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Redbird Buzz Episode 28: joyce gillie gossum, July 26, 2023

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Joyce Gillie Gossum

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Redbird Buzz

Episode 28: joyce gillie gossum

July 26, 2023

Rachel Kobus 00:09

Welcome to Redbird Buzz, I'm Rachel Kobus from Alumni Engagement. College of Education alum Dr. joyce gillie gossum has spent her life going against the grain. At the age of 16 she felt so connected to the poetry and style of e. e. cummings that her mother let joyce legally change her name to all lowercase letters, which is frequently met with resistance. joyce has more than 40 years of professional experience ranging from special education teacher to elected official, organizational consultant, leadership coach, and higher education administrator. Currently, she serves as the princess of Best Gurl, Inc., providing solutions to corporations, education, and nonprofits to improve performance. Throughout her career she has almost always served as an active member or officer with civic, professional, and community organizations.

Rachel Kobus 00:59

A big Redbird welcome to Dr. joyce gillie gossum. So what's the word, Redbird? Tell us a little bit about yourself.

joyce gillie gossum 01:08

Hi Rachel. The word is gratitude.

Rachel Kobus 01:12

Okay. Wow, kicking it off well, gossum. Love it.

joyce gillie gossum 01:16

Yes. So gratitude, gratitude for the foundation that I got at Illinois State. And if someone had told that young freshman or even that graduating senior all those years ago where I would be now and what I would be doing as a result of the foundation that I got at Illinois State, I would have laughed at them.

Rachel Kobus 01:43

Oh gosh, oh, no. Well, don't do that. We're going to talk a lot about your amazingness.

joyce gillie gossum 01:50

Thank you. I'm glad to be here.

Rachel Kobus 01:52

Yes, and we're happy to have you. So everyone's heard a little bit about your bio in our intro and one thing that I had to kick us off with just to get it out there because everyone's gonna see in writing too -

Dr. joyce gillie gossum. But joyce gillie gossum - no, that is not a typo. Can you talk about - I know, and it's great, I mean, it's very unique and I know you have talked about it in a few things I've read about you, but your name has been legally changed to not being uppercase. So can you share a little bit about that before - I feel like that leads into your story itself. That's the first part of your story and kinda is going to lead us through the rest of our conversation.

joyce gillie gossum 02:31

Absolutely. And it does, it tells you a lot about who I am as a person and what I stand for and how stubborn I am.

Rachel Kobus 02:45

Honesty, and how honest you are.

joyce gillie gossum 02:48

So if you can imagine or remember your own high school experience, most of us in our sophomore year took English Literature at some point and studied both the great writers and poets and one of those poets was e. e. cummings. And I fell in love with e. e. cummings' writing at that time for two reasons: one, because of what he wrote and the messages in his poetry, and then two, because of the way he made the words do what he wanted them to do rather than following the rules.

joyce gillie gossum 03:52

One of my favorite poems of cummings is A Leaf Falls on Loneliness and the way that it appears on the page, the letters of the poem go down the page, like they're falling.

Rachel Kobus 03:52

That makes sense.

Rachel Kobus 04:16

Wow, okay, I've never heard this poem, okay. Yes, yes.

joyce gillie gossum 04:21

The other thing that cummings did, he did not use capitalizations in his name or in his poetry. Well, that resonated with my 15, almost 16-year-old heart, so I stopped capitalizing, I stopped capitalizing everything. My English teacher was Sister Mary Lucia, if I can say her name on the air, and that did not make her happy.

Rachel Kobus 04:54

I bet not. You went against the grain, it's hard going against the grain.

joyce gillie gossum 05:00

She did not, she did not like that at all. So she, you know, started this series of punishments to try to get me to conform. She took points off, then she took more points off, then she took letter grades off, then she took more letter grades off, then she stopped grading and would give it back and tell me to fix it, and then she started giving me zeros. And, you know, before I knew it, I had a D or an F in English. I

didn't really care, Rachel, because I didn't care and I never cared what my grades were. I cared about learning and as long as I understood the material being taught in the class and I could explain the material being taught in the class to my mommy, which was always a requirement at home, I didn't really care what the teacher thought about how well I could guess the answers on his or her test. So that didn't work so she sent from my mother and asked my mother to come in for a parent-teacher conference. Well mommy brought me with her, which was a surprise for Sister, as you can imagine, and mommy asked me why I was not using capitalization and I explained. And she asked Sister, what, you know, what the issue was. "Well, she must use capitalization!" - and that was how she talked. We really didn't like her.

