

[Music]

Liz Norell - You are listening to Tiger Stories, a podcast from Chattanooga State Community College. This is the place to share the stories from our community with our broader community. At Chattanooga State, we believe every member of our campus, students, faculty and staff belongs here and because we know that belonging matters, we're excited to share the stories of those who make up the unique, diverse and supportive community on our campus. You'll often hear people on this podcast talk about Chattanooga State as having the feel of a family. We are so proud to be part of an institution that welcomes people from across the community to come here and pursue their dreams. We hope you'll enjoy hearing our stories and maybe even someday you'll want to share yours with us too. I am Liz Norell and I teach political science on the main campus of Chattanooga State. I feel so lucky that I get to be on this campus working with our students and my colleagues on the faculty and staff. We get to witness powerful transformations happening on our campus all the time. And so I'm excited to get to share this conversation with you. Without further ado, let's get started with today's conversation. I'm excited to have the chance to chat with Gabby Eilf who is a political science major who will be graduating in May, yay. Gabby is SGA Vice President and she's originally from Florida. Also here with me to take part in the conversation is Tyler Gentil who is in the Professional Actors Training Program here at Chattanooga State. He is the Treasurer of SGA, the President of Psych Club, a Student Ambassador, a Tour Guide and Orientation Leader and the Humanities Peer Mentor. So Tyler sleeps a lot.

Tyler Gentil - Not really [Laugh] but I appreciate your hopefulness for me.

Liz Norell - Yes, and Tyler's originally from New York. Gabby is originally from Florida. So, welcome.

Gabby Eilf - Thank you. Glad to be here.

Liz Norell - So Gabby we're gonna focus on you in this conversation. We'll have a chance to talk to Tyler in a future episode. Why don't you start by telling us why you came to Chattanooga State?

Gabby Eilf - Yeah, well when I graduated high school, I decided I wanted to go into Radiologic Technology and at the time I was living in Cleveland and Cleveland State didn't have Rad Tech Program but Chattanooga State does. So that was the original draw for me to come here at Chattanooga State was for the Rad Tech Program.

Liz Norell - Cool. Well I know that you're not doing Rad Tech anymore.

Gabby Eilf - Yes.

Liz Norell - So what happened?

Gabby Eilf - Well my life changed, that's what happened.

Liz Norell - Ok yeah.

Gabby Eilf - So a couple of classes completely influenced my life. The American government class with you, Mrs. Spear's Honors Speech class and the Global Scholars Leadership class. Those classes kind of changed my track in my college career and I've always had a passion for the constitution and for politics and history but taking those three classes, it kind of encouraged me to follow my passion. So I would say after I took the Global Leadership class and I went on a study abroad trip to Greece, that was whenever I decided to join SGA and whenever I joined SGA that's when I started changing my major and do a scary thing and just follow my dreams.

Liz Norell - Hmmhmm.

Gabby Eilf - Which isn't always easy.

Liz Norell - Yeah, and I know it's scary. What about that trip to Greece really felt life changing to you?

Gabby Eilf - While at Greece, we did a lot of volunteer work with refugees and I've always had a passion for servitude and servant leadership and so being able to go there and do what I've always wanted to do and help people and experience a new culture, it just changed my perspective on not just the refugee crisis and how it affects us, not just globally, but here in our community Chattanooga, but it affected me personally to where I just, I just know I have to do something in this world and I just can't get by with, you know, going to a nice job that gives me a lot of money and I go home and that's my life.

Liz Norell - When you talk about that you sound so passionate and I'm wondering if there are parts of your life that have influenced the way that you've navigated these classes and these experiences.

Gabby Eilf - Well, my first year here at Chattanooga State was definitely a struggle. I, I didn't have quite a place to live, so I would serve, couch surf a lot and everything was in my car, so all my clothes, my makeup, toiletries, everything, and, as well as I didn't have enough money a lot of time to go and buy food. So whenever the food pantry opened up on campus, I was very thankful and appreciative for that. But that experience and going through that struggle, it just

made me realize, I need to take every opportunity and every help I can get because a lot of people sometimes, they are, they don't want to take out the hand that's reaching out to help them and I'm not quite sure why maybe sometimes are too proud but at that moment, I couldn't be picky, you know, so and like I said before you know I have a passion for helping people and just I love history and I love the constitution, so those classes kind of put me in a better place.

Liz Norell - Thanks for sharing that. Can you describe a time when you really felt like you belonged here at Chattanooga State.

Gabby Eilf - Mm, hmm, well let's see. I know whenever I joined the honors program that was whenever I started to get more comfortable with Chattanooga State and whenever I started making friends, you know, I got used to everything, whenever I felt, I truly belonged here, I would have to say whenever I started, whenever I joined SGA and whenever I started to reach out and help students and just talk to them, have an open dialogue, that's whenever I felt I belonged here because I realized I have a purpose here, you know. While before I felt welcomed but I didn't feel like I belong because I didn't know what I could do here to help and through SGA I learned what I can do here to help.

