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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. Today, I am excited to have the chance to chat with Tyler Gentil. Hi Tyler.

Tyler Gentil - Hi, I am back again.

Liz Norell - Yay! I know, we were really excited to get you, um, back in the studio.

Tyler Gentil - Yeah.

Liz Norell - To chat.

Tyler Gentil - I talked a lot and when it wasn't even my episode last time, so it's a lot of fun.

Liz Norell - Now, it's all you.

Tyler Gentil - Yeah. It's all me.

Liz Norell - So why don't you tell us a little bit about what brought you to Chatt State?

Tyler Gentil - Um, well, funny story, I didn't mean to come to Chatt State, I actually was going to go to TTU, but I didn't have the \$25 admittance fee and I asked too late to try to get a waiver for it and by that point, the deadline had already been passed, so the only school I did apply to was Chatt State, so then, it just kind of happened. Just ended up here.

Liz Norell - Interesting. So TTU is not in Chattanooga.

Tyler Gentil - No.

Liz Norell - Did you have a connection to Chattanooga?

Tyler Gentil - Um, not really, the real only connection with Chattanooga is the fact that it was a bit closer than TTU, and like I live in Dunlap, Tennessee.

Liz Norell - Okay.

Tyler Gentil - Which is more in the middle of those two cities, but Chattanooga was a bit closer and also, I could have gone to the Dayton Campus or the Kimball Campus if I had wanted to. I didn't know that the Art major would not allow that at that time, but I thought I had more options with it too and also the Tennessee Promise. I knew this is the only school around that I really could get that connection in there.

Liz Norell - We learned last time that you are originally from New York.

Tyler Gentil - Yes, I am.

Liz Norell - So tell us how you ended up in Tennessee.

Tyler Gentil - Um, well, normally, I give a very shortened version and that's typically because I feel bad for talking too long about it, however, since I want more people to actually know I am going to give the full spiel, so basically it was 2009, the recession had hit and my dad had gotten laid off from his job at a garbage company and he was laid off because they no longer were legally liable to hold him there because nine years prior, he had an accident there where his legs got cut off by one of the garbage trucks. They reattached the skin and everything so he can walk, but not very well. So he is on disability now. We had to fight for that too, it was great. But once he got fired there, it all started kind of tumbling downhill.

Then my mom went to a prison transfer because she was a corrections officer and she, um, went with another woman, which is not typical, especially since the prisoner was a male and while the other woman was going to fill out the paperwork to release him, my mom witnessed a prison guard beat him up, beat up their prisoner while he was still in their shackles and everything, so it wasn't even his like jurisdiction at that point. And then, my mom told to her family because of course when you witness a crazy thing,, and she didn't know my uncle was friends with the guy. So he told the guy's mom and then the mom obviously reported it. She was like what the heck,

this is cruel, all of that, and then my mom had to like testify in front of the Federal Court. And once she did that, she got labeled a snitch by the entire jail.

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Tyler Gentil - And once she got labeled a snitch, she was afraid she wouldn't even walk back out of that jail. So we ended up having our curtains closed all of the time, we had to be careful where we went, what we did, it was that type of thing. And, um, we had some family friends that lived in Dunlap and we were like, hey, is it pretty there and like everything is kind of falling apart here, there is nothing really holding us here. Our family is crazy in New York, half of them are on drugs, half of them are just dramatic, like there is nothing keeping us in New York. So we came and visited and we liked the looks and everything, needless to say we were trapped by the mountains now and we are stuck there, but they were pretty when we were visiting. And, um, actually after we got here, we found out that the jail my mom worked with, that she was filing for retirement through, had a private investigator follow us. So they knew we were here, they knew that we were going to school and what we were doing, trying to disprove my mom of that whole thing. And then from there, we just like fell financially as it goes whenever you move halfway across the country, but it was just a whole lot of events that made you just kind of be like 'I need to uproot everything and just go somewhere new and change'.

Liz Norell - Yeah, start over.

Tyler Gentil - It really was a big chance to start over. And we definitely took it in stride.

Liz Norell - Yeah. So you graduated in Dunlap.

Tyler Gentil - Yeah, in Sequatchie County, class of 2017.

Liz Norell - Nice, cool. And Tennessee Promise and here you are. You're at Chatt State.

Tyler Gentil - Yeah.

Liz Norell - Talk to us a little bit about what you're, kind of, first experiences were at Chatt State.

