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Samantha Statler: Welcome back listeners. On our last episode, Becky and I sat down with the 2023 West Virginia teacher of the Year Amber Nichols, and today we have the opportunity to talk with the 2023 West Virginia Service personnel of the Year. Jessica Gross Jessica. Congratulations on your win. I'm sure you're so excited and that really is just such an amazing.

Jessica Grose: Yes, I am. Thank you so much. It's such an honor.

Becky Lewis: So Jessica, thank you for being here and making this possible. We're just really excited to share your story with our audience. But before we get started talking about the amazing things that you're doing in our classrooms, I thought it would be great if you could tell our audience a little bit about yourself and how you got to this point in education.

Jessica Grose: My name is Jessica Grose and I'm from Upshur County. I'm married to my husband Rob. We've been married for almost 20 years, and we have three wonderful children. 's education's always been a passion for me. I was a young girl that I wanted to be in the education field. And honestly, my whole life has been around education. My mom's a retired schoolteacher. So, education has always been the heartbeat in our family. My first job was as a babysitter, and I knew that I loved kids. Then when I was young. And then I went and worked with special needs adults, and I realized that that really wasn't my thing that I wanted to be with children. So, I worked in a head start facility and that was great and then my kids got into the. The school setting and I was like I could just be with them. Let me just go be a substitute and work here because the secretary was like you're here all the time. You might as well just come. Get a job and I was. Like oh, that would be great. I could be an aide and she's like, yeah you could. And so, I applied and got the job and now I've been here for 11 years now, and I don't see myself going anywhere else. I love being in the education field.

Samantha Statler: Yeah, and I can definitely relate to what you're sharing about like your mom is a retired teacher. I also come from a family of educators, both of my parents are actually retired educators, but are now working full-time again in the educational setting. Two of my aunts are actually retired teachers, so it's

definitely been something I feel like. Also, that was instilled in me very early, that education was very important and like you have always just really enjoyed working with kids. So, I can definitely relate to you with those things. Can you just tell us a little bit more about your role and your responsibilities? Just kind of on a day-to-day a basis in the classroom.

Jessica Grose: I sure can my role in the school setting is. I assist students with special needs. I'm a special education aid and with being able to help them function in a general education classroom, of course they'll have modifications. But my goal is that they will be safe, secure and loved.

Samantha Statler: And that's so important. We know that if our students. Don't feel safe, secure and love they can't be ready to learn, so I think that's really great that you keep that at the forefront of your mind too and you just have a really important position helping those kiddos. So that's really great. How do you build those positive working relationships with the teachers that you work with? Tell us a little bit about that.

Jessica Grose: That's such a good question because everyone wants to know how. I myself have built relationships with teachers. And one of the things is I just listen to them. I know as working in the school system that you need someone to listen to and I want them to know that they can trust me with anything that I'm not going to run down the hallway that I want them to know that I am. There to help them, I respect their boundaries. You know, with them to be honest with me and I'm honest with them. And at the end of the day, we celebrate like if they want to come and celebrate something, we'll have a celebration. I love celebrations and I want them to know that I am just their sounding board, that I'll be there for them, and that I have built so many relationships in my career.

Samantha Statler: Yeah, I just want to say really quickly that I agree with you. I think sometimes teachers just want someone to listen to them and that's really great when you work in a building with other educators who are willing to do that. And kind of like you said, be your soundboard. So, I really love that you shared that.

Becky Lewis: And I'm sure it's taking a long time to get to that point because I'm a former title I teacher was a classroom teacher, but you know, I had to push into teachers' classrooms too. Kind of like what you have to do on an everyday basis,

and it can be intimidating going into a teacher's classroom and not knowing their personality or where their boundaries are and really getting to know them.

Jessica Grose: Oh yes, that's definitely true because you have to like come to a common ground with them because you don't want to just go in there and step on their toes. You just you want to be, they're light like they see you coming. They're like oh yay Miss Jess is coming. I know if I need to go do something I can do it really quick, and she'll watch the kids for me for a few minutes. Just want to be I want to. Be there sounding more I want to I want them to know that I'm there for them.

Becky Lewis: Yeah, yeah, and it sounds like you do a great job at it. From what you've described too. So, on the flip side of that, we know how important relationships with teachers are, but we know that the student, teacher, and student, aide relationship is really important. So how do you begin working with your students on creating a relationship with them?

Jessica Grose: Well, of course that's not started day one. That takes a long, long time. Whenever I came to Hodgesville, I didn't know this child. I didn't even know his name. I didn't know he looked like I had no clue about him, but I knew that I was going to treat him just like I treated my kids at home. That I was going to love him and. We were going to become a good bond, a good relationship and how I did that was I just let him know right off the bat that I loved him. I didn't know him, but I loved him. I wanted him to know that Mitch just loved him. That she cared for him and that she wanted the best for him. I spent a lot of 1 on one time with him. And let him know that I wasn't someone that was going to judge every move he made. I wasn't going to pull him down the hall. He couldn't speak of the first time that I met him, and I was like, you know you can speak. Let me hear your words and within like two to three days. He was actually saying words to me. And his mom was. Like how did that happen? He hadn't even spoken at home and I said because I knew that he had a voice and, in my heart, I knew that he could speak. And I didn't force it upon. There are 170 some kids in our school and I know every single kid I have a relationship with every single kid, and I wanted to share with you how I build relationships with them because I know some other aides in our state would love some tips and tricks for how to build relationships with students. If you don't mind, I would love to share with that.