Rachel Kobus 06:57

[Inaudible] you're trying to change your, the whole persona of yourself and having very strong - mm-hmm, okay.

joyce gillie gossum 07:05

Very much so. So mommy proposed a compromise. At that time, when a child was born, they did not automatically get a social security number. You could not get a social security number until you turned 16 when you got your driver's license, because in many states your driver's license number was your social security number. So mommy's compromise was when we go next month to apply for your social security number so that you can get your driver's license I will let you fill out the form and sign the form with your name lowercase, legalizing the spelling of your name. Well, I'm not stupid so I said, did Aunt Ralla say that would make it legal? Ralla Klepak, who was a well-known attorney in Chicago, was not only my surrogate aunt, she was our family attorney. And mommy smiled and she said, yes, I've spoken without Aunt Ralla and no one will be able to make you capitalize your name. She said, however, in everything else you must use correct capitalization. Okay! And so I did and we did and the rest is history.

Rachel Kobus 08:49

Well, yeah, and it leads into a great history. I mean, right there you learn compromising and sticking up for yourself, going against the grain, knowing that learning is more important. I mean, all right, I think we're done with the interview. So many values just in that one - no, just in that one lesson, it's crazy. You were like 15 years old, 16 years old, and doing that. So I mean - yeah, and then, so I think this leads into my next question: you did this already at the young age, you stuck with who you were and your values, your goals, the reason - how you want to get educated, and then you chose to continue your education at Illinois State.

joyce gillie gossum 09:28

I did.

Rachel Kobus 09:29

So can you talk a little bit about how your time at ISU and, you know, going through that, started the next steps in your professional career?

joyce gillie gossum 09:40

Absolutely. I came to Illinois State because Caspar Weinberger said that it was one of the top three schools in the country for special education. He at that time was Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare and I wrote him and asked him what were the best schools. And so I chose Illinois State and I arrived for orientation having never visited the campus. I'd never seen the campus. I'd been to Northwestern where members of my family were alum. I'd been to University of Illinois, I'd been to Georgetown, you know, where family members had gone. No one in our family had gone to Illinois State so I'd never visited the campus. And what I will say is that everything that I learned at Illinois State provided the foundation for everything that has come after. And for a lot of people that doesn't make sense because I was a special education teacher, so what does that have to do with leadership and what does that have to do with organizational consulting and what does that have to do with strategic planning and needs assessments and - there's no connection, what do you, what are you talking about, joyce? The reality is that Dr. [Elmer A.] Lemke and Dr. [Jane M.] Lee, and especially Dr. [Diana K.] Starzinger, they taught me when I got a child in my classroom to conduct a series of tests, interviews, conversations, observations with that child to assess where he or she was and then think about where he or she needed to be to meet the state criteria. Design activities, educational programs, interventions, behavior changes, to get the child from where they were to where they needed to be, develop all of those interventions that I was planning to use, implement those interventions - you see where I'm going?

Rachel Kobus 12:28

I was like, yep, you keep going -

joyce gillie gossum 12:29

Implement those interventions and then evaluate the effectiveness of those interventions and cycle back and reassess the child. Well, what do you do as a good leader? What do you do with organizations where there are problems or issues? What do you do in relationships with people that you care about and want to continue the relationship? You assess, you design, you develop, you implement, and you evaluate.

Rachel Kobus 13:11

There you go!

joyce gillie gossum 13:12

And I learned how to do that and do it exceptionally well at Illinois State, because it was drilled, it was ingrained in everything we did.

