

Susan Jobe ([00:04](#)):

Welcome to the GUIDE For Life podcast, exploring topics related to the personal competency skills that empower Arkansas students and teachers to thrive at home, school, on the job, and in the community.

Susan Jobe ([00:20](#)):

Welcome to the GUIDE For Life Podcast. I'm very happy to have a special guest with me today, Dr. C.J. Huff, who is founder of Bright Futures USA. Welcome.

C.J. Huff ([00:32](#)):

Thank you. I'm excited to be here.

Susan Jobe ([00:34](#)):

I always like to start the podcast off by having people share with me their personal journey in education. And I know that not everyone that comes on the podcast is an educator, so to speak, but tell us about your experiences growing up in school. And was there any teacher maybe that significantly impacted your life, or made a difference for you?

C.J. Huff ([00:57](#)):

Yeah, I grew up in Southeast Kansas, and grew up in the public school system there, very small rural community. McCune, Kansas is my hometown, and I grew up on a farm there. And I went to a consolidated school district. I started out in McCune Elementary School, went to K-8 there, and then the high school at Southeast High School in Cherokee, which was the high school where the four communities of McCune, West Mineral, Weir and Cherokee, we all kind of converged there at the high school, and huge graduating class of 63 in my school.

C.J. Huff ([01:29](#)):

And wouldn't trade that experience for anything. In terms of educators that had an impact on me, I think there were a number of them. There were more probably than I can count here from at the elementary level, Mrs. [Coletrain 00:01:45], first grade teacher, still have a relationship with her, just a great lady. She was a brand new teacher, in her first year and in my first year, in first grade, and only year, thankfully. They didn't have to hold me back, so that was a good thing. But she's one of my all-time favorites.

C.J. Huff ([02:05](#)):

And then Jerry Jack Gwinnet, middle school, had a tremendous influence on me, and he was also my basketball coach, and amazing teacher in high school. Some good and bad, some relationships that I had with teachers that weren't as positive, that maybe pointed me in a different direction, because I just was trying to avoid some things as a kid, that just some not so positive relationships.

C.J. Huff ([02:37](#)):

But for the most part, really just was blessed to be surrounded by caring adults that helped guide me on my path. And so much so, I mean, everybody in my family, you're either a farmer or an educator, those are your two career path choices. And so I did both. I was a farmer out of high school when I graduated in 1988, giving myself away a little bit on my age, but graduated high school in 1988, started farming with my grandpa and my dad, and farmed until about 1996, got my teaching degree, went into

elementary education, taught third grade, taught fourth grade, got married in 1997, then moved to Missouri.

C.J. Huff ([03:13](#)):

The rest is kind of history there. The rest of my education career was in Missouri as an elementary teacher in Bolivar, Missouri, then an assistant principal and principal in Springfield, Nixa, Missouri. I became superintendent of schools in Eldon, Missouri, up by Lake of the Ozarks, and then in 2008, landed in Joplin, Missouri as a superintendent of the schools there, and was there from 2008 to 2015, which we'll be talking about, Bright Futures, but that's kind of where... All those experiences kind of led up to what ultimately became the work of Bright Futures. And in Joplin, Missouri is really where it was founded, and I've been continuing with that work ever since about 2010.

Susan Jobe ([03:57](#)):

I love that, kind of have done it all, I guess, in education, approached it from every angle. I think that that really contributes too when you have that broad range of experience, your understanding of students and their needs. So what inspired you to start something like Bright Futures?

C.J. Huff ([04:20](#)):

There were a lot of factors that came into play. Certainly, my lived experience, my personal experience, having grown up on a farm in Southeast Kansas, I was blessed to have that nuclear family in the traditional sense, mom and dad, I had three brothers, and I grew up poverty. Didn't realize it because I had everything I needed. I had food on the table, we had a garden, we had cows, we had chickens, we just were very self sufficient. And with my grandparents living close by, my aunts and uncles and cousins, I mean, we just all took care of one another and had a great life.