Tyler Gentil - I have a very similar response to that actually. I know you didn't really ask me but here I am. I didn't really realize I had so much power here either until I started talking about this, the Tiger Talks thing, the Tiger Stories. Once I brought that up to Miss Maria Spear in her speech class, she immediately told me who to talk to, who to go to, and who to actually reach out to get it moving and all of the sudden, I met so many different wonderful faculty members on the campus and suddenly I realized all the dreams you can have on this campus can come true, no matter what you come from, where you've come from, where you've been and it just grew from there. Once I got into the Criminal Orientation Department, I realized I had a family here too. And I realized I had an impact on students. And suddenly I was a student voice that was a loud too, you could not walk around this campus without seeing someone I know. And that's so nice to have, a lot of universities don't get that feeling, you might see someone you saw in a class one time, but here people always know my name. They hug me. They give me a nice little handshake if they want to. And that's not really a feeling you can be. Whenever you have a community college like we do, with the community being the forefront of it, you just really get a feeling of home. And that's what's so wonderful about it. You can always succeed here no matter what.

Gabby Eilf - Yeah I think we should give props to the faculty because I believe they're the gateway to letting students feel that community feel and be invited into a place where they feel like they're belonged.

Tyler Gentil - I completely agree.

Liz Norell - Can you describe a relationship, maybe one or two relationships that you've formed while here that feel really meaningful to you.

Gabby Eilf - Oh, that's a tough one, man. I have the people I've connected with here. They've, they're so special and I love the new friends and people I work with on SGA. You know, they're like my family. Mm hmm. A meaningful relationship I would have to say would have to be.

Liz Norell - You're gonna say with Tyler right.

Gabby Eilf - Other than Tyler, yes.

Liz Norell - And me.

Gabby Eilf - Yes of course.

Tyler Gentil - Preserving your feelings when you do that.

Gabby Eilf - I would have to say it would be with the previous SGA President, Courtney. She has been like a mentor towards, for me and she's given me advice and kind of guide me not just with my ideas for SGA and how to be a good leader and conduct business but she's also given me great life advice and yeah, she's, I guess you can say she's the first mentor I've ever had. And so, you know, having a mentor period is something special. So I've, that's something I've got out from Chattanooga State, I'm very grateful for that. It's like, it's a breeding ground for connections and meaningful relationships.

Liz Norell - Mm hmm. I can say I feel exactly the same way. Like the relationships that I formed here on this campus are just incredible. Like I come to this campus every day and think, my gosh I get to be here.

Gabby Eilf - Yeah, yeah. I've never experienced it anywhere else.

Tyler Gentil - We're honestly really lucky to have a college like this. This sounds like a really a lot of self promotion but the whole reason I even had this idea was never just to be like and Ted Talks rip off or anything, it was always just to show that we have something no one else does, a community.

Gabby Eilf - Yeah.

Tyler Gentil - So many colleges lose out on that and we are so, I'm so grateful and we are so lucky to have everybody here care about us. I've not met a single person who doesn't care about you here. And if I have them, I'm not around them often [Laugh].

Gabby Eilf - Oh yeah.

Liz Norell - Yeah. What do you think is the most interesting, oh sorry, most important thing that you've learned during your time here.

Gabby Eilf - Mm hmm, well other than how to conduct the meeting, [Laugh] uh, the most important and valuable thing that I have learned for myself is that I matter and that I have a voice that deserves to be heard and so does everyone else. I think that's kind of what I've, what I've learned from the classes I took on that trip and I kind of cultivated that into SGA understanding that my voice does matter, I as a person matter, and so does everyone else. And something else I've also learned is the true meaning of perseverance. It's not something that a class can teach you or one person can really explain what it is, but it comes from your innermost being and it comes out of you in times of trials and hardships and whenever you do persevere and you get to that other side, you know, in the, when you get through it all that's what amazing things are happening. And that's what I've learned, that's another thing I've learned is what it means to persevere and the good that can come out of not giving up.

Liz Norell - I feel like I should just sit here and think about that for a really long time.

Tyler Gentil - If I can, I'd like to add on to that a bit too. I feel that because this is not my episode but I want to jump in on this one, really one of the biggest things you can learn at the school is failure. And that's one of the biggest things I've learned for sure because I started here as an Art Major. I was going for painting and then I realized I couldn't draw and a lot of painting is drawing. And it didn't last long. And once I hit that roadblock, I kept hitting others too and I kept feeling like I wasn't getting stuff done enough, like I wasn't doing enough work. Honestly, I think that's why I do so much now. It's to try and make out for all the time I lost out on. But this school has really taught me that failure is okay and that it's okay to be at that point. I've met so many people here who've been so down on their luck but are still fighting and it's so inspiring. That's why I know I have to be the same way because if you just give up when you fail that's when you actually fail. I've had to drop classes, I've had to walk into a class completely unprepared and face the music, but it's always taught me more and that's what matters to me, so it teaches you.

