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Becky Lewis: Hello fellow educators and welcome to a new year and a new episode of the leaders of Literacy Podcast. I'm Becky Lewis, one of your hosts and today helping me bring in the New Year is my co-host, Samantha Statler and special guest Amber Nichols who is the West Virginia 2023 teacher of the Year. Today, Amber is going to tell us about her educational journey. Welcome to the leaders of Literacy, Podcast, engage and educational. Strengthen early literacy in West Virginia. Are you ready to become a leader of literacy?

Samantha Statler: Welcome listeners, we have a special treat for you today. Becky and I are sitting down to have a conversation with the 2023 West Virginia teacher of the Year, Amber Nichols.

Becky Lewis: Amber, thank you for being here and congratulations on your big win.

Amber Nichols: Hey thanks. I'm so excited to be. Here and talk with you guys.

Becky Lewis: So, Amber, you're no stranger to our show and I just want to put that out there for the audience. I was fortunate enough to get to sit down with you shortly after the pandemic began, and basically in the beginning of the infancy of this podcast, so I really want to encourage listeners to go back and listen to that episode but before we dive in just to get them reacquainted with you, or acquainted with you, if they haven't listened to this episode, can you please tell our listeners a little bit about yourself and your background in education?

Amber Nichols: Sure, gosh the pandemic seems like so long ago, but so just around the block, right? My name is Amber Nichols. I'm in my 21st year of teaching and began teaching in 2001. I am currently teaching kindergarten, and that's where I've spent most of my educational career. I did a few years in special education, and I really think that's where my heart and my passion, you know is, is in special education and in early literacy. I am in Monongalia County. I teach at Eastwood Elementary school. We are a green school, which is a really cool experience to get to do. I've traveled a little bit and I've taught in Arizona. I did a little stint of teaching in Pennsylvania, and then I've been in Monongalia and

Jefferson Counties. I love what I do. I feel blessed to get to be in the classroom every day and in my personal life I'm a momma and I have three kids of my own and I'm married to my best friend. You know, we really like our life here in Morgantown and just feel really blessed to get to do what I do every day.

Samantha Statler: Yeah, thanks for sharing that with us. You gave me chills. You're just so happy and sharing all the great things that you've done in education and that's wonderful. You said in most of your teaching career you've taught kindergarten and I remember when I was teaching first grade, you know, people didn't think there was a big difference but there's a huge difference. What you do is a wonderful job and people don't understand how much credit kindergarten teachers really need to receive because what you do is challenging every day.

Amber Nichols: Yes, we really get to train them to be people, right? This is usually their first experience, and this is actually the first year I've had where not many kids went to preschool because of the pandemic, so this is really their first experience away from mom and dad, so to take them from that to reading on a level D by the end of the year, yeah, we do need some props.

Samantha Statler: Right, it's a little bit of a challenge. So, receiving the Teacher of the Year award is a great honor. Would you mind just telling us a little bit about your teaching philosophy?

Amber Nichols: Sure, I truly believe that kids should be safe, loved, and appreciated. You know, those are three simple words but I feel like we make the most headway when our kids feel those things. You know, our kids are coming to us from so many different backgrounds and so safety has to be first, right? We must make sure their basic needs are being met, and that's harder by the year. I think you know in the span of my career and just the 20 years that I've been doing this, it's getting harder to meet those demands. You know our kids are not coming to us with their basic needs being met, so that's the first one, and then the next one is loved. I really, truly believe that our relationships with our kids is what matters. You know, a kid will learn from you and a kid will respond when they have that relationship with you so that's the second and then they need to be appreciated. You know, appreciated for what they do, especially now more than ever. Our kids are coming to us with some heavy backpacks and to make them

feel appreciated and set that purpose for learning, so that's really my teaching philosophy for sure.

Samantha Statler: And I really like how you said their basic psychological needs have to be met. They have to feel safe. They have to feel cared about, so I really like how you said you really have to care about the whole child, and I think sometimes thinking about test scores and data, you know, sometimes that might get lost in the mix, so that's wonderful.

Amber Nichols: Absolutely, absolutely.

Samantha Statler: And can you tell us a little bit about just the message you hope to send to other West Virginia educators during your reign?

Amber Nichols: Yeah, and it's really simple. You know I said this in my interview and then I said it again the night of the gala but really, there's just joy in education. I think so many times it's easier for us to look at the yeah, we have a teacher shortage. Yes, there are changes that are being made in education across our state, but we have so many things to celebrate and that's the message that I want to bring with positivity. Being in the top ten finalists and hearing the other nine teacher of the year finalists and the things that are happening in their classrooms alone and in their counties, you know, I want that message to be out and about in West Virginia. We have some really cool and amazing things that are happening, and I want us to focus on that as much as we can.

Becky Lewis: Yeah, and I think like you said, it's easy to get bogged down by the other things. And yeah, Sam and I are in a position where we're lucky enough to get to see the amazing work that our teachers are doing out there. So, I love that, that is part of your message.