C.J. Huff ([05:00](#)):

And when I got into education, I think what I didn't realize, was that not everybody, even the kids, now as I think back that I grew up with, had that same lived experience that I did. And when I became a teacher, obviously I was much more cognizant of the lives of the children that I was working with, and became very aware that poverty in the sense that I grew up in, and the poverty that kids that I was working with at that time, was very, very different. They, in some cases, didn't have the support structures at home. Sometimes they did. Sometimes there was a mom and dad in the home, both working hard, but there were just some challenges there that had to be overcome. But unfortunately in many cases, it was kids that were being subjected to some really challenging situations in the home, and poverty was one of those challenges.

C.J. Huff ([05:53](#)):

And as I kind of observed that and started asking myself a lot of questions about how do we work with these kids? Because I came to realize right away that academic success was very closely tied to what was happening in the social, emotional aspect, what was happening in their personal lives, all played into this bigger picture of educating kids.

C.J. Huff ([06:16](#)):

And didn't really know the answer, obviously as a rookie teacher in my first few years, and then when I moved into administration, seeing more of that. I was in Springfield, Missouri. I was in the highest poverty school in the district. I only had three kids in my whole school that weren't [inaudible 00:06:31] lunch, dealt with a lot of inner city type poverty there, and the challenges that come with that, and then rural poverty.

C.J. Huff (06:39):

As a superintendent, then when I came to Joplin, dealing with the graduation rate issue there and trying to overcome the challenges that our kids that weren't graduating from school, with a 62% on time graduation rate, worst in the state of Missouri, there were a lot of issues that were challenging our kids that had nothing to do with academics. There were a lot of things that were pushing our kids away from school that had nothing to do with school itself. And trying to overcome that challenge and engaging our community in a meaningful way through a lengthy, strategic planning process, there were three specific action plans that really gave birth to Bright Futures.

C.J. Huff (07:18):

I remember very clearly it was action plans four, five, and six related to the graduation rate strategy. And those action plans specifically stated that we want to engage the time, talent and treasure of our faith community, the time, talent and treasure of our human service agencies, and the plan six was engaging the time, talent and treasure of our business community.

C.J. Huff (07:42):

And so really it was just a, let's take a whole community approach to overcoming these challenges and start having some meaningful conversations about how we can stabilize the lives of these kids to the greatest degree that we can, put supports in place for these kids to the greatest degree we can, and create a structure and systems to make that possible. And so that's really where the work began.

C.J. Huff (08:04):

It was born on April 8th of 2010. We kicked off the initiative locally. And again, it was just a locally based effort to improve graduation rates, and not just at the high school level. I mean, we were taking a systems approach looking at it even how we could work better with children that were newborns, and working with pregnant moms even, I mean, just realizing that, that was part of the greater system and putting those supports in place to help all kids.

C.J. Huff (08:31):

And so that framework was born then. The fall of 2010, I started getting phone calls from school leaders across our area saying, "Hey, we're hearing about this work. We'd like to do it in our communities too." And so by the end of that first year, we had, I think, seven communities in the area that were working together to support children and youth, and the Bright Futures framework was kind of born out of that.

C.J. Huff (08:56):

So it came from a very pure place. I mean, we were just trying to help kids in Joplin overcome the challenges that they had and struck a chord with community members in other areas. And we all started working collectively together to support children and youth in all of our communities, because we do

share these kids. I mean, every kid's, our kid, I don't care what district they attend. And that's kind of the philosophy that we have with our work. Let's do this work together and figure out how we can overcome these challenges.

Susan Jobe ([09:20](#)):

Yeah. I love that because we are really focused right now in Arkansas on meeting the needs of the whole child and the whole learner. And I love the approach that you've taken because it just seems like there are very well round systems in place. And you are, through your faith communities, through your local businesses, through your educators, meeting all of those needs, those social, emotional needs. And so-

C.J. Huff ([09:48](#)):

I think too, I think it's something that Arkansas should be very, very proud of. Currently Bright Futures, we're in 70 communities in eight states. And I will tell you that I'm not seeing... I think there's a desire, I think there's a collective will to do what we're trying to do, but I'm not seeing a state make this particular issue a priority to the degree that I've seen Arkansas do that, anywhere that I've been. And I think everybody's trying to figure out how to crack that code, and Arkansas is on the cusp, I think, of being a model for every state in the country on how to engage communities and bring those resources together to take that whole community approach to support kids and youth.