Tyler Gentil - Well, initially, I was obviously very nervous. Going from high school to college is a really big change and when you're very ill prepared with, especially with how our education system kind of is. Like all the teachers at Sequatchie County High School were great. There is very few I even had any disputes with at all. Most of them were like the type of teachers you'd look back on and be like 'they changed my life', which was a really great thing. However, I don't think anything can prepare you for how big of a change it is. So I was just, I was very lost and I

was in the Art major, but I couldn't draw and it was very frustrating and it was a very, um, depressing time almost, like I really felt off. I couldn't get a hold of anything. It just felt like I was really trying to find my way in a world that didn't care. And then, I accidentally applied to be a tour guide here on campus, and suddenly I had a family here.

Liz Norell - Do you want to explain accidentally? [Laugh]

Tyler Gentil - [Laugh] Um, so, I went into, I had always been interested in being a tour guide because I was like this school is really cool, I could use their, like, community service, I could just do it. I genuinely thought I was just going to do it for community service, I went to the, um, Students Support Center and I was like 'hey, I know there's tour guides and stuff, how can I be a part of that?', and they were like, 'oh, actually, you can just go over and talk to Shirley Moore and Miss Keisha', and I was like 'okay, I'll go do that'. That same day, I talked to them and got like a little application interview and everything and then Miss Shirley called me a few days later and was like 'we need you to fill out your direct deposit form' and I was like, 'wait, I'm getting paid for this?'

Liz Norell - [Laugh] Like, okay, one, I guess I got the job, and two, I get paid?

Tyler Gentil - Exactly and it was just like.

Liz Norell - Awesome.

Tyler Gentil - So much, like a lot more than I expected because I didn't even know about Federal Work Study or just the academic service. I knew nothing about all those things, so I was just like '\$9 an hour? What? Just for talking? That's perfect.' So then I had a family too and it was just really nice. But that's kind of how I started off, actually getting involved too.

Liz Norell - Can you describe a time when you felt like you really belonged here on this campus?

Tyler Gentil - That's a really loaded question, which like it sounds really simplistic whenever you just say it, but there is just so much to this campus that it's hard to pin down one point. But I think the moment that I felt most strongly connected to this campus was in my improv class, class, where Rex Knowles in the PATP. Um, we were doing an exercise where we were going around in a circle with our eyes closed and we were just supposed to tell everybody around you to make you feel a certain emotion and then you'd go around in the circle and then they would interact with you and try to make you feel that emotion. I went up there thinking I wanted everybody to just tell me the truth because I'm like a really honest person and I like honesty, and Rex was just like, 'we can't do that? That's, that's a trap. We can't do that. That won't even get you to feel an emotion'. And I was having a really rough week, so I got unbalanced straight from

that and I was just like, 'oh, well, that's what I wanted though', and he was like 'why are, why aren't you, like, okay with that? And what's, why are you suddenly so vulnerable?', and I was just like, 'I guess I won't, I hated the fact that I didn't know what I wanted'. And he was like, 'well, I think this is the most attractive part of you I've seen and I want you to just go around the circle and tell people 'thank you''. And I did that and I started crying. And I started hugging everyone and just holding them. And by the end of it, everybody else was crying and it was one of those moments where you just realize, 'wow, I'm really a person'. And I'm really a person that has an effect on others and people have an effect on me. And it was one of those really like humanizing moments too, and where you are just like, 'wow, what did I do to actually deserve to live a life like this?'

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Tyler Gentil - One that actually makes me feel something, so great.

Liz Norell - Uh, what I love about that is how you talk about vulnerability, because I, I personally believe that. When we're able to be real with people and kind of share the truth about what's happening, that people are drawn to us and we have such richer and more meaningful relationships. I love that you're talking about that. I'm getting a little teary over here, I'm going to be honest. Um, I'm wondering like can you talk a little bit about some of the relationships that you've made on this campus that feel most meaningful to you?

Tyler Gentil - Oh, that's another loaded question.

Liz Norell - I know.

Tyler Gentil - There's so much, there's so much here to offer like every teacher I had in my first and, and second semester here, the two semesters I was still in General Ed classes, they all changed my life in a different way. Like my very first teacher was Robin Popp, from my Psychology class. She's the one who made me realize that there is nothing to be scared of, just because it's a bigger change than I expected. She's one of those people who really broke down the stigma of college being scary and made it feel more like, 'oh hey, this is just me being an adult and still learning'. And then, I had Maria Spear and Laurie Barton in a Spartan class for my comp and my speech and they both helped me realize that I really liked to be a person and actually talk to people and made me understand more about myself. Both of them, like Maria's the reason why I wanted to do this, the Tiger Stories and the Tiger Talks, Laurie is the reason why I'm a peer mentor now. And it's just every teacher I had, every faculty member I've met and every student I've met, have somehow changed me in a different way. And that's why that's such a loaded question, because there's no, there's no one I can really specifically pin down. Everybody is just so great here. Even the most insig, the most insignificant people I have met,

like the ones I just waved to, they somehow changed my day. Everybody smiles or if they don't smile, they're at least like interesting to look at. This is one of the best places that people watch.