Rachel Kobus 13:28

Yeah. Wow. I can't - that is amazing. And I can't - I would never - what an easy analogy and easy concept to understand. And I'm sure there's many programs like that too, but, and we, of course, we like to brag and boast that our College of Education is second to none. And I had to go back to say, like, you wrote a federal secretary and that was one of their top three, to say please go to Illinois State. So it just shows that yes, [innovation?], I think, is in many programs at ISU, but it's so amazing to hear how you transferred all that into what you're doing today. I'm, like, flabbergasted by it.

joyce gillie gossum 13:59

Absolutely, and I rely on that and when we get a call from a potential client and they ask us - you know, most of the time they'll say, we have X problem and we need you to do Y. And our response is always, how do you know that X is the problem and not just a symptom?

Rachel Kobus 14:28

Yeah. And going back again -

joyce gillie gossum 14:30

Because I was taught to ask that question, right, I was taught to look beyond the symptoms that the child was exhibiting and to get to the root cause and then deal with the root cause and not just the symptoms.

Rachel Kobus 14:45

Wow, amazing. And something I think listeners can appreciate too and you can use, like you said, in relationships, in your own organization, and your, like - look past just the one - I do that every day even as a marketer, it's - we don't need [inaudible], you need to go back and start with the assessment, and then like you said, message and design, develop, implement, assess, something! Again, it's just so logical and easy but we forget to do it. So no wonder your business is so amazing, just living on that foundation, so -

joyce gillie gossum 15:14

Yes, it's been successful.

Rachel Kobus 15:17

Yes. Well, yeah, it seems so simple, but something that, again, just has to be stressed at every point. But so then after ISU, learning that, having that, you know, foundation set for you, you still did go into teaching for a while?

joyce gillie gossum 15:32

I did. I taught in Chicago and in Nashville, Tennessee.

Rachel Kobus 15:37

Okay, great. So after - what made you, I guess, you know - obviously, you wanted to be a teacher, you chose this program, this major to go through, and then something switched, you decided to go to grad school while you were - how did that come about that you took this next step, so - ?

joyce gillie gossum 15:55

So the plan, my plan was always to be in a position, whether that was as a local superintendent, a state secretary of education, or THE secretary of education, or university dean, something -

Rachel Kobus 16:13

Wonderful, I love the goals.

joyce gillie gossum 16:14

I wanted to be able to influence future teachers and future leaders, so that was always my plan.

joyce gillie gossum 16:25

Makes perfect sense talking to you, Joyce, I see it.

joyce gillie gossum 16:27

That was always the plan. I wasn't sure exactly what I would be doing, I just knew that I would be influencing others who were going to then influence and groom and train and raise up the next generation. So I'm teaching, minding my own business in Nashville, enjoying my classroom and my responsibilities at the school, and the husband of my co-teacher at the church where I was a Sunday school teacher for special education - so Debbie and I were co-teachers, because we were both special ed teachers, and our church wanted to start a Sunday school class for those special needs children. So Debbie and I were teaching that class and apparently she was going home and talking with her husband about me and her husband was a senior manager at a consulting company, a business consulting company. And one day he asked if I would meet him for coffee and he asked me if I would come to work for the consulting company, designing curricula and teaching technical people how to be instructors and conducting assessments of organizations.

Rachel Kobus 17:59

Wow!

joyce gillie gossum 17:59

And he said it just like that, and that's what I said, Rachel, I said, wow, I don't know how to do any of that. I can't do that.

Rachel Kobus 18:17

I just wasn't expecting that either, you coming from special education teacher to, do you want to consult?

joyce gillie gossum 18:22

Organizational consultant, right? And I said, I, Mike, I don't know how to do any of that. Would I have to go back to school? Would I - I don't know how to do any of that. And he said, what do you do when you get a new student?

