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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 Chatt State, we believe every member of our campus, students, faculty and staff belongs here and because we know that belonging matters, we are excited to share the stories of those who make up the unique, diverse and supportive community on our campus. You will often hear people on this podcast talk about Chatt State as having a 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 will enjoy hearing our stories and maybe even some day, you will 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 am excited to get to share this conversation with you. Without further ado, let's get started with today's conversation. Why don't you start just by introducing yourself? Why don't you begin by introducing yourself?

Megan Mathews - Hi, my name is Megan Mathews. I am a Political Science Major and this is my first full-time semester at Chatt State, woo hoo!

Liz Norell – YAY! And you started at Kimball.

Megan Mathews - Yes, I started taking just basic General Ed classes there at night time and then I took one class here at main campus and it blew my mind and now I'm here for full time this semester.

Liz Norell - Awesome.

Megan Mathews - Yeah.

Liz Norell - So why don't you tell us first why Chatt State?

Megan Mathews - I was born and raised in the Bay Area and I ended up meeting a boy here or out there who was going to college and then when his semester ended, he came back to his home state of Tennessee and he invited me out there for a week. I stayed for a month and I just I fell in love with it and eventually in 2017, his mom got diagnosed with cancer, so I moved out there. We both moved out there to help her, just you know do stuff around the house and it's a big house and when she started feeling better, we had not only the time but the money because California doesn't really let you save money but we had the money for him to go back to school and that's when I started just taking the small classes, so that's why I really like the Kimball Campus because it's like small and I was home-schooled, so I wasn't like ready for like a big gigantic crazy campus like here but it's not that bad.

Liz Norell - Yeah and it's interesting because when you leave here, this is gonna feel like a small small small place.

Megan Mathews - Oh yeah.

Liz Norell - [Laugh] But one step at a time.

Megan Mathews - Yeah.

Liz Norell - What do you like about Chatt State like I know that you've mentioned that it's less expensive than going to school in California.

Megan Mathews - It's less expensive just even to drive here like you know like gas wise but I think that people really make it a more enjoyable environment because not everyone is you know like competing for everything, a lot of people here I think are, we're all like struggling in our own way I guess but it's more of a shared struggle, it's not like you know in California there's such a serious like income divide where if you wanted to go to Community College, you still have to be really really well off whereas here like some of the people I'm friends with like, we're in the same boat and it's actually nice because meet people that you can vibe with.

Liz Norell - Yeah, yeah. Can you describe a time when you felt like you truly belonged at Chatt State?

Megan Mathews - Yes, so last semester before my American Government class, I went to use the bathroom and one of my classmates was sitting outside the bathroom crying and so like I went and I sat with her and she just told me that you know she bombed this test and her grades were not what she thought they were and she's just like really upset about it and I was trying to offer words of encouragement but then as people turn the corner to go to the bathroom and they came out of the bathroom everyone stopped and said something like beautiful to her, like it was just like five or more people just nothing but encouraging words and like it was really nice to see because we're all just like sharing stories of like you know how we get anxious for tests and it just showed me that like we're all in the same boat.

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Megan Mathews - You know and like it's okay to be scared and to voice that and like you're not gonna be shamed for it, that everyone here knows, what you're going through and we're here to help and it just made me feel like you know like because I get anxiety too and it was just like really nice to see that if I ever you know break down like that like there are people here who will be like, "hey, you're still worth something," you know.

Liz Norell - That's so beautiful.

Megan Mathews - Yeah and also I recently got accepted to be a global scholar and her name was on the pamphlet. So even if you know like you think you're failing, you're still full of potential because she's a global scholar now.

Liz Norell - That's right.

Megan Mathews - Yeah.

Liz Norell - I loved that. Talk to us a little bit about the relationships you've formed with people on the campus?