Liz Norell - Yeah, I love that. You know, I, I appreciate you talking about those faculty members and kind of what they gave you because I feel like it nods to the fact that each of, I mean we are social, social creatures, each of us influences every other person even if it's in very subtle ways. Through our body language, through our presence, eye contact, again makes a difference and I love that you talked about that.

Tyler Gentil - And then adding onto that, there's also another faculty member that I know if she ever hears this, if I don't mention her name, she'll get me. Um, Blair Ryan, she was the tour, uh, the tour coordinator whenever I started working on the tour guides. That woman is honestly one of the strongest people I have met here. She always makes me smile, she always shows me that I can always do better than myself. She's the one who always believed in me right from the beginning. She's one of the main reasons why I actually started growing more on this campus because she knew I could. She really like fostered that feeling in me. And she's just one of those many people that makes me like realize I'm really lucky to be at this school.

Liz Norell - Yeah. For anyone who hasn't had the opportunity to interact with Blair Ryan, you should, because you will not be the same person when you left. [Laugh]

Tyler Gentil - She's the best. She's like, uh, she's like a big old teddy bear that can definitely fight you.

Liz Norell - She's a phenom. Um, that leads me really nicely into the next question I want to ask you, Tyler, which is what do you feel like are some of the most important things that you've learnt during your time here?

Tyler Gentil - Uh, this is why I love this, like, I, first, I was very worried about having a bit of like scripted questions and I know this is meta right now, but these questions are so good. There's, we've so much opportunity. Um, I think the biggest thing I've learned is just how to be myself.

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Tyler Gentil - And that's one of the hugest and most important things and I think that's why this college and like, the Tennessee Promise and everything about this atmosphere is so great, it gives you a chance to learn what you want to be and what you want to do. Nothing about anyone else. Just you and that's why I love the program. I'm learning more about myself than I have in my entire 19 years of being alive. I'm actually just sitting down and I'm like, 'why do I do this?',

'why does this make me mad?', 'why does this make me happy?', 'what makes me a person?', and like. you're shoved into so many little situations that you wouldn't expect and that challenge you. Like when I failed my first class, I had to drop out of my Statistics course, so I didn't get an F on it, because that would've been worse than a 'W' for me at that point. But I had to drop it and that was one of the most defeating things I've ever had, because I've always been like, if I wasn't doing good grades, if I wasn't getting good grades in high school, it was because I knew I could do it and I didn't try. And I was at least going to pass. But once I got to college, I actually had to try and I wanted to try, and that was the first time I had been here, where my trying and my best wasn't enough. And that really led me into believing that failure is good and failure is okay. And Miss Kayla Ebert, the teacher for that class, she understood. She like wanted me to continue with the course obviously because I sat down and talked to her before I dropped it. I wasn't going to drop it blindsiding her because that wouldn't have been, I know it might not have meant anything to her, but I'm sure it did after I talked to her. But I didn't want to fail and give up while failing. I wanted to fail and go down scratching.

Liz Norell - [Laugh]

Tyler Gentil - [Laugh] And once I had eventually did drop the class, I did feel like a weight lifted off of me, but also I had a lot to reflect on. And a lot of that was tying back into my first statement of just being me. I'm going to fail sometimes and that's okay and that's really, that was my first experience where I definitely needed to fail. Like in my Art class, I couldn't draw, I felt like a failure then, but it didn't really hit me because I could sum it up to be going, 'oh, I just don't have that natural talent, this isn't my fault.' But once I was in that class, I was like, I can do math, but I'm not able to do it right now. It's someone that's up with my situation, this is on me, I need to take responsibility of this failure. And that's when I started actually realizing the more I take responsibility for my actions and what I do, the more I'm learning from them and able to do better the next time. And that's why I promised Kale whenever I'm done with the program, I'm going to go back and take Statistics and I'm going to pass it, regardless of if I'm full time or part time student, even if I'm just taking that one class I'm going to pass that, gosh darn math class, because Statistics shouldn't be that hard for me.

Liz Norell - Knowing Kale, she's going to hold that, hold you to that.

