Kirsten Wilson:

Hi. I'm Kirsten Wilson.

Cristian Haynes:

And I'm Cristian Haynes. Join us as we explore and embrace the challenges of digital learning. This is Living in Beta Mode.

Welcome to Living in Beta Mode podcast. Episode number six, season two of Living in Beta Mode. This podcast content is developed by DESE's Research and Technology Digital Learning Unit, and recorded in the DESE podcast studios of Donnie Lee. Joining you today is your podcast hosts, Christian Haynes and Kirsten Wilson. Today, we're going to be chatting with guests Susan Harris and Tara Adams.

Kirsten Wilson:

Susan shares that every day is an adventure as Lakeside's PR director and family and community engagement coordinator. Creating a positive and welcoming environment for their Lakeside family is her passion.

Cristian Haynes:

Tara has worked at Lakeside as the family and community engagement and communications coordinator for the past seven years. Her favorite parts of the job are providing families a window into their child's learning, highlighting what makes Lakeside special, and that her days are never the same.

Kirsten Wilson:

Welcome, Susan and Tara. We're so excited to have you on Living in the Beta Mode podcast.

Tara Adams:

We're happy to be here.

Susan Harris:

Nice to meet you.

Tara Adams:

Hi, I'm Tara. I'm super excited to be here.

Susan Harris:

Yeah, and I'm Susan. Thanks for having us.

Cristian Haynes:

Well, before we jump in, I think it'd be great, Kirsten, to share how you, and Susan, and Tara connected.

Kirsten Wilson:

I had reached out to David Terrell and Karen Bergh with the DESE engagement unit to ask them about districts that are really knocking it out of the park with the use of communication platforms like social

media, and successfully getting communities and families involved. They mentioned several, but Lakeside School District near Hot Springs was highly recommended to connect with. I emailed Susan and Tara to ask if they would be willing to share with the Living in Beta Mode listeners their story, and they agreed. We worked out some logistics, and that led to an agreement for a podcast guest appearance on Living in Beta Mode. And here we are.

Cristian Haynes:

Susan or Tara, could you share with the listeners what each of your roles do from a practical, day-to-day vantage point?

Susan Harris:

So every day is different, and the first thing we do is open up our calendar, see what's going on in the district. We're so fortunate that Lakeside is all on one campus, so it's easy for us to get around. So, we see what's going on. My job is more primarily being the frontline, being in the buildings, getting a pulse, getting that face-to-face interaction.

Tara Adams:

And I'm, a lot of times, just behind the screen or behind a camera trying to capture what's going on. But yeah, like she said, every day we're running around the campus. So, I mean, we have to decide what shoes to wear each day. And sometimes we have heels on, or wedges, and we're running up to the high school to take a picture.

Kirsten Wilson:

Shoes can create a problem, can't they?

Tara Adams:

I mean, it's funny. We're like, "Hey, what shoes do you have on today? Do we need to switch before we run around campus all day?"

Susan Harris:

Tennis shoes today.

Tara Adams:

Yes.

Kirsten Wilson:

I gotcha. I gotcha. I do have a question for you, just to help our listeners understand the context of what you work. About how many students do you have at Lakeside? Just to give the listeners an idea of what you're working with

Tara Adams:

About 3,500 students, K-12.

Kirsten Wilson:

So my other question for you is, is your background in education, communication, or another profession? How has this helped you in your current role with communications at Lakeside School District? What limitations has your background presented that have stretched you?

Susan Harris:

So for me, I taught preschool in Oklahoma, and then we relocated to Hot Springs. So then I started volunteering and substituting, and then becoming employed by the district and holding several different roles. And then, when I moved into the PR position, I knew. Technology, totally my weakness. So, then Tara came on board.

Tara Adams:

So, I didn't come from an education background. I taught at a non-profit arts academy. So my background was more in digital marketing, and social media, and website design, and all of that. So when I came on, I didn't understand and know much about the education background of it. So it's been nice that Susan has been here, and has the experience, and has worked in the school for so long. Because our strengths and our weaknesses just meld, and I feel like we're a lot alike. So it makes the job a lot easier, working together.

Kirsten Wilson:

Susan, one of the things that we talked about before we started recording is how you came in as a parent and as a volunteer, and I think that brings a special perspective to the job that you do. Would you agree with that?

Tara Adams:

A hundred percent. Just even last week. There's always little things that happen and Susan was like, "Hey, these are our parent volunteers. So, let's just keep that in mind whenever we're moving forward with this project. That they are giving their time." And I think that, had she not have been in that role before ... They have full-time working jobs. They're moms. They're dads. They have other things that they're doing too, and they are giving back to the school when they can. So, making that as easy for them as possible. And she's always like, "Hey, that's our number-one. Let's make sure that we're grateful for what they're doing, and that we make anything that we're doing with them easy for them."

Kirsten Wilson:

Well, and that probably increases their sense of belonging. Because when it's easy, then they feel like, "They see me, and they understand me, and they want me here." How long have you both been working together on communication projects for Lakeside School District? What do you feel has been the greatest benefit to your outreach as you work together?

