

Listen. Create. Motivate.

Professionally curated podcasts on
School Readiness, Attendance, Extended Learning
and High-Quality Instruction



Episode 54: Interview with Marian Clowes

Becky Lewis: Hello listeners and hello Sam, I'm really excited to finish our conversation on Community-School partnerships today.

Samantha Statler: Yes, so am I and I am so excited for the guests that we have and just to listen to all of the great things that I know that she's going to share with us.

Becky Lewis: Right, so we have Marian Clowes with us from the Parkersburg Area Community Foundation. Marian, thank you for being here with us today and talking about the great work that you're doing in Wood County.

So, Marian for the audience who doesn't know all the great work that you do, can you describe your current position and how you are connected with public education.

Marian Clowes: Yes, so my current position is that I am the associate director for Community leadership at the Parkersburg Area Community Foundation and that means that I oversee all of the Foundation's grantmaking programs and our leadership activities in the region, and we are a charitable foundation that serves ten counties in West Virginia and also one county in Ohio, Washington County. We're based in Parkersburg, WV, and we build permanent charitable funds for the region. Our goal is to make sure that our region has the resources that it needs to respond to the ongoing challenges that we all face.

So, in our grant making program, we do a lot of grant making with schools in the region. We get requests from schools and partner with schools to support the kinds of things that that they're trying to do. So that's kind of our connection with various schools in Wood County, and schools throughout the region that we work together to make sure that the needs that they have are being met and that we can supplement. Some of the funding that they get more routinely through the school system to help them do special projects that they might not otherwise be able to do.

Samantha Statler: Yeah, so Marian, that really sounds like you know you wear several different hats and that you know your job definitely helps. Like you said, with those grants and just those foundational pieces for other organizations to be able to do things in their community. So, as far as the Wood County Reads group goes, can you just tell me a little bit about what it is and how it was formed?

Marian Clowes: Yeah, well I'm so excited about Wood County Reads and what we've been able to do in the county. And it really started one of my roles at the foundation, which is also to work with donors who have interests in supporting things in the Community. And we have a particular donor that I've been working with. His name is half Esmond Shade and he is really passionate about reading and making sure that we grow good readers and the community, lifelong readers, because he believes that reading is truly a fundamental part of being successful in life is too. Be well read to reach out and learn as much as you can through reading.

So, he has funded a number of things related to reading in the community, and we were together one day talking about reading and we actually had Brian rates with us, who's the director of the Parkersburg and Wood County Public Library. And we were just talking about the importance of reading and how passionate we all felt about reading. And we started talking about there are lots of organizations in the community that are working on reading, but we don't know how well connected they are, and we find that with a lot of things in the community there are a lot of groups working on things, and sometimes they might be connected and sometimes they could be better connected so that together they can accomplish more than they can individually.

So, we started to brainstorm about who was working on reading issues in the community. Of course, the school system is the, you know, it comes to mind first because they're you know their role reading instruction and promoting the love of reading is so fundamental. And of course, we thought about the libraries in our community. And then we thought beyond that, you know what other groups are engaged with reading. So, we thought about Read-Aloud. And we thought about the Extension Service because they offer programs like Energy Express in the summer that are focused on. And other nonprofit groups like the boys and Girls Club here locally and the YMCA because they're doing after school instruction and

part of that is to work on reading and to build reading skills among the students that they serve.

So, we decided to have a meeting and invited everybody to come to talk about reading and our very first meeting which was really exciting. I think we had like 20 people who came to our first meeting, so we were like we're onto something here if we have 20 people are willing to come out for a meeting. We actually, I remember our first meeting, had to bring in more chairs. We were at one of the branches of the library and we had to find more chairs. Yes, there were more people kept coming, so that was very exciting, and we just started to talk about what or, you know, initially kind of started talking about what is everybody doing kind of separately and then have tried to move more towards what can we do collaboratively?

So that was a long answer, but that's the origin and I can get into more detail about some of the things that we're working on now if you'd like me to?

Becky Lewis: Some point, yeah, I will definitely have you explain more to us about the work that you're currently doing. But I know Sam and I have been grateful and lucky enough to sit in on some Wood County Reads meetings and they have been wonderful, because seeing that partnership that you were just describing and looking at how we can work together, and not duplicate efforts is really powerful. I've seen it grow and evolve, because I've kind of been there from the beginning watching on the sidelines as this has come to where it is today.