Rachel Kobus 18:39

Back to your foundation.

joyce gillie gossum 18:40

Exactly. And he said, that's exactly what you do in an organization, that's exactly what you do when you're preparing to teach someone how to be an instructor, and that's exactly what you do when you're developing the curricula. And so I thought about it, and I thought, ooh, I would reach even more people than just the students in my classroom and I would be having an impact on organizations that will have an impact on the people in the organizations. Sure, sign me up. So I did, and I traveled all over the

country doing just that, working with utilities and health systems and school systems and nonprofits and large corporations and small manufacturing companies. I mean, just all kinds of businesses I was exposed to, and they all were exactly the same in spite of what they were doing because all of them had people. And when an organization has people they're always going to have this same kinds of issues. It doesn't matter what the product is or what the service is, or, you know - and they all think that they're different because of what they do. What I discovered in those years traveling around the country is that they're all the same because they all have people.

Rachel Kobus 20:20

We're all human, you know. Interesting.

joyce gillie gossum 20:22

Exactly. Exactly. So I did that for several years and one of my clients was a utility, Georgia Power Company, and they were on probation for accreditation at their nuclear site and they were in construction phase for their second site, and they asked if I would come and head up the department that was responsible for accreditation because they needed to get off probation.

Rachel Kobus 21:01

Wow. Another out of left field. What a [cross talk] journey.

joyce gillie gossum 21:08

Exactly, and so - again, right, again, I'm thinking, I - but I had been working with nuclear plants and I had been working, helping them to build, you know, their package for accreditation, because I had done that in the school system, and so I said okay. And it occurred to me that at that point I probably need a degree in adult education, because adults are a little bit different. You know, we use in pedagogy to teach children but we use andragogy to teach adults, very different approaches. One is teacher-centric, pedagogy, and the other is learner-centric, andragogy. So I went back, got a master's in adult education and leadership supervision, did that for several years, transferred to another of the Southern companies in Alabama, met Tom, and he convinced me to marry him. I'm just kidding.

Rachel Kobus 22:30

Took a bit. I mean, you're on this journey here, Tom, we need to, you got to fit into it somehow.

joyce gillie gossum 22:36

We decided to get married, we moved here to Fort Walton Beach, and I was teaching at the local community college, so I was teaching pre-service teachers, I was still doing consulting work with corporations and higher ed around the country and we were getting more and more requests from higher ed. And I thought, I don't know that I want to do this consulting for much longer, I think it's time for me to spend some time in education, so I decided to go back and get my doctorate. I could see where the world was going, so I got my doctorate in multicultural studies and leadership, and - I'm sorry, multicultural studies and curriculum - and just as I was about to finish the doctorate the associate provost of the branch locations, right, those locations that are not on the main campus in Pensacola, the vice provost asked me if I would come and be his assistant with the caveat that I had to finish my

degree that December. And so I came on board and ended up being the associate dean for branch locations at the University of West Florida.

Rachel Kobus 24:20

Back into higher education, almost a full circle.

joyce gillie gossum 24:23

Back into higher education, a full circle. Yes, yes. So I did that for several years, and when I left I went to Tom and I said, I need a job. I want to do some consulting again.

Rachel Kobus 24:43

I just love it - Tom, I need a job.

joyce gillie gossum 24:45

I need a job, will you hire me? And so I ended up back at Best Gurl and we work with clients all over, corporations, higher ed, lots of higher ed, because that's where my heart is, right, and then Illinois State came calling in the form of Wilma Bates and the rest is history.

Rachel Kobus 25:15

Yes. And you've done - I know recently at Illinois State, you were just inducted into the College of Education Hall of Fame last year, so congratulations on that. And it's because of this, it's because of this journey. Look at all these areas that a special education degree has impacted. And I'll - I have to be biased, a special education degree from Illinois State University, because I don't know if other universities could have given you the foundation that ISU could have given, but all this to come back and say that - so you are very deserving of being inducted, because you've done so much, and like you said, especially higher education, that's your your bread and butter, where you love to serve, where you love to consult. And again, that's why your name came up and you were honored last year. And you've become - I think what you've called, you know, you try to instill - the leader's leader, as you - with Best Gurl now, and you consult and you help others figure out what that whole foundation of evaluate, develop - I'm going to get it all wrong - design, implement and evaluate again.