Gabby Eilf - Yeah, and something I've also learned is from my time here is although I may be scared that means just because I'm scared to not let fear rule your life. I learn that any time you're about to go up against something that is scary whether it's going to a new class, getting a new job, starting, you know, starting at Chattanooga State, you're about to do something that is

amazing, you're about to do something big whenever you're scared but you do it anyways. That's one amazing thing that's going to happen.

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Tyler Gentil - And that's really valuable too.

Liz Norell - I really want you to just tell a story of something that's happened here that felt really like emblematic of your Chattanooga State experience.

Gabby Eilf - The only thing I can think of is whenever we conduct student cabinet meetings.

Liz Norell - Yeah, so share one of those that felt really like important to you or interesting, something happened.

Gabby Eilf - I would say, one student cabinet meeting that, that really kind of encompassed, what I, who I was as a leader and what I was, just what I was doing on it, yay, was whenever we had open dialogue from the students because the first couple of student cabinet meetings there wasn't a lot of conversation, but this, the first one that happened whenever we got people talking, I felt so proud and just overall awesome that I was, I had the opportunity to conduct a platform, a meeting ground where that student and this group of students can come and speak directly to the administration and then the administration reply and respond. I felt really, really great, really great on that student cabinet meeting, but I have to say, my most, like the experience that really, really like was amazing for me, was whenever we went to TISL.

Liz Norell - So explain what TISL is. So for those who don't know TISL is the Tennessee Intercollegiate State Legislature. It happens every year in November at Nashville, not the State Capitol. And essentially what it is, it is a mock Tennessee State Government. It is all made up of college students. There is no, you know, someone telling us what to do. It is literally every, is all college students comprised of house representatives, senators, media team, the judiciary, a governor is amazing. So I got nominated [INAUDIBLE 0:17:11.9], [Laugh], I was the head delegate for TISL and I've never been at TISL, so I kind of had to start from scratch, figure out, okay, who is even interested in it, what is TISL, how am I going to prepare it out myself, but the delegation and the team itself. So just going through that, figuring out who I'm going to go to, who do I talk to, who do I recruit. That was an exploration that I loved. Um and I know I went to a Congress Day, it was in the fall, [INAUDIBLE 0:17:46.3] that you hold and I went there to kind of like scout out some people who would be good and boy did I struck gold.

Liz Norell - For talent scouting at a class project.

Gabby Eilf - Yup. Yeah. And those people that I ended up approaching who was at Congress Day, they went to TISL, they joined our delegation and they won awards. They were amazing. Yeah.

Liz Norell - What was it like to be at TISL.

Gabby Eilf - Oh my goodness. That was amazing. That, just the energy of it all, is something I've never experienced before. And my mentor, Courtney, she said whenever you're on the elevator that was going up, whenever it opens and you see that crowd people, just think game on, you know. And so whenever like that happened to me, I did, I wasn't thinking about it but the elevator doors open at the State Capitol, I saw like a sea of college students in their best attire and you can, like they have pamphlets, they have books of like bills that they have and they wrote. And like I just thought, game on, Chattanooga State is going to win.

Liz Norell - That's awesome.

Gabby Eilf - Yeah. TISL was amazing. I suggest any student who's listening, please, please, go to TISL, be part of Chattanooga State delegation and do Congress Day **[INAUDIBLE 0:19:10.7]** class.

Liz Norell - So that brings me to my last question. What's a piece of advice you would give other students at Chattanooga State?

Gabby Eilf - Other than take your classes, um. [Laugh]

Liz Norell - Thank you.

Gabby Eilf - Um one way to have a better college experience is join a club, you know, whenever you join a club and you're involved and you be part of something that is bigger than just yourself, your college experience is going to be so much better and another piece of advice I would say, this is a quote, "courage is not the absence of fear but rather the judgment that something is more important than fear." Whoever is listening, a current student, future student, I advise you to be courageous enough to not let fear control your life and control you in your decision making because the brave may not live forever but the cautious do not live at all.

Liz Norell - Thank you for sharing your story with us Gabby. [Music]

Gabby Eilf - Well, thank you for taking time to talk to me.

Liz Norell - Yeah and thanks for being here today, Tyler.

Tyler Gentil - No problem. I'm glad I could jump in.

Liz Norell - Those of us who have the honor and privilege to work on Chattanooga State's campuses does know that something really special happens here. And it's humbling to get to share a few of those special things with you, our listeners. So thanks to you for joining us here today and a special thank you to the students, faculty and staff, who make this podcast possible. If you are a student at Chattanooga State and you want to be on Tiger Stories, let us know. You can get in touch at the email address in the show notes. We'll be back soon with another installment of Tiger Stories, until then, make it a great one.