Samantha Statler: And I've had the opportunity to sit in on two of the Wood County Reads meetings so far, and I'm telling you every time when those meetings are over, I'm like on fire to go teach like I'm just so excited and it's just so amazing that you know you all took that step to get those community members together. And you know, to talk about those things that are important for the students in Wood County. So, I'm also excited to be able to sit in on those and listen to the great things I know you all are doing.

Marian Clowes: Yeah, there's a lot of energy there. I think every meeting is energizing because everybody is excited about the work, and we've had continued great attendance at our meetings even through the challenging times that we've had over the past two years where we've had to have different types of formats for getting together, you know virtual or hybrid or whatever the case

may be, but everybody keeps coming back and to me that is a sign that what the work that we're doing is important. Everybody is excited about it and wants to continue that work and the group came up with the name Wood County Reads.

The group came up with that name early on and that was exciting too that we kind of collaboratively came up with a name to represent the work that we're trying to do together.

Becky Lewis: So, in the last episode, Sam and I looked at a white paper that was titled nine elements of effective school community partnerships and to address student mental health, physical health, health, and overall Wellness. And we learned from that White Paper that one of the elements was having a person or persons located at the school to lead the coordination of school and community partnerships. So, thinking about that, how did you get the ball rolling with working with people from the schools?

Marian Clowes: Well, as I mentioned, we have a lot of past relationships or ongoing relationships with the school system, so I already had some personal contacts in the school system and then brainstorming with somebody like Brian rates from the library where the library had worked with people in the school system. So, he was able to add some additional ideas about who else we should engage and then kind of each person you talk to kind of that recommends, or as another person.

So, I think that the fact that the Community Foundation has, you know, had a long history of engaging with the schools and supporting things in the school system kind of gives an opening, uh, already opening or people are willing to engage in partner with us and then just getting suggestions from others about who were the right people in the school system to involve it really was pretty easy. We were fortunate in this county to have this kind of open partnership and lots of cooperation and collaboration. So, everybody wanted to join the effort and was excited about it. And we were excited to be able to play the role of helping to convene the group, because we're not experts by any means here at the Community Foundation, it's all the people who come to the meeting who have the expertise. We're good at bringing people together and seeing how we can partner and helping to nurture that, and they're good at bringing the expertise to the table and knowing what the real needs are and how to address them.

Becky Lewis: And one thing that I really like is that you don't have one person from the school system that is a part of Wood County Reads. There are multiple people involved which I think is great because Wood County is one of our larger districts and they have a lot of people that do a lot of different things within the district itself, so it's great to help those people connect with each other. And these outside organizations as well.

Marian Clowes: Yeah, I think we're up to if we keep adding people from the school system, which is awesome. So, I think we may have even had four or five at the last meeting, because like you said, there are different roles and different things that they're involved with. So, we welcome anybody who wants to come to the table. We welcome them for sure.

Samantha Statler: Yeah, and so when talking about you know how often that their group meets. Can you just kind of like talk about that? How often do you meet and what kinds of conversations and what kind of work is taking place at these meetings?

Marian Clowes: We're meeting quarterly, so we meet every three months, and initially I'd say we started out with a lot of information sharing, like who is doing what, tell us about the programs that you're offering. Tell us about the services that you have and then as we got to know each other better, I think we've moved and evolved more towards collaborative work. So, kind of looking at what are some ideas that we have to be able to kind of push the needle a little further. What else can we do? And for example, we had a long conversation a couple meetings ago about promoting West Virginia authors, how could we do more to make students and people in the Community aware of these great authors that we have who are from or have a strong connection to the state of West Virginia and from data?

A little group has formed out of our larger group. And that includes people from the schools and libraries to put together a partnership. They have an idea of implementing a program that would involve library personnel going into the schools to do programming around a West Virginia author with a particular theme for each month, potentially starting in the fall. And then a follow-up program at the library so that families would be encouraging to connect with their local library to go to the library and see the resources there and kind of continue that

learning, and I think we can even connect that in with some of the other groups like the YMCA or the boys and Girls Club to see how we can partner them in as well.