Rachel Kobus 26:19

Yes, I got it! So can you talk a bit about how you instill and do this, what's it mean to be a leader's leader and how that has helped you move forward? Or maybe have you used it to impact, I think, maybe, your business, your organizations, but what does it mean to be a leader's leader, then?

joyce gillie gossum 26:19

That's right.

joyce gillie gossum 26:41

I think General George C. Marshall said it best when he talked about it being easy to get those who report to you to follow you and how it is much more difficult to get those who are your peers, or who are also leaders in their own field, to follow you.

Rachel Kobus 27:11

That's very true.

joyce gillie gossum 27:12

And I would have to say, again, that the same things, assessing where that leader is, figuring out what his or her gaps are between where they are and where they really could and sometimes should be as a leader with their people, figuring out what to do about it, designing, developing, whatever methodology, sometimes it's suggesting an executive leadership program at one of the universities, sometimes it's executive coaching, sometimes it's just a matter of doing a 360 assessment so they can see how others see them. But implementing whatever that initiative is and then getting back with them to evaluate and then follow up, exactly. So again, leading other leaders is not different, it's just a little more challenging, because you have to get them to see that there is an issue.

Rachel Kobus 28:40

Yeah, and that can be hard.

joyce gillie gossum 28:42

Yes, and for me, leadership is not a title or a position, leadership is a state of heart. And if you don't care about the people you are leading, if you don't care beyond the profit, or the shareholders, or the board, or, you know, whoever, whatever those externals are, if you don't care about the people then you ought not to be leading. And you should step aside and let someone who cares about the people - because the way I treat my - the people who choose to follow me as a leader, the way I treat them is exactly how they're going to treat the people that our service, our product, our organization serves.

Rachel Kobus 29:50

Yeah, and I think that's a great value to live by. Because it's true, I mean, you want others to be beside you, basically, and you're not going to [inaudible] ahead of them. So what a great value, I appreciate you sharing that with us.

joyce gillie gossum 30:04

Absolutely.

Rachel Kobus 30:05

And I think that comes back to, you know, how I kind of wanted to end our conversation is Best Gurl has done so much because of you, because of Tom, because of your staff that does this. You inspire others, you help others, and full circle, you're that leader's leader because you want to see others grow, and you want to see others grow at Illinois State so it comes back to Illinois State again that you've given back, you're supporting our students now through a scholarship, I believe too, if it's okay to mention that, and, you know, and appreciation obviously for it, but is it in the special education department that you are doing it in? Okay. And so I find that amazing now listening to your story, that I hope these special education students are able to reach out to you when they see your scholarship and learn about what you learn and that - become a teacher, but become a teacher in many different ways. Become a teacher either in your classroom, but know that there's places to go and teach outside of a classroom and continue that value. So for you to give that support, I think you're going to support more

than just what people see as a traditional teacher. So, very much, this conversation is very much of how to be a teacher outside the classroom and where to go with this, so I love it. joyce, thank you so much. Is there anything else you want to add, anything you want to end with, share with anybody before we say goodbye? It's okay if not, I put you on the spot.

joyce gillie gossum 31:34

I was taught, I was taught to give back. I was taught to give back at home, I was taught to give back at Illinois State certainly, and I will stay without bias, because I've worked at several higher ed institutions and worked with them, I have met many other educators and special educators and they did not get that foundation and they struggled when they had to write individualized education plans once they got into their own classrooms. And so yes, Illinois State does it differently and better in my opinion.

Rachel Kobus 32:25

I will agree with your opinion 100% on that one, joyce, so - I will never say no to that. So I want to thank you again and we appreciate everything and I, you know, Best Gurl is an amazing company that is helping everyone strive to again be teachers, be leaders. So [cross talk] joyce, and we hope to hear amazing things from you soon.

joyce gillie gossum 32:50

Yes, you're welcome. Thank you Rachel.

Rachel Kobus 33:05

And that was 1978 Special Education alum and 2022 College of Education Hall of Fame inductee, Dr. joyce gillie gossum. Thanks for listening to Redbird Buzz. Tune in next time for more stories from beyond the quad.