C.J. Huff ([10:30](#)):

So it's not just about the.... I'm all in on academics too. I'm an educator first, but I think Arkansas, more so than any state that I've worked with to date, has recognized the fact that it's not all about the test score, if you will. It's not just about the academic side. Alongside that we have to look at that whole child and take a whole community approach to meeting those needs so that kids can be successful in school. So stabilizing that child's life so they can focus on their learning, and not every state is that sophisticated and mature in their thinking.

Susan Jobe ([11:08](#)):

I mean, we talk about Maslow's hierarchy of needs all the time, and we know that they can't hit those levels in blooms until those Maslow needs are met. And so I just really love everything that you're saying. And before you were talking about students in poverty, and I think that sometimes it's so easy for us to think about poverty and just think about that from an economic standpoint, but we know that we have students, there's emotional poverty and it's a very complex issue. And so why don't you talk to us about what I've heard you call the three-headed monster of [inaudible 00:11:52].

C.J. Huff ([11:52](#)):

Yeah. I don't know if that's the right terminology or not, but really, truly, when you think about this issue of poverty, which has gripped this nation for decades and it's becoming more and more of an issue. In fact, I think it was in 2013, we crossed that threshold of having over 50% of our kids in this nation that qualify for free or reduced lunch. I mean, that's a huge number. And if we know that poverty matters and we know that poverty, I've said for years, is a detriment and a threat to our national security. And what I mean by that is that, if we don't have healthy kids, what does the future look like for our country?

C.J. Huff ([12:31](#)):

And so we've got to have an emphasis on that fact. And so when I talk about this idea that poverty's kind of a three-headed monster, there's economic poverty, which that's really the situational or generational poverty that exists that can put kids behind and create stressors in the home and family that are hard to overcome. And so we have to put systems in place to address that.

C.J. Huff ([12:59](#)):

We've got the emotional poverty piece that you referenced, and that's just about, how do we create nurturing environments and give kids tools that they need to [inaudible 00:13:12] that emotional stability and supports that they need so that they can be successful in that sense. And then there's this third piece, which I think is not discussed a lot, but I think that it certainly is relevant, if not is much more so than some of these others, and they're all tied together.

C.J. Huff ([13:31](#)):

And that's kind of why I talk to... They're three pieces of the same monster that we have to address. So this third one, relational poverty, relationship poverty, I think, is something that we have to pay attention to too. And so the example I give that I think to illustrate this point is that, when I talk about relational poverty, I think about my own children. So I have three kids. I have a daughter that's at the University of Arkansas currently, that's finishing up her senior year. My son Keaton, he's a freshman at Missouri State University. And my youngest Julianne, she's in seventh grade. So I'm going to be at this for a while, but I've been in tune with, and I have those conversations with my kids regularly from the time they're really small, three, four, five years old.

C.J. Huff ([14:13](#)):

What do you want to be when you grow up? And anytime they come up with whatever it is, we have a conversation about what that looks like and what they have to do. And so we're having those conversations at the dinner table with my kids. So when my daughter said that she wanted to be a doctor, and this was going into high school, she wanted to be a doctor and she was thinking possibly orthopedic surgery. I'm like, wow, that's cool. And in my mind, I'm thinking, I have no clue how to help her to do that. But because the relationships that I have in the circles that I run, if you will, the people I go out to dinner with or relationships, friends, that I have, connections that I have, I was able to pick up a phone and call a friend that's an orthopedic surgeon and say, "Hey, my daughter's interested in becoming an orthopedic surgeon, would you mind if she job shadowed? Are there opportunities for job shadow or something else so she can get some exposure to that?"