So, we've moved from information sharing to. How can we work together to do? Some new and exciting things and I think it's been great to see that progression. So, the agenda is really shaped around what projects we're working on or what ideas we want to discuss. Sometimes we have a kind of a highlighted speaker. The meeting prior to the last meeting, there were some questions around how reading instruction takes place in Wood County schools. What's the curriculum like? How has that been changing in recent years based on research and science? So, we had Ashley Beatty from Wood County schools do a great presentation that really you know deeply went deep into talking about how that how that instruction takes place in the school system and how it's shaped by current research. And I think that was a really great discussion.

So sometimes we'll have a featured speaker and then we move into more discussion of projects that we're working on together, or new ideas or, you know, we're also trying to come up with goals that we might have as a group that we want to work towards. We're still working on that, but that's kind of how the meetings flow, and we have a lot of open discussion and the last meeting I think everybody was so excited.

We tried to keep it to an hour and a half because we know everybody is busy and everybody has a lot on their plate, but we just I felt like the last meeting I had I kept having to stop conversation because there was so much great conversation going on. People were so excited, but we had other things that we had to cover. So again, I think that's a great sign that this work is worthwhile, and that people are happy to be, you know, excited about being engaged and happy to be part of it.

Samantha Statler: Yeah, I was. I was going to say, you know there is definitely you have to keep everyone on track with the time because like you said we do get into some really good conversations and ask questions. And you know, listening to ideas so there is definitely no time wasted. You know, during this collaborative process, and that's just that's so awesome. you can just feel everyone's you know passion. And you know, kind of mentioned Marian the overall goal of the group.

So can you just talk a little bit more about you know, how that was decided, and you know, does that kind of change over time. or how do you check in with that?

Marian Clowes: Yeah, we've had a couple of great discussions about what is our overall goal and purpose. And you know what is the thing that we're all trying to drive towards and two meetings ago I think it was one of our group members who came up with this really great statement. I'll go ahead and I'm going to read it so that I get it right, but the statement was our goal is to encourage the love of reading and lifelong learning by elevating the reading level of children and adults in Wood County. The group works toward this goal by sharing ideas supporting each other and collaborating on program. I just thought that was a great way to capture what we're trying to do with this group. And it's sort of a mission statement. I would say about why we are getting together.

And like I said from that, we're trying to think about some more specific objectives or goals, like are we trying to raise literacy levels? Are we trying to increase library usage? You know, what are some things that we can measure so that we have some guideposts to see if we're making a difference in achieving what we're what we set out to do?

Becky Lewis: Yeah, I really love that statement that you shared. That's definitely one that we tried to promote here at the West Virginia Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is just helping students get that love of learning and wanting to continue to grow as learners as they you know, get older and more experienced. So, I think it's just a powerful statement like I said. So, thinking about all the successes that you all have had up to this point, I know that COVID was a big one and I was a part of this group during that COVID time. But we've seen some successes out of that. So, what has been the biggest success of this group to date?

Marian Clowes: I think the biggest success is the strengthened interest in reaching out to each other and collaborating, and there are small like small signs of that and larger signs. Another group that comes has been coming to the meetings is the Parkersburg Women Club. Because they have installed a number of free little libraries in the community, which is awesome. Of those free little libraries and read aloud at one point had some extra books that they had available. So, they connected directly with the women, and got those books to them and help to stock those free little libraries.

So, this is like a small example of how people who might not have been connected previously are now connected and can work together too, you know, because they're interested in the same goals. So those small successes, I think are awesome, I know that I'm really excited about some of the things that we're planning that are coming up like this West Virginia authors project. There's a particular author that the group is looking at bringing in to speak to some Wood County schools in the spring. So, I'm excited about that as well. So that it's seeing that collaborative spirit grow. That I think that's has been our biggest success.

Becky Lewis: That collaboration, I think that's the thing that hinders most groups that get together. They don't know how to collaborate and then inevitably they're duplicating efforts. So yeah, even the tiniest piece for that collaboration is great. But thinking about successes, we know there's also been some challenges. So, what has been the biggest challenge that you have faced as a group so far?