Megan Mathews - The first friend I made here was when I went on the civil-rights trail trip to her, they set us up with the roommate and she was actually like really really cool. I was scared that I was gonna get stuck with someone who I didn't you know like have anything in common with and like she's really cool and she made my whole trip so much better because I actually knew somebody or friends on Facebook now or both global scholars now, like I just she's really cool, made me feel less of an outsider to know that there are people here that are like you, you know like even if you feel like you're that weird person like, no there's other weird people. So there's her, one of my favorite teachers, who just kind of like gave me so much confidence to actually come here and just how some of the faculty will like see something in you and like really like make you realize that you're worth so much and you can like really apply yourself and take those opportunities and do something when you feel like you know maybe before you were too scared.

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Megan Mathews - Yeah.

Liz Norell - I would love for you to talk about the experience of going to the Washington Center in May?

Megan Mathews - Whoo.

Liz Norell - If you don't have to give us the whole long spiel but what was that experience like for you?

Megan Mathews - Honestly life-changing to see like up close and personal like where are, what the Capitol is like these, this is ground zero for like everything that happens in our government and seeing how, it's also a city at the same time, we're like people just live there and we went to think tanks, we went to the Capitol, we went all over the place and it was just really informative and humbling educational like, oh my gosh, it was crazy because like I would have never thought like I didn't even know what the word think-tank meant like me that was like that's weird, why would you think in a tank but I went to the American Enterprise Institute website and I was just like reading some of the things they like regularly posts on like military capability and stuff and like it helps me as a citizen like be more informed and aware of like where our country stands in the world and like I think that it was just, it was really important because I feel like not a lot of people bother reading into that kind of thing but yeah I was amazing.

Liz Norell - It was amazing.

Megan Mathews - Yeah.

Liz Norell - That was a big reach for you outside of your comfort zone.

Megan Mathews - Yeah, I was terrified, terrifying everyone there was dressed so nice and I'm just like over here you know and a lot of people like, a lot of smart people but then at the same time it's like we're all doing the same assignments and I can do that too, so yeah I was, there's a lot of people there, I think there was like a 109 students or something barely over a 100 students, you have to be down there like 8:00 every morning, 7:00 or 8:00 yeah, lived off coffee. Their terrible coffee. Yeah.

Liz Norell - What do you feel like is the most important thing you've learned while you've been at Chatt State so far?

Megan Mathews - To take chances.

Liz Norell - Woo I loved that.

Megan Mathews - And to not give up because I think like to an extent you know higher education is supposed to be a little difficult, you're supposed to like it's okay to struggle because otherwise it would be too easy and you know, you wouldn't feel good about it at the end of the day and I think that it's important to take opportunities because like you'll never know what if but also like it could change you in so many ways and it will just let you grow as a person instead of staying in your little comfort zone box. It'll expand your mind you know, yeah I think that if you are struggling like to not give up because it is imperative that you keep going because otherwise you will have only come halfway just to turn around, you know you have to see these things through and that there is a community here who will help you no matter what you're struggling with and you know what's got you down or if it's grades like they can do to you and there's so many different like resources available that you just should not give up.

Liz Norell - I loved that message. Has there been a time where you thought about giving up?

Megan Mathews - I think I stressed myself out and I talked myself into like just walking away from things like I'll come back later but like, oh my goodness, I can leave me alone right now. I think in fall of last year for my music class. It was driving me nuts the way the teacher would teach and then the way the questions were worded and I was just like so angry about it but I bought his expensive book and I kept reading it and you know like I got the grade, I got the grade I wanted but not without some tears in there you know.

Liz Norell - What it sounds like, you got the grade you wanted because you perused, sounds let that get the better of you, there's some grit there.

Megan Mathews - Right, last night I was actually freaking myself out over this astronomy quiz and I thought these questions are just, these are unfair questions and I was like angry about it and then I submitted it and I had them all right and I was just worrying for nothing but yeah like even if it's you know don't just quit halfway through it, as long as you come back to it like always come back to it, don't just walk away and shut that door because those are the opportunities that you're just going. No, I'm good I don't need those.

Liz Norell - Yeah and I think that's probably a good segue into the advice that you would give other people.