Amber Nichols: Yeah, I think we need to spend more time on those stories, and you know it's OK to like your job. You know, it's OK. I'm a teacher and I know there are a lot of heavy things that are happening right now but I love coming to work every day and I think that's the message that sometimes gets lost in the shuffle is that it's OK to like your job even though or in spite of all of the things that are happening right now.

Becky Lewis: Yeah, I love that. So, I want to go back Amber because I know this about you because I've been friends with you for a while, but let's go back to your

first day in the classroom. I think this story is so impactful and it could have set up your whole view for the rest of your teaching career in a positive or negative way and I just would like you to share that story.

Amber Nichols: Sure. I actually didn't go to school to be an educator. My undergraduate degree is not in education. I have a broadcasting degree. I was determined to work for PBS and to do children's broadcasting. I knew that I wanted to influence children and I've known that since I knew what I wanted to be when I grew up. I mean, I think I knew at the age of five that I wanted to work with kids and do TV. And I married my high school sweetheart. He was a marine and we were shipped to the other side of the world, and I found out that you could be a teacher in Arizona with a four year degree, so I took a job teaching computer skills in an elementary school and I fell in love with it. The second I stepped foot into my classroom I was like, this is where I'm supposed to be. Well, the beloved kindergarten teacher had cancer and she couldn't return. And so, someone needed to fill her spot and I was pretty successful in those first couple of weeks in teaching computer skills and I took her position and my first day in kindergarten was September 11th, 2001, which you know when you tell people that they're like, really?! And that's exactly when I stepped foot into my kindergarten classroom, and I know that kindergarten is where I was born to be. I mean this is where I'm supposed to be. But it was September 11, 2001, so we were on the West Coast and you know the events were unfolding as we were getting to work and our principal called all of the military wives to the office and there were seven of us and she said, you know, I don't know what this day is going to bring for any of us, but especially, you know, the seven of you, if you need to leave right now and get the affairs in order in your house I'll cover your class. Here I am 22 years old right out of school, and this is my first day in my classroom and I'm looking around and there's a rank in military wives. It's unspoken, but there is a rank and the Lieutenant colonel's wife jumped in and I tell people all the time she could have said we're out of here and I would have just followed suit and we would have gone home, but what she said just stuck with me. And it's kind of become my mantra, she said no, we are here for the kids, and we have each other. And it was like that ultimate mic drop and we just all marched right back in our classrooms and I just felt like that was my sense of purpose, you know, we were there for the kids. We had each other. This is what

we were going to do, and you know that's really just stuck with me and you know, especially during COVID when it was like, no, we're here for the kids. We have each other. We're going to get through this and so yeah that was my first day of teaching, September 11, 2001.

Becky Lewis: And I love that as a former military wife, because I totally get the rank and the hierarchy that's there and like I said, that could have made or broke your teaching career because of that, so, it's great that you had that inspiration.

Amber Nichols: Yes, yes, I carry it with me every day.

Becky Lewis: We kind of touched on this a little bit Amber, but we do know that being an educator can be overwhelming at times, especially in the wake of the pandemic. Teachers are feeling more burnout and stressed than ever before. They're having new pressures put on them. So, it's always great to hear what others do to cope. So, when you're feeling stressed or overwhelmed, what do you do to kind of alleviate these feelings and emotions?

Amber Nichols: Yeah, it's funny. I just sat with a group of first year teachers and really talked them through, you know, looking at these burnout rates, especially in those first five years of teaching we're seeing that more so now than ever before. And I told them I said you have to find your tribe. We have to find our tribe and I rely on my tribe more and more as the years go on and my tribe just happens to be in my school which is amazing. You know relying on that team and you know having those people that you can really just share with, and I think it's important that we do that with educators, right? No one else gets our life more than we do. And so, to have that tribe of educators or a mentor or someone that you can say you know, this is happening, and I just can't process it. You know, I've got a pretty heavy case in my class right now and this kid is going through a lot and I'm really having a hard time processing it myself and just to have that educator that I can ask, what would you do in this situation? Or I'm feeling this way, is that OK? You know we need validation. We need that. So, I told that group of educators you know they're in their first year that they need to find their tribe, find their people and rely on them. And I think that's just really an important valuable thing through life, and I think it's important as educators to say you know, I don't know the answer and it's OK. I think our field more than anyone, we're expected to just know. And you know it's OK. I've been doing this for a long

time, and I've got this really cool title now and I don't have all the answers. And that's OK. That is OK. You know, when your heart is in it, and our heart is here for the kids, you will seek out the answers when you don't know them. But it's OK to say that you don't know. And I think that's been a saving grace for me is having that tribe of people and people that you know are going to have your back no matter what.

Becky Lewis: Yeah, I love that because like you said, it's really true for all of life. You have to have your tribe, whether it's personal, or professional, in every facet of your life because it's hard. Life is hard. It's messy, teaching is hard and messy, and you need those people to be able to bounce ideas off of and have that support. And it's really easy to see those people that are very negative and latch on to them, so it's very important to find the people that you click with and that are going to be supportive of the things that you're doing.

Amber Nichols: Sure, absolutely.