Marian Clowes: I think the biggest challenge is maybe the obvious one was COVID and I think that making it harder to connect. We have been great about continuing our connections through virtual meetings and things like that, but as you all know, just from your own work, I'm sure that you lose a little bit in not being able to be together in person. So, I think that has been a challenge. But I think we've done great it Despite that challenge. And I think the second challenge was at least early on, moving from information sharing to collaborative action that you know takes a little bit of trust building and getting to know each other first.

So, you have to spend some time initially just sharing information. You know and get to know each other and build that trust. But now that we're, I think, two years into it, we're seeing that that's now moving towards collaborative action and program development that people are working together. So, I think we have moved through that challenge pretty quickly, which is great. Because sometimes that can take a while with groups to move beyond just the, you know, getting together and saying, well, we're doing this and we're doing that, and that's all very helpful to know what each other is working on, but it's even more helpful if you can figure out ways to come together and do even more by collaborating.

Samantha Statler: And you know, I know that we mentioned earlier from the White Paper that the article that Becky and I read that it is so important that you

have to have someone in the school system to collaborate with. And you mentioned, you know, not only there's not just one, there are several from the Wood County School district that take part in these meetings. So, what can you share with our listeners on how do you like to continue to strengthen and keep that relationship strong with the school district? How do you do that?

Marian Clowes: I think that you know by bringing value you know bringing additional value to the work that they're trying to do so that can be through bringing in, you know organizations who can supplement the work that they're trying to do, like the libraries can come in and do programming, and that helps their you know teachers and adds to the curriculum, and you know frankly, another piece I think is funding because we are a funder and because we have, you know, a donor connection and individual who is passionate about this topic and is willing to support a good project that we can bring funding to the table so that when ideas develop, we can actually say yes we can, you know help with when funding is needed we can step in and help provide that funding to move things forward. So, I think that's a kind of an incentive to is that we're not just talking about ideas, but we're investing in those ideas so that we can be sure that they can actually happen, and they can happen effectively.

Becky Lewis: I love that piece because often I think our ideas do get stopped right there because we hit that funding wall and we're not sure what to do next about it. Our hope for this episode is that our listeners will be able to take some tips and advice and just some of the things that you have shared back to their communities to build a partnership like the one that Wood County Reads has in Wood County. Thinking about that, and that's what our goal is for listeners that are out there, what advice would you have for them if they wanted to start to form a group such as Wood County Reads?

Marian Clowes: Well, I think you have to you need to have somebody or some organization that's willing to take the lead, at least to be the convener, and that can be anyone. It doesn't have to be a Community Foundation that happened to be the case in our community, but it could be somebody from the school system. It could be somebody from the library or somebody from another organization that's engaged in the promotion of reading and working on reading skills.

So, you need a kind of somebody willing to be that backbone. That person who's going to call people together and find a space and create an agenda and then you just need to start brainstorming about all the different organizations that might be interested in joining the effort, and to think outside the box, it's not just the schools in the libraries, but you know there are other groups that are playing a role and can and want to play it roll so you know it's got to start with at least a person who's interested in getting it going and then think about the other people. And I think that they'll find that if you bring people together and have a good discussion that people will be interested and want to continue to participate, and so you that's what you got to keep focusing on. Because after a period of time you know people could lose interest if they don't feel like the time is valuable. So, you've got to make sure that the time is well spent.

Becky Lewis: I think you've definitely done that because during the pandemic. Even though we were in the information sharing stage, everybody was still excited, and they were helping each other brainstorm about what extended learning programming could look like, how could they get books in the hands of children, how could they have people still coming to the library in a safe capacity, and I thought that was so great to see that collaboration piece happen and it was because you brought the people together and they were really excited about what you were talking about.

Marian Clowes: Yeah, I agree. Everybody has been excited and it's great to see that enthusiasm and I think it's this has been a really fruitful partnership and I think it will continue to be so.

Becky Lewis: Well Marian thank you for joining us and for coming on to talk about this partnership, I think it's going to be incredibly valuable to everyone out there listening.

Marian Clowes: Yeah, I hope it inspires some others to think about doing the same in their communities. That would be a great result to share that model with other communities and see them get on board as well.