Tyler Gentil - Yeah, she definitely has her eye on me. [Laugh]

Liz Norell - [Laugh] You know, Tyler, what you just said, I think is so important and it's this notion that 'maybe, I'm not in a place to pass Statistics right now, but that's not because I'm a bad person or because I've failed the world, it's just not the right time', right, there's too much going on.

Tyler Gentil - Exactly.

Liz Norell - And seeing that as an opportunity to learn something really as opposed to getting really beating yourself up kind of down in the dumps about it, I think that's wise beyond, where many of us are.

Tyler Gentil - [Laugh] Don't get me wrong, I definitely beat myself up about that. And I don't want to come off as if I'm completely wise beyond my years, because obviously I do consider myself a bit more forward thinking than some of my peers, however, I definitely still get caught up in all that. There's never been a time where I've been above my doubt, which is one thing I'm fighting towards, but a lot of people, if they don't see me when I'm vulnerable, they think I have my life together because I'm doing so much, I'm in so many clubs, so many things, I'm doing everything on campus. You always see me, I'm always waving to someone, I'm an extravert so I'm always, like talking to someone and doing something. But the reason why I do all of that is so I can ignore those doubts. Because they're always there, but if I'm doing something I can just be like, 'oh, I have to focus on this, I have to work on this, I can't, I don't have time for these'. But then they all build up and suddenly, I'm sleeping in too long and I'm skipping all of my alarms because I just need one more minute of a break.

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Tyler Gentil - And that's, I'm most vulnerable at home, because that's when I don't have something to do. [Laugh]

Liz Norell - Yeah. I identify with so much of what you're saying like people often suggest that I, like, I have it all together and I'm like, 'oh god, if you were in my life right now', right, like imposter syndrome just flared it's ugly head when you said that.

Tyler Gentil - Oh exactly. [Laugh]

Liz Norell - Right. [Laugh]. Don't peek behind the curtain please.

Tyler Gentil - Please don't.

Liz Norell - Please don't.

Tyler Gentil - I'm definitely exactly like the Wizard of Oz, if you look behind that curtain I'm just a small little man not able to help anybody's situation, but my own. [Laugh]

Liz Norell - [Laugh] Right. Maybe not even always that.



Tyler Gentil - Yeah. Exactly. [Laugh]

Liz Norell - So let me wrap up by asking, what advice would you give other students, other ones who are here now or who might come in the future?

Tyler Gentil - There's, it's so cheesy what I'm going to say.

Liz Norell - It's okay.

Tyler Gentil - But don't give up. That's really the only thing I can say that I know is important. Like it's one of those things that's embedded in me, that I know it's, if I don't share my truth that I'm doing the other people a disservice. If you give up after failing, even if you come back and you do it again, it's cool to give up and come back to it. But if you give up and just give up entirely, like if you refuse to admit that you could have done better, if you refuse to work on yourself, then you're just not even giving up on you, you're giving up on the world. We've been given such like an extraordinary chance to be alive, it's so microscopic that we would exist, especially our species, like, just the existence of human beings entirely is astronomically impossible, and people are giving that gift away. Some of them out of the idea that there is more afterwards. You got to live in the moment.

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Tyler Gentil - You don't know if there's going to be something at the end of the road. You just got to do it while you're here.

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Tyler Gentil - Because if you don't, then you'll just regret it. Well, you won't even be able to regret it.

Liz Norell - [Laugh]

Tyler Gentil - It's just, I have such a strong passion for making sure people live their life to the fullest and whenever I see someone just living their life to whoever else thinks it's the fullest, that drives me nuts. I stay at home and I play videogames because I want to.

Liz Norell - Right.

Tyler Gentil - I do all of this stuff on campus because I want to. And that's, it ties in with what I need to do too though. I find a way to want to do everything. And that's why I really force the sentiment of never giving up because if you give up, you won't have the opportunity to see things become what you want them to be. If you give up, it's just going to end right there. There is no growth once you're done trying. [Laugh]

Liz Norell - That's very wise, very wise. I feel like the force of what you just said just kind of slapped you in the face.

Tyler Gentil - [Laugh] A little bit.

Liz Norell - [Laugh]

Tyler Gentil - I'm just sitting here like, 'Tyler, why are you trying to sound so deep and philosophical', but it, it's

Liz Norell - Because that's for you, yeah.

Tyler Gentil - It really is, it's just, this is why I want to do it, like, a live show too. Like, I know this is again very meta. But the more I get people to realize that they shouldn't give up, the more I feel like I can change something.

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Tyler Gentil - Because I feel like the main reason our world is so negative, is because people, that's all people are seeing.