Beck Lewis: I know that working with your families and supporting them is a huge part of the work that you do in your classroom, but I just want to talk a little bit about how you encourage your families to support their child's education, especially in the wake of the pandemic.

Amber Nichols: Yeah, I'm so blessed to work in a county that believes in home visits in kindergarten. So, we started from the beginning. You know we make those home visits. We make those connections early. I am a firm believer in parent communication and that is good, bad, ugly and all the above. You know, really working with families and letting them know that I am a team member, I am not the team leader. I'm a team member for their child and really encouraging that from the get go I think is important. I'm also a huge believer in data notebooks and the student lead conferences and that can happen in the early childhood setting and that's you know, really important that kids take that ownership too. They're an important part of the team, and so I think setting those boundaries early and getting the kids involved and the parents involved is important. I like to do good phone calls home. You know I'm making calls home very frequently and they're good, they're great calls. I think that when you get a call from the teacher and it's always negative, that's a problem. You know, really setting that standard of hey, your kid has had a great day and I wanted to share,

this is what I saw, and I want you to celebrate it with me and I'm huge on finding them in different ways. I have a Facebook page and we use remind. I am emailing the newsletter and I'm sending a paper copy. It's extra work on my end per say. But honestly, when the parents get the message, it's less work for me in the long run. So, I just really set that standard of communication, communication, communication.

Samantha Statler: Yeah, and you just shared so many great things. I think the home visits, they can be very powerful, so it's wonderful that you're able to do that and also sharing about communicating with families for positive reasons. I know whenever I was teaching, students sometimes would get a reward at the end of the week and one of the choices was a positive note home and I had so many students who would choose that because they were just so excited to go home and tell their family I had a great day and look what Miss Samantha said, so that's really wonderful.

Amber Nichols: Awesome, I love that! I'm stealing that.

Samantha Statler: Yeah, and Becky and I recently did a podcast about family engagement and the definition of family engagement is doing with the families not doing for and I think you just really hit the nail on the head with that listening to all the things you do.

Amber Nichols: I think that's important. I think that's so important, especially and I don't know about the upper grades, but I definitely know here in this early childhood world, it's really just modeling and working with families, not for them. We're setting that stage, you know it's 12 plus years that we're hoping for their kiddos and I agree, I think it's definitely with and not a for, for sure.

Samantha Statler: It takes a lot of passion to be in education and it's important to have that love for teaching to be an educator. So, can you tell us about what you love most about educating our youngest learners?

Amber Nichols: Oh my goodness, there are so many things that I love. I love seeing a kiddo who doesn't have the best home life, or the best background find success. I love seeing kids feel successful. You know, I'm really passionate about building confidence and building it in all my kiddos. You know we're all coming to school with something, even those kiddos that are cognitively on par, or those

kids that are behaviorally on par. Everyone's coming to school with something in their backpack and just, I've really been big on this, like in spite of, in spite of what you're going through finding success. My middle child is very ill, and she has a life threatening illness and things are hard for her but finding her in spite of has really just ignited this fire in me that we all have things that we're dealing with and just getting kids to be successful and that can be so simple. You know that could be writing our name today but reading at the end of the year. I love celebrating kids and celebrating their successes. I get really passionate about a kiddo who finds success and just having them hold on to that. I really think that our jobs, what we do, we are so influential, we are so powerful and to be able to use that to have a kid find their way. Gosh, I mean, how lucky are we? How lucky are we?

Samantha Statler: And I love that too, that helping your students find something that they can be successful at. You know whether it's writing their name or maybe tying their shoe. It just seems like you really try to help all of your students kind of find that moment where they can build that confidence. And like you said, they're going to start carrying that with them through the rest of their educational life, so you know your position is really important for our youngest learners, for sure. So, what advice would you share with some of those who might be interested in becoming a teacher? What would you share with them?

Amber Nichols: Teaching is a calling. So, if you have that call, follow it, go do it. You know, I had so many roadblocks coming back to West Virginia from Arizona. I did teach and had a really successful teaching career there, but when we transferred back here, you know I wasn't able to get right back into the classroom, so I had a lot of stumbling blocks. And you know, going back and getting my masters with two small kiddos, and you know, I did have some things that would have deterred me from teaching, but it was just right there that fire in my belly. So, I say if you have that, first of all, we need you. We need good people in this field. The future of West Virginia is really, truly in our classrooms and it's in our hands, and so we need good people here. So, if you have that call, follow it and do it and do it to the best of your ability because our kids deserve it.

Becky Lewis: Thank you Amber. It's so great to have you on again.

Amber Nichols: Yes, yes it was so great to be here anytime, anytime I will talk about education and our kids in the state of West Virginia. I'm just so passionate

about it and I can't wait to see where education in the state of West Virginia goes from here. I think we're in a pivotal spot and I think it's just it's time to elevate it and our kids deserve it.

Becky Lewis: For links to. All the resources discussed in today's episode and for additional information please visit our website at marshall.edu/ELTAC/podcast. Want to learn more about being a leader of literacy? Be sure to like and subscribe to the podcast so you don't. Thanks for listening.