C.J. Huff ([15:08](#)):

She's like, absolutely. And so within a week or two she's job shadowing an orthopedic surgeon and observing surgeries and getting that lived experience that happened as a direct result of the relationships that I had. Now, let's take that to a different example. I can tell you right now that there was probably at that same time a young lady in Joplin, Missouri, that was the same age as my daughter that may have had that same dream. And her mom and dad, no doubt loved her dearly, just like I love my daughter dearly. But maybe they both work on the line at a local manufacturing company. And the circles that they run in may not cross paths with orthopedic surgeons or anybody in the health field that may know the answer to how to get there.

C.J. Huff ([15:54](#)):

And so they may not have the relationships that my daughter's able to access as a direct result of my relationship circles, that they would have. And as a direct result of that, that child may never get that opportunity and may never be able to explore that particular dream, simply because those relationships don't exist. So in this work, this broader body of work of Bright Futures, part of it's about meeting those emotional needs and basic needs of kids. But it's also, how do we establish great relationships in the community so that every child can chase whatever dream they want to chase. And it's not judgmental, we're not here to judge families. We all are where we are.

C.J. Huff ([16:35](#)):

And the question is, how can we support one another and create the relationships that are needed to help move children and allow them to chase whatever dream that they want to chase. And if that means they want to grow up to work and manufacturing, yay. If that's where you're going to go... Because if I had a child that wanted to work manufacturing, it'd be a stretch for me to find somebody that knew how to get into that field of work. And so it works both ways. So at the end of the day, it's whatever path the kids want to travel, we want support not just the child, but the families and helping them to give those kids that opportunity to chase that dream.

Susan Jobe ([17:17](#)):

I know you work with a lot of communities across the country who are highly engaged in supporting their students in this way. So would you just share with us some of your best examples of what that might look like?

C.J. Huff ([17:29](#)):

Oh, wow. Yeah, there's a lot of good ones. A lot of good ones in Arkansas. We work with about 18 communities in Arkansas currently. And the thing I would say, is it looks different in every community. The Bright Futures framework... And I probably should have shared this earlier, consists of these three things. There's three pillars to our work. The first pillar is creating systems to meet any child's basic needs within 24 hours. And we have a multi-tiered system of support to do that, that engages with the faith community, human service agency, business community, and organizations in the community that may have resources to bring the barrier to various challenges. We engage with social media as a part of that effort. And then we also work with communities to established funds to support children and youth, in case they just have to buy something if you will, to meet that need within 24 hours.

C.J. Huff ([18:17](#)):

So there's that. The second piece is building leadership capacity in the community, and really building a strong advisory board at the local level to problem solve those challenges that every community faces that relates to children and youth.

C.J. Huff ([18:32](#)):

And the third piece is service learning, which is giving kids the opportunity to give back to the communities that are giving to them, and growing that next generation of service minded citizens. So those are the three pillars. And in Arkansas, we've got some great models of that, Pea Ridge, Arkansas,

was actually the very first community in Arkansas to adopt our Bright Futures framework as a community engagement model.

C.J. Huff ([18:52](#)):

And they've done some amazing work in Pea Ridge, from not just meeting basic needs, but creating opportunities for kids through the academic programming and partnership with business and industry and other agencies to create workforce and economic development opportunities for kids, that they wouldn't have had otherwise.

C.J. Huff ([19:11](#)):

So some of that job embedded credit, they've done some work in that. They've done some work with putting together programming that allowed for kids to get certifications that allowed them to hold a job while they're going to school that paid very, very well, and put them on a path for careers with local employers, and gave them some great job skills. So some great things happening there.

C.J. Huff ([19:35](#)):

And then we have some great examples of service to others in communities. I think about Mexico, Missouri, is one of the communities we work with and probably of all the communities... And I've got some communities I'm really, really proud of, but Mexico is just a little bit further ahead, I think, than many of the communities we work with. And it's kind of a rural community that's really taking that... Which this will make sense because it's kind of been led by the chamber of commerce, in conjunction with the schools.