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Tyler Gentil - They're not seeing the positive because mentally and psychologically, all of the positive just kind of breezes over. You see it for a second, you're like 'aw that warms my heart', but the negative stays there. It stays in your mind. And that's why you have got to keep fighting to see that positive.

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Tyler Gentil - I obviously look at all the news things and I'm like 'wow, that's terrible', but then I also look back and I'm like, 'but I can fix that, I can work towards that'. Like I don't know if you've seen the little recycling tag thing they're doing right now, where they're cleaning up all

the like, outside nature and all that, that's so cool. And that started from probably one person just thinking that 'let's do this hash tag'.

Liz Norell - Right.

Tyler Gentil - And people, like, have so much power and they have so much more that they can do than they can realize and that's why I'm being so deep and philosophical, even if it's fake. Even if it's me just trying to push my own feelings on myself. Even if this is literally just a reaffirmation of what I'm feeling. As long as I can get it across and somebody else can hear and be like 'wow, I want to do better,' that's what, that's why I do this. This is why I'm an extrovert, this is what drives my life. I want to do better for others and I want them to do better for themselves.

Liz Norell - Um-hmm, yeah, I mean that

Tyler Gentil - [Laugh]

Liz Norell - Yeah. I, I do too. And I, you know, I, um, I know you're involved in SGA and I've been taking my class to SGA this semester because our class happens to meet at the same time.

Tyler Gentil - Um-hmm.

Liz Norell - And what I've heard my students, what I've seen my students say now having been to I think three meetings is, they're saying things like, 'well, two months ago, someone said 'can we have food at night?', and now two months later, see this cafeteria is open.' I had no idea that students had the power to make those changes. And that's exactly what you're talking about, right? That like when you stand up and say 'hey, this is a problem, can we do something?' Then that inspires other people to do the same.

Tyler Gentil - Exactly, like the minute I talked about doing a TED Talk esque thing with Miss Spear, she immediately had me someone to talk to and that was Miss Dana Nichols, the Vice Dean of Academic Affairs.

Liz Norell - She was the Vice President of Academic Affairs.

Tyler Gentil - Yeah. Really sad she left because she was supposed to write me a reference letter, I'm watching you Dana, anyway.

Liz Norell - She probably still would.

Tyler Gentil - I know. [Laugh] But I just want to make a joke. But, um, that, right, when I talked to her about, I was immediately in contact with Dana and then I got to go to a deans' meeting and I got to talk to all of them and pitch that idea and I really pitched the idea of our college is more than a community college, it's a community.

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Tyler Gentil - Which is very, very true.

Liz Norell - Yes.

Tyler Gentil - And they loved that idea and then suddenly, I had met all of the deans, I was talking to Miss Patterson over at the Vice Presidents of, I can't remember her title, it is probably something.

Liz Norell - She's the Vice President of Advancement, and yes.

Tyler Gentil - Yes. [Laugh]

Liz Norell - She does the foundation and external relations.

Tyler Gentil - She's great, but

Liz Norell - I think it's external relations.

Tyler Gentil - She, um, I met so many faculty members in my first semester, so many people I thought were out of reach just because I was like 'hey, I want to do TED Talks and I'm passionate about it'. And then suddenly, I was doing something. The only reason it even took this long to do is just because it, it was hard for me to find that connection with SGA. And then once I was in, I was like, 'heck, yeah, we're doing it.'

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Tyler Gentil - Let's, come on, push my agenda. [Laugh]

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Tyler Gentil - But students have so much power than they think they do. And it's mind boggling that they think they're only here for the two years, just to get their Gen Eds and their degree and be done with it. There is so much importance behind being involved. And that's what I really,

another reason why I drive the don't give up thing because involvement equals not giving up. Whenever you're involved, that means you're trying. If you just go to your 10 a.m., go home and go to sleep, you're going to hate it. And that's going to be easier for you to drop out. It's going to be easier for you to find a disconnect of, or an excuse to just stop. Once you started thinking life is meaningless or life isn't meant to be lived to its fullest, once you find those excuses, that's when you feel powerless.

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Tyler Gentil - And that's when the power in it, like, that's when you give up. And that's what I always try to fight off, because if you just acknowledge the fact that you have power, that's where the power comes from. It comes from you, knowing you have it. The mind is a very powerful thing.

Liz Norell - Yeah. [Laugh] Alright, I think we should wrap up here, Tyler.

Tyler Gentil - I think so too, I don't know how many more soapboxes I can go on.

Liz Norell - I know. We've climbed up them all. Thank you so much for sharing your thoughts with us,

Tyler Gentil - Thank you.

[Music]

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 installment of Tiger Stories. Until then, make it a great one.

[Music]