

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Ayers Institute “My Why” Podcast

Episode 6 – September 2018

Title: *Cicely Woodard*

SPEAKERS

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CW	Cicely Woodard	Middle School Math Teacher, 2018 TN Teacher of the Year Freedom Middle School / Franklin Special School District (Franklin, Tennessee)

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INTRODUCTION:

RM: For some it is a decision made after a moment of epiphany. For others, they can't imagine a time when they wanted to be anything else. They are teachers. They are leaders. They are life changers. These are their stories.

CW: My name is Cicely Woodard from Memphis, Tennessee, and this is “My Why.”

There's this power in believing in students, believing in the power of education, believing in them as people, believing that they can be successful. I don't take that for granted because everybody doesn't believe in them. But I do. No matter their background, their race, religion, socioeconomic status, where they come from, I believe when they walk in my door that they're going to be successful. And I expect them to be successful!

RM: Welcome to My Why: Stories of Inspiration from Educators. This podcast is presented by the Ayers Institute for Teacher Learning & Innovation and brought to you by the College of Education at Lipscomb University, where 21st century educators are prepared to involve, impact, and inspire.

My name is Rachel Milligan.

Today we are joined by Cicely Woodard an experienced teacher-leader who has served in a wide variety of roles including as a middle school math teacher and as an adjunct instructor at Vanderbilt University and Lipscomb University. Cicely was a member of the inaugural National Public Education Foundation Teacher Cabinet, and a member of the Tennessee Teacher Advisory Council, the Tennessee Assessment Task Force, and coordinator of the Tennessee Educator Fellowship with the State Collaborative on Reforming Education (SCORE). Cicely is a 2017 state level finalist for the Presidential Award for Excellence in Mathematics and Science Teaching and a 2018 Greater Nashville Alliance of Black School Educators award winner. She is currently serving as the 2018 Tennessee Teacher of the Year.

Cicely thank you so much for being here today!

CW: Thank you for having me.

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EPISODE BODY:

RM: Why did you decide to become a teacher? What was the decision point for you? What was your journey to that moment?

CW: There was a moment. There was definitely a moment.

I was a girl scout in middle and high school and in order to earn a badge, we were required to teach a younger group something. And so, I decided to go and teach a younger group of Girl Scouts some French. I remember being in the room with those girls and seeing their eyes light up when they were able to speak another language. Many of them had only had experience with English. And so, to see them be able to speak another language and to learn something new— in that moment I knew that I wanted to be a teacher.

Now, it took me a little while to figure out that I would teach math. But in high school I fell in love with math. It was challenging but there was always this concrete answer and this concrete thing that I was looking forward to. And there was such a process to get there. And I appreciate the challenge and the process of math.

It was hard for me, though. I worked hard at studying math and learning it. It did not come easy. I worked hard at learning it and I appreciated it for that. I appreciated the hard work that it took for me to get there. When I fell in love with math, I realized ‘you know what? I could be a math teacher. I could do this for some kids and help them to really understand this challenging concept.’

RM: One thing that I know about you is that you are passionate about students learning math through relevant, real-world contexts. So, why is that important to you? And why is that important for you to communicate to students?

CW: I believe that students need the opportunity to feel like math is concrete and to feel like they have some connection to it. They have so many things pulling at them in this age of technology and in this fast-paced world that we live in. And I want them to feel like the math that they're learning is connected to all of that technology. It's connected to fast pace. It's connected to what's going to help them to be successful in the future. And so, for me that's why I do it. I want them to feel connected to it, so that they can learn it.

I want them to be prepared for their futures, whatever that is. Whether that's going to college, or going to the military, or starting a career, or traveling. Whatever it is they want to do when they finish high school, I want them to be prepared to do it. And I like to use the challenge of learning math to get them there.

I know that they are going to face so many challenges in life. It's a part of life, right? As adults, we have challenges we need to overcome. And I believe that if they can face those challenges through math in my class as a middle school student, they will be prepared to face challenges in the future as adults.