C.J. Huff ([20:02](#)):

And so they've really taken that workforce pipeline piece of this very, very seriously and have created all kinds of opportunities with local business and industry and other employers. There's employers... When I talk about workforce development, that also includes your faith community and your human service agencies too. I mean, oftentimes the largest employer in town is the school system, which would be considered a human service agency. And so, just bringing all those partners together to allow for more career exploration and helping kids understand what opportunities exist there for them locally, what those jobs pay, what kind of training they need, what the expectations are from an employability skills standpoint, that's all important part of that. So as we do this work where we usually start that conversation, and most all of our communities are doing a great job with this, is meeting those basic needs first.

C.J. Huff ([20:53](#)):

And what we find is, as we engage communities in that conversation around how we can create that stability for the child and bring people together to meet those basic needs, once they get a chance to get to know what the issues are, that it relates to our kids and begin having those meaningful conversations about the children in the community and have a better understanding of the capabilities that our kids have, what we find is that those conversations begin to evolve.

C.J. Huff ([21:22](#)):

So it goes from, let's take care of food insecurity to, oh my goodness, these kids are really sharp, how can we... I have a lunch buddy and I'm mentoring this kid and he's in high school and he wants to be a chemical engineer, but he's homeless. He's not going to get that opportunity because he doesn't have anybody in his life that can help guide him towards college and what that's going to take to do that.

C.J. Huff ([21:50](#)):

It's really about just creating the dialogue and building that, reconnecting the community to the schools and the classrooms and our students, and then vice versa reconnecting our schools, our classrooms, and our students to the community and figuring out what we can do together.

Susan Jobe ([22:05](#)):

I love that. I love everything you're saying. I love the community service and the service learning aspect because I just feel very strongly that that is so empowering for students, to just realize that even at they're young age, that they can make a difference, a positive difference. And then I think that providing them with those opportunities also cultivates that sense of personal responsibility to be a positive difference maker in our communities. [crosstalk 00:22:36].

C.J. Huff ([22:35](#)):

And the reality of it is, that kids are going to choose a path. I mean, good or bad. And I think that oftentimes, when children and youth don't see that they have options, and then the wrong influences come into play, that can set them on the wrong trajectory. We're not talking about monumental changes here in systems. We're talking about small incremental changes, because what I know is that every community loves their kids. I've yet to meet anybody... And everything is so politicized nowadays, I've never anybody on either side of the aisle, I don't care how far left you are, how far right you are, when we come to sit down and talk about kids and helping support children and youth, I see communities come together around that.

C.J. Huff ([23:21](#)):

They're not talking politics, they're like, okay, how can we help these kids? And I think this is really, in a world that's as crazy as it is right now and there seems to be so much conflict and controversy, we can come together around children. And once we come together around kids, we see some really amazing things happen, as communities come together to support their children.

Susan Jobe ([23:47](#)):

Yeah. I think about that acronym of TEAM, together everyone achieves more, and just the potential for just this domino effect. I mean, you're helping your kids, but that in turn helps schools, they're performing better academically. They're being successful in their communities. They're contributing. And so I really love that. Sometimes getting started might seem very overwhelming to a community that might be interested in working on something like this. How do we even get started? What is the process for us in creating brighter futures for the kids in our own local community?

C.J. Huff ([24:26](#)):

Yeah. So I reference the, I call it the courtship to marriage continuum. I try to use a lot of analogies and help people connect things, because one of the things that I think is a... I'm a visual person and I have to

connect dots, and I think a lot of people are like that. And when you've not done the work and you're not sure, like you said, how to get started and it's hard to see it, but if you can put your hands on it or you can relate it to a relevant life experience, then I think it makes sense. And so I use this courtship to marriage continuum as kind of the analogy that describes how this work starts.

