

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT

Ayers Institute “My Why” Podcast
Episode 10 – September 2019
Title: *Melissa Miller*

SPEAKERS

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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.

MM: My name is Melissa Miller from Columbia, Tennessee. This is My Why.

So many of my kids will come in and they don't believe that they can do something. They come in with that mindset of already, "I can't do this. This is too hard." And being able to turn that mindset around it just fulfills me so much. They can reach the goals that together that we've set. I just feel like we've been on this journey that we're supposed to be on. Each and every child is placed in my classroom for a specific purpose.

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 Rachael Milligan.

Today we are joined by Melissa Miller a National Board-Certified Teacher who currently teaches first grade at Franklin Elementary School in Franklin, Tennessee for the Franklin Special School District. A teacher for 20 years, Mrs. Miller's enthusiasm and passion has set the tone for learning, whether teaching her students or sharing teaching strategies with adults. Mrs. Miller has the opportunity to inform education policy at the state level as a member of the Tennessee Commissioner of Education's Teacher Advisory Council. Mrs. Miller also advocates for the teaching profession as the 2019 Tennessee Teacher of the Year.

Melissa thank you so much for being here today.

MM: I'm so excited to be here.

EPISODE BODY:

RM: I've been looking forward to talking with you. And I wonder if you would start out by telling us your journey to education.

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MM: I wanted to be a teacher in kindergarten— when I was in kindergarten myself. And that's what I wanted to do when I grew up, to teach kindergarten specifically. So, I just stayed on that path of wanting to be a teacher: trying to be that superstar student; playing teacher at home with my sister; and taking home extra things I could play school. All those things that kids do that when they want to be a teacher.

And then, as I got into high school, I still wanted to be a teacher. That was actually met with a lot of discouragement that, you know, I needed to choose a path that could make more money. And I was really good at accounting, so I thought I'll be an accountant. So, I started college on the business path and got to my junior year of accounting and still in the back of my mind, you know, thinking about I really want to be a teacher. And one day, I just said, "This is it." I'm going to finish this semester in accounting, but I'm going to do what I'm really meant to do and that's teach.

And then after I graduated, I actually had the opportunity to teach with my kindergarten teacher that inspired me to be a teacher in the first place. So that was really wonderful.

RM: It strikes me that Mrs. Lee was there at your transition into being a student, and then she was there in your transition to being a teacher. What stands out to you in your mind about being that first-year teacher with Miss Lee by your side again?

MM: As a first-year teacher, you feel like you're drowning, anyway. You're keeping your head above water. You're so passionate and on fire going into teaching, setting up your first classroom, having everything just perfect. But really, you know, you have to have that person who's there for you when you feel like you're drowning, which is going to be many times during the first year. And that's okay. It's just important not to drown by yourself. You want to make sure that someone is being that lifeguard or throwing you that life preserver.

She was that person along with many other teachers that were there as teachers, when I went to school there. You know how they really poured into me. I can go through all my teachers. Mrs. Anthony, my first grade teacher, who squeeze my cheeks every single day and tell me she loved me every day before I can come in the classroom. That's something I do with my kids. I don't squeeze their cheeks. They're hugged and loved and complimented and welcomed every day.

So those things that were instilled in me then as a first grader, I do now because those are the things that stood out to me as the most important things.

RM: So, what are the "whys" that fuel your work every day?

MM: My "whys" that fuel my work every day are: to teach students to believe in themselves; to see the invisible in each and every student, because that was done for me; to help students see what they can become and to nurture their gifts; to ensure that each child feels loved; to inspire a passion for learning that is unquenchable; to give every child, every chance, every day to feel and to become successful; and to be that teacher that they never forget. Those are my "whys" and that fuels what I do every day.

RM: That's so powerful.

What's a success story that you would share about an individual student or something that just really stands out to you?

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MM: Definitely one of my favorite successes is when I think of this little girl in my class, who had so much anger inside her. So much that she would dart pencils across the room at kids. She would crawl under the table and flip chairs over. She just didn't have a way to deal with her emotions, yet. When she was faced with a struggle or trouble, she didn't know how to handle it. When she was faced with adversity or if she was faced with a difficult relationship (you know, with one of her friends), she didn't know how to deal with it— other than just break down.

So, teaching her the power of "yet." Instilling in her a growth mindset. Helping her to believe in herself and see what she can be. I noticed one day she was reading to an imaginary class. She had a book up and was flipping the pages like kids were there. And she was just reading away. And I said, "You know you would make an excellent teacher! You're reading just like teachers read." And she said, "I want to be a teacher when I grow up." So, from that moment she wanted to be a teacher.

And she worked like a teacher and she acted like a teacher. And she used her frustrations for the good of those around her. Teaching her to shine through helping people and helping her to see how amazing she is. Giving her that vision for what she can be and how she can get there. That was life changing.

And the behaviors just faded away. Those behaviors that held her back were the lessons she used to help other kids. So, then she became a mentor to other kids having the same struggles as she did in the beginning. This was one year's growth from falling on the floor angry to being a mentor and my mini me in the classroom.

Absolutely amazing. And favorite story ever— just to see the transformation in her life and that 'what we do changes lives.' Her life and her path is significantly changed. She's on a completely different course than she was in the beginning.

RM: That's amazing.

I'd love for you to talk about the invisible, "see the invisible."

MM: Some things are easy to see on the outside. And what I'm most passionate about is to see what's invisible. So, I need to see you for who you are and I need to see your struggles that you don't talk about. I need to see why you're upset today, when you walk in the room and I can see there's something wrong. Seeing that what they're not talking about, whether it is something that was said to them or something that happened to them or a way that they're feeling that they just don't say that's what I want to see.

There are times that you put on your happy face and everything's fine. People ask you, "How are you?" "I'm fine." "How's your day?" "It's fine. Everything's great." But it's not great. And for kids, I need to be able to see even though they're smiling on the outside, what's on the inside that's holding them back? What's the invisible in them that holds them back from whatever it is that they need to do or want to do? When I can see that then I can reach you and help you. So that was important for me.

That's why it's one of my whys is because I was that little girl in the class with the happy face the big happy smile. You know I talked about earlier my first grade teacher came in and she squeezed my cheeks every single day. So happy. But on the inside, there were things that were broken about me and I didn't feel successful at all. So, the teacher coming to me and saying "you're a reader, you're a great reader," "You can do this" and looking up to her and saying I can. I didn't believe in my own abilities. And even though I looked happy and wonderful on the outside I was so broken on the inside and I felt like a failure because reading wasn't easy for me. There was nothing easy about it, and it took her noticing that in me—

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noticing what I really needed was encouragement. (Not the skills. Not the standards. Not the strategies.) What I really needed was someone to anoint me with their words of affirmation.

And so, when that happens, then you break this barrier in kids because it was broken for me. When she told me "you're smart," I was smart. It was like she anointed me with her words. And that's what I want to do for kids. I want to see their invisible struggles, make a connection, break down a barrier. And that's how I can change their lives. And that could be in an emotional way or in an academic way, depending on what they need.

Speaking life in to kids is a gift that we have. And I love to use it every day.

RM: So that's a good point to ask. What would be your six-word memoir?

MM: What we do changes the world.

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 hashtag #MyWhy. Also, check out the handout including some of Melissa Miller's favorite resources, lessons learned, his six-word memoir, and other helpful information. This handout can be found on <https://eduTOOLBOX.org>.

Connect with Melissa on Twitter @Melissa11322 and on Instagram @TNTTOY19. We also invite you to connect with the Ayers Institute on Facebook and Twitter at @AyersInstitute.

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

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