration. I know at our school we have collectively worked with the book called Culturally Responsive Teaching in the Brain by Zaretta Hammond. This is about how to build learning partnerships and trusting relationships with students, very key for our teachers, but also really important for any staff in the building. Anything that you can do, I would say to help you grow your colleagues, is going helpful for the school in general and for students and their families.

Jen Walsh:

Absolutely. Thank you for sharing that. So shifting gears a little bit, I also hear that you are into roller derby. Sounds like fun. What is your team's name and what is your favorite part about roller derby and what surprised you about it when you first got into it?

Marianne Matt:

Yeah. Well, full disclosure, I am retired from roller derby now. My body couldn't take it anymore and it takes up a lot of time, but I will still talk about roller derby because it's beautiful. Honestly roller Derby, I started before I was a counselor and it is what gave me the confidence and the ability to move forward and become a school counselor because I needed that extra push, being surrounded by powerful humans, but roller derby in Madison, is now called the Madison Roller Derby. I was on the Reservoir Dolls. I was also on the traveling team called the Dairyland Dolls and we traveled all over the country playing roller derby. A lot of teamwork, a lot of tenacity and grit was required, but roller derby really, truly, when we were traveling, we found that it was like a sorority. I was never in a sorority in college, but we felt like anywhere we went, it was a sisterhood that we would be able to find and immediately have a community, whether we were in Seattle or Austin or New York, we were able to find that community. And I think that that is what helped me understand how to be even a better part of a school team, because I understand how teams work.

Jen Walsh:

That's really cool. I love those names.

Marianne Matt:

Oh I should say my roller derby name was Pain Mansfield like Jane Mansfield.

Jen Walsh:

Oh, that's so funny. So you have special names too. I knew the teams had fun names, but I didn't know you took on a different name as well.

Marianne Matt:

There are some more modern roller derby players that don't, but back when I was playing, we definitely all had some fun names.

Jen Walsh:

Love it. We wrap up each episode with asking our guest what inspires or motivates you?

Marianne Matt:

My students. And I know that every school counselor probably will say that, but truly it's the resilience that my students have. They in the face of whatever obstacles, whatever barriers, whatever trauma, they continue to show up, they continue to come to the school building. And every time they come in that door, it means that they want to be here. No matter what their mood is, they're showing up, and that resilience right there is what excites me. I love having conversations with students. I love getting to know them and just knowing that they have bright futures is what motivates and drives me every day.

Jen Walsh:

Great. Well thank you so much for being here. We really appreciate you taking the time to talk with us today and congratulations again.

Marianne Matt:

Oh, thank you so much.

Jen Walsh:

Thank you all for listening. We hope to have you back on our next episode, but until then be sure to check out our website, schoolcounselor.org for school counselor resources. We'd also love to engage with you on all of our social media platforms. Find us on Facebook at the American School Counselor Association, Twitter @ASCA tweets and Instagram @weareasca.

Thanks and hear from you soon. I'm Jen Walsh. This has been, I Hear You Say, the podcast from the American School Counselor Association.