C.J. Huff (25:04):

I use the example when I met my wife. I didn't just walk right up to her and say, "Will you marry me?" That's not how this works. It started with a conversation and it's about people coming together and having a conversation, and finding that, hey, we've got some things in common. And then I talk about the first date. You've got to ask them out on that first date. Well, that's kind of the quick win, where can we work together right now to make a difference in the lives of these kids? And let's see how that feels and how that works together. And then when I do my presentations to communities, I say, what's more important than the first date, and always, I've never had anybody... Because I always thought that would be kind of a tricky question, and immediately, somebody always blurts out, "It's a second date." Absolutely.

C.J. Huff (25:50):

So you decide that, we kind of like working together, so what's next for us? And then what's next? And then you're like, okay, let's make this more formal. Let's get engaged. And then you say, "I do." And then, in essence, the community comes together, all those sectors of the community come together and say, we're going to do this. And then as we all know, with marriage, once you say I do, the real hard work then begins. And so all the factors that play into a successful marriage or a relationship also play into to this idea of how you engage community. So trust, transparency, having mutual goals, having the same vision for the future together, all those things that make a marriage work, or a relationship work, is what makes community engagement work.

C.J. Huff (26:40):

And it is hard work, but it's worthy work. And so when communities ask me, how do we get started? It starts with that conversation. And then, the thing that I think we bring to the table, it's a national not-for-profit now, and working with so many communities, it's almost like we're marriage counselors in a way, we help help navigate some of those initial challenges of bringing people to a table. Because there are a lot of... It's not all kumbaya and teddy bears and rainbows doing this work. It's hard work. And sometimes people are going to have disagreements on how you approach it. Some people are going to be resistant to bringing something like this to town because they don't understand it.

C.J. Huff (27:23):

I'll give an example, sometimes human service agencies in particular, when they hear Bright Futures might be coming to town, and I understand this, think, oh no, because there's limited resources out there. I'm not sure I want this because does that mean that they're going to take over the work that I'm doing, or they're going to take resources away from me, and that's not how it works. The analogy, again, that I use on what Bright Futures looks like, it's more along the lines of a Christmas tree. We're kind of the framework and all the organizations, the good things, the resources that you have in your community, it's really about, how can we hang them on this framework? All these ornaments, and hang them on a framework and create something beautiful for our community.

C.J. Huff ([28:02](#)):

But part of that is just knowing what you've got to work with. And that's why I think our framework is important, because it gets all those ornaments, all those resources you have in your community on one tree. And we can all see it and support the important work that needs to be happening without replicating, duplicating effort, and make sure we're allocating resources in the best way possible, and building those relationships and creating new programming where programming needs to be created. And sometimes that means reallocating resources to do that.

C.J. Huff ([28:32](#)):

We don't make those decisions. Those are all decisions that are made at the local community level. We just help put some structure around the system to make that possible.

Susan Jobe ([28:41](#)):

Got it. Sounds like you do a lot of work bringing people together and facilitating the process. And so I like that. Well, Dr. Huff, thank you so much. Is there anything else, first of all, that you'd like to share that I haven't asked?

C.J. Huff ([28:58](#)):

I think that what I would say again, is Arkansas is just doing some amazing things for kids. And we work with a lot of communities in the state of Arkansas, and at the end of the day, whether a kid lives in Arkansas or Missouri or Virginia, or out in Alaska, we work with a community in Alaska, we see those kids as all our kids and we, as the adults have a responsibility to stabilize the lives of these kids that they can be successful. And it's exciting to be a part of a system, meaning the system in Arkansas, that recognizes that and are actively seeking solutions and partnerships to make that vision for the children of Arkansas possible. So I'm excited to be a part of it and appreciate the opportunity to visit with you today.

Susan Jobe ([29:42](#)):

Yeah, no, thank you. And we will definitely put the link to your website if people want to learn more, that will be in the show notes of the show today. And so thank you so much for your time, and we just appreciate you so much.

C.J. Huff ([29:54](#)):

Well, thank you, Susan. Appreciate you.

Susan Jobe ([29:57](#)):

We'll see you next time on the GUIDE For Life podcast.

Susan Jobe ([29:59](#)):

(Singing).