Megan Mathews - I think would be obviously don't give up but like step outside of your comfort zone, even if it feels weird like you'll find someone, you know you'll find a person or subject or something that you just like it lets you come out of your shell without like struggling about it. It'll just be easy and the more you put yourself out there, the more people will see you and like you'll make friends and you'll be able to prosper and if you just keep you know turning things down or just not taking that chance like you won't know, you know like if I didn't, I would still be at the Kimball Campus being sad with my what two classes a

semester and you know not having any friends or anything or having a voice even and I feel like having people like see me and like make me feel like I'm being seen has given me the power to like climb up and be able to do these things and come here and feel comfortable while doing it and I just, yeah I think that's important because like every class I've sat down in this first week I've talked to every single person. I set that down next to and yeah which is not who I am.

Liz Norell - I know that.

Megan Mathews - And I've made a friend in every single one of my classes.

Liz Norell - That amazing.

Megan Mathews - I know and it's not hard like it's weird just to be like, hi you know, I'm Meghan. Is this the right class, but like right after that like they feel comfortable talking to you, you have someone to sit down next to you next time and it just makes the experience so much more enjoyable you know like you're not just struggling alone, you know you have friends and you're working towards a future which you're not so scared of anymore.

Liz Norell - What I've heard through much of what you've said so far is that the people around you are people to enlist, not to alienate.

Megan Mathews - Yes, yes, don't be afraid of people like go for people who aren't in your typical friend group, you know like if you're a jocks, talk to that weird punk rock kid like, just talk to everybody because you don't know what kind of experiences you're missing out on by being that person's friend but yeah you know like just and you don't know what they're going through either, you know like just simply saying hi to someone can totally make their day and.

Liz Norell - So one of the reasons that I wanted you to be part of this podcast is that you're not the kind of person who's gonna sign up to do this, like this is very far outside your comfort zone and I know you well enough to know that and the other thing is that I think a lot of people who come to college imagine that the only way you can be successful is to kind of be really outgoing and talk all the time in class and you know you're a great example of someone who comes to class and I hope you don't mind me saying this, I'm just kind of absorb and observe.

Megan Mathews - Yeah.

Liz Norell - You don't speak out a lot, maybe you're doing that more now but when I first met you, you were pretty, you kept to yourself and you've been so successful here despite that or maybe because of that, I don't know.

Megan Mathews - I feel like it just has gotten easier with time whereas like yeah I take you know a lot of notes and so most of the time I'm just focused on writing and listening instead of being in the discussion because I'm like scared well what if what I say is dumb but then someone else says what I'm thinking anyways you know kind of thing but I think it's important to at least try, you know not every day I'm not going to talk to everyone every day, God know if there's something I feel like that I can add to a classroom whether it's just like an

interaction with the student or like I actually have something to say on what we're learning about like I will try to do it just because I think it makes a difference.

Liz Norell - It does and what I see you're doing is paying forward the trust and confidence that people have placed in you.

Megan Mathews - Yeah, yeah because it's like it feels good to be given that like helping hand up you know like if you're you know sitting outside the bathroom, having a really hard time crying about your grades, like it helps to have a bunch of people be like, hey I've been there or you know if you're just struggling about whatever in general and someone is like, hey I've same, we were a community and people will notice that and you know help you with that and I think that's beautiful.

Liz Norell - Yeah, I think that's a great place to end.

Megan Mathews - Okay.

Liz Norell - Thank you so much Megan. Is there anything else you want to add?

Megan Mathews - This is fun doing this, I think I psyched myself out but it was actually really fun.

Liz Norell - Good.

Megan Mathews - Yeah.

Liz Norell - I thought it was actually really fun.

Megan Mathews - It was.

Liz Norell - Alright.

Megan Mathews - Thank you for having me.

Liz Norell - Those of us who have the honor and privilege to work on Chattanooga State's campuses 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, the faculty and staff who make this podcast possible. If you're 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 instalment of Tiger Stories. Until then, make it a great one.

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