RM: Can you share a particular story when you know maybe that challenge translated into triumph or translated into success with a particular student? Does a particular student rise to the top in your mind or a story?

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CW: Definitely.

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I had a student a few years ago who absolutely hated math. Miriam was her name and she told me all the time whether it was in the classroom or in the hallway or the cafeteria, "Mrs. Woodard I hate math. I just hate math. I really don't like it." And so, I would tell her, you know, "Give it a try. It's okay. It's August; it's okay. Let's— you know— give it a few weeks and we'll see how things go."

And I noticed this change in her over the time. She would ask questions. She would start working with our small group. She would volunteer to present her thinking. She wanted to share. And so, I noticed this gradual change in Mariam; and, all of a sudden, her new mantra wasn't that "I hate math." It became, "I'm really going to miss this place." She was in eighth grade and she was going off to high school the next year. And in the cafeteria, she would say, "Mrs. Woodard, I'm going to miss being here." "Mrs. Woodard I'm going to miss seeing you." "Mrs. Woodard I'm going to miss this class. I'm going to miss being here." And so, to see her change and grow like that was really amazing.

A few months ago, I got a message from her on social media and she said, "You know, Mrs. Woodard I'm graduating this year. I'm graduating from high school." And I said, "Well, Miriam what are you going to do? What's next? What are your next steps?" And she says, "Well, I want to go to college because I want to be a teacher." She said, "I'm NOT going to teach high school though. These kids they are just too undisciplined. I can't handle this but I AM going to be a teacher."

And so, I think about this child who hated math, who didn't particularly like being at school— has now decided to make school her career. She is going to influence lives, and she's passionate about it

RM: Why do you think students feel compelled to reach back out to? What do you think motivates them to do that?

CW: I think it's the understanding that teachers make a difference. That teachers have made a difference in their lives, and they want us to know it.

I remember another particular email I got from a student who had been in my class and he had been accepted to Vanderbilt University and he was so excited. He said, "You know, Mrs. Woodard I appreciate you for challenging me in class. Your math class was not easy. It was challenging, but what I experienced in your math class is going to help me to face the challenges of being an emergency room physician. That's what I want to do and I know it's going to be hard. But you taught me to face challenges and now I get to do that in my career."

That's why I show up every day. — Oh I'm getting emotional thinking about it. — But that's why I show up at school every day; so that kids can do whatever it is they want to do.

RM: Absolutely. Absolutely. You taught him so much more than math. You taught him to face challenges.

CW: Definitely.

That's what, that's why we show up, because really it's not always about the content. They're not going to always remember the specific math content, or science, or social studies, or English. They're not gonna always remember every particular musical note and how to play every particular song.

But they will remember that we taught them to face challenges. They will remember that we cared about them. They will remember that we smiled and shook their hand every time they walked into the classroom doors. They will remember that I knew their name and I cared about their story. They'll remember how

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we treated them, as teachers and how we inspired them to do great things— even though doing those great things was really tough.

RM: So, I would love for you to sum up your My Why in six words or less.

CW: To prepare students for their futures. That's My Why.

I want them to be ready for whatever it is they want to do in life, whether it's go to the military, or go to college, or start a career, or travel. I want my students to be prepared for their futures.

RM: Well Cicely, this has been an absolute pleasure getting to talk to you today. Thank you so much for being here!

CW: Thank you for having me. I've truly enjoyed being here.

CONCLUSION:

RM: As we close today's episode we encourage our listeners to consider your own sources of motivation. What inspires you to do what you do? What is your “why?” Share your ideas on social media using @AyersInstitute and the #MyWhy. Also, check out the handout including some of Cicely’s favorite resources, lessons learned, her six-word memoir, and other helpful information. This handout can be found on <http://eduTOOLBOX.org>.

Connect with Cicely on social media @Cicely_Woodard and with the Ayers Institute on Facebook and Twitter @AyersInstitute.

I'm Rachel Milligan producer and host for the My Why podcast. This episode was directed by Julia Osteen. Forest Doddington handles editing and technical production. This podcast is brought to you by Lipscomb University's College of Education.

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