Becky Lewis: Absolutely, that's perfect.

Jessica Grose: I look for something like to comment like most kids wear clothes and T-shirts that they like. So, I'll say, hey Joey, I love your turtle shirt, tell me what's your favorite turtle character that goes so far? I share stories with them for my weekend. I'll be. I'll be real with them. They just. Being real with students. Go so far, they're like wow you actually have a life you don't live here at school all the time. I attend student events if they tell me that they have a wrestling meet. Today at 10:00 o'clock in the morning, I'm going to be there, uh, they might not speak to you at that game or that tournament, but they know that you were there. They see you in the stands and they know that you're the biggest supporter. One of the little girls went to a cheerleading competition and I went, and I spent all day there. And her mom said she might not have said one word to you, but the whole entire way home. All she did was talk about you. So that just makes relationships go so far and I tell each and every kid that I love them. I love kids so much that I don't even have to tell them anymore. They just know. That I care and love for them. I hope that helped out some fellow aides in the state.

Becky Lewis: Yeah, yeah, I think it does. They can definitely take away those tips and tricks and. It is important to be there for the kids and to show up because like you said, they do think that you live in the school setting. So even if they just see you out at a store, you know I've seen former students at a. Grocery store and they're like, hey, miss. Lewis, you know I didn't know you came here and if they were. Even smaller, they're. Like you, you go shopping. I thought you stayed at the store. Where do you live like? It doesn't dawn on them until you start building those relationships and they see you as a person outside of the classroom so I can really relate to that. So, you talked a little bit about, you know, the little girl's mom at the cheerleading tournament and how excited she was and telling you about that. So, I'm sure that you work really hard to build relationships with students' families as well. So how do you start that process?

Jessica Grose: That process starts with being positive. I'm never negative with any of the families I want to put myself in their shoes. I have three children and I know what it's like to have a teacher just coming to you or an educator, if anyone come to you and just gives you all the negative stuff. That's negative, I'm not like that. I send good notes home like to my one-on-one student I make good phone calls

home. I think that they need families need to know that not everything is negative in the school system. Just because you see Hodgesville Elementary school on the caller ID, they're not going to be in trouble. And I do daily check-ins I have. Empathy for these families. You have to have that, or you don't build that relationship with them, and I always use I statements. I feel this way I see it this way and that's helped so much. And then I just listen to them whenever I'm at the end of the conversation. I'll always just listen to them and get feedback from them too. And this communication is the key to building a relationship with students' families.

Samantha Statler: And that's something that Amber Nichols also discussed when we interviewed her is how she takes the time to make sure she communicates with families about positive things that their children are doing. And I think like you said, that's so important that way when they see you know your school's name on the caller ID. They're not always, "like, uh, what you know? What did she do? What did he do so?" I think that's great that you make that effort, and make sure you're sharing those positive things that you're seeing with those students. I'm sure you have had a lot of memorable moments so far in your career, but could you just share one? That kind of stands out to you.

Jessica Grose: The most memorable moment I have at this point is when a student of mine came to school. He had the worst behaviors. He made me want to quit every single day, but I came back and just kept rooting for this child he wasn't speaking. He wasn't potty trained. He just had a very hard time adjusting to school. And at this moment now he's in 1st grade and he can speak clearly in complete sentences. He could probably do a great job on a podcast. He is potty trained. He is doing unbelievably, and his math scores are amazing. His reading scores are amazing, and he loves to come to school. Now before it wasn't so much loving coming school, so he has made so much progress and I'm so proud of him. I've been his biggest cheerleader and I always will be.

Samantha Statler: Yeah, and I think you really just kind of shared the definition of resilience, and as educators you know we have to be very resilient, and you can tell just from our conversation with you that your students know that you believe in them and that you care about them. And even like you said, when you have those challenging moments and days with them that you're still going to be there

the next day, and I think that's so important. For our kids to really know that we care about them and we're going to show up for them every single day and that we believe.

Becky Lewis: E, well, and not just that. That you're not holding against them what they did earlier. Like you're giving them a fresh start every day. And I know in my career when I gave my kiddos a fresh start, either that day that hour, that moment it went so far to build our relationships so we could have those memorable moments like you're talking about and sharing.

Samantha Statler: And sometimes that's not. That's not always easy. Like and you know. What I mean, we really have to be mindful of that. Like Becky said, to really make sure each day we start fresh, and we start at the beginning with those kids. Yeah, I feel like there are often a lot of misconceptions just around the role of a teaching assistant. Could you share some tips? And tricks for building relationships with students. And could you share another thing that you would just like other teacher assistants to know about your role or maybe others who are thinking about? Maybe you know, wanting to be a teacher's assistant.

Jessica Grose: Definitely that is such a great. Question, I think the thing that is most important for people to know is that while the main goal of a teaching assistant is to provide support for the classroom teacher, the biggest focus is for us to build and maintain relationships with students. We serve students in a way that teachers can't. Always we provide support. In ways that teachers can't always. So, I would like for people to know that relationship building is our number one priority.