Tara Adams:

We've been together for seven years. It's been awesome. I think that we understand each other. We work really well together. I think that where I struggle, she holds me up, and vice versa. But everything we do, we always try to take it to the next level. We went to a conference this summer, and one of the speakers, Duncan Wardle from Disney, we did this little scenario and he was like, "When you're working

with people, instead of just shutting down their ideas, ask, 'Yes, and?'" And as we were doing ... We didn't do it together. We were partnered with other people. But I'm like, "She is my person. She's my yes-and person all the time. Anytime we have anything, like, "Let's not stop. Let's take it to the next level." But we're always like, "Yeah, we can do that. And what else can we do?"

Susan Harris:

That's kind of our philosophy of the district. Where you never get comfortable and say, "We've arrived." We're always like, "What can we do better? We've done this now. Well, what can take us to that next level and make us better?"

Kirsten Wilson:

Well, and I think that's evident. I mean, the fact that we're talking right now, and that there has been people in the engagement division at the department that have noticed the work that you do. I think that that speaks volumes to the work that you're doing in your community, because your outreach is to your community. But we know, in social media, that it can go anywhere. And when it goes beyond the walls of your community, out to them, and then I'm hoping that through this it gets out to Arkansas and beyond, you guys become a sounding board for a yes-and for other people too. That's exciting. I love the fact that you guys have been together for seven years, and that you have such a great collaborative working relationship, and you ask who brought the shoes that day. I love that question. What are some systems that you have in place to ensure equitable representation of events and timely sharing of information?

Susan Harris:

I think it all leads back to building relationships, and making people comfortable to come to us and share, and really hearing all the voices at the table. Making sure everyone has a voice at the table.

Tara Adams:

We try to make an effort to be at everything all of the time. And it's nice to have two of us, because we can split it up, but the parents know who to go to. It's nice to be in this role and have the parent and family engagement aspect in the role as well, because as communicators, that's bottom-line. You want to communicate to your families, but you can't do that if you're not building relationships. If you don't see their needs and what they want from the district, you can't really convey that to them. You can't help them.

Kirsten Wilson:

So, you mentioned the partnership that you have with your families because of the relationships you've built. How does the partnership work with your teachers and your administrators as well in this process of making connections and communicating what's going on at Lakeside?

Susan Harris:

I think we start with our new-teacher orientation. So, we build that foundation from day one. We spend three intensive days with our new staff, just getting to know them on a personal level, letting them know our philosophy, and making us approachable.

Tara Adams:

Sure. And then our administrators, they're out in the buildings just as much as we are. Probably more. Yes, obviously more. I think that they see the importance of building relationships with the teachers too. But then we have a really close relationship with our administrators and the principals, where we can work together to figure out needs, but we build those relationships throughout the schools.

Kirsten Wilson:

Another question I have, and it kind of goes to what we already talked about. But how do you ensure that your individual schools, your teachers, your students, your families, and your community are given a voice through your various forms of communication? We know that communication isn't just coming from you, but it's receiving communication too. We know that communication is a two-way process.

Tara Adams:

For sure. Again, it goes back to building relationships. They don't feel comfortable with us if we're not approachable, if we're not available. And I guess this goes back to some of the systems that we have. We don't just put content on Facebook. A couple years ago, we decided that we're just going to share good stories on Facebook. There's no reason to post ... Unless it's an urgent thing. We had a game change yesterday, and people want to know about that, and they can share it. But just highlight our kids. Have our kids smiling. Have our students, have our teachers engaged. Have the collaborations that are happening across campus that people don't really know about, but just highlighting the good things on social media.

So, that's what that platform is used for. And then as far as other stuff, like hard content, things that we need to reach out to families, we're either emailing, texting, or we're picking up the phone and calling them. Those are some of the systems. We separate what social media is for and what our other forms of communication are for. Or whether we need to actually write a letter and mail it to a family, because we noticed that they didn't get the text, they didn't get the email. "Well, I didn't read that. I didn't see that." "Well, how can we talk to you?" But we send out surveys to try to get, "What's the best time for you to be at an event? When is it good for you?" We always are trying to have that two-way communication with our families.

Kirsten Wilson:

That's really good, and I like how you're telling the good stories on Facebook. I know several years ago I was at a conference with a innovative thought leader, and he said, "If you aren't telling the stories, the good stories that are happening in your classroom, somebody else is going to tell the story. And then you're not controlling the narrative." And controlling the narrative is so important. And if we're not communicating information ... You all know this too. If there's not communication, people fill in with their own stories in the gaps. So I think that's great, that you have a real clear idea of what you're using social media for, and then your other forms of communication in order to connect with your families. And then they start to understand that too. So they know where to look for information, and that it's consistent. That's key. I know, as a busy parent myself, consistency is a very welcome part of communication when it comes from my kids' schools. What is the one technology tool or application that you cannot live without to do the work that you do?

Tara Adams:

Probably our notify system, which is text, email, phone calls. I mean, it's our direct line to parents. It works, and we've seen that it works, and we've heard that it works. So I think ultimately, yeah, that would be our-

Kirsten Wilson:

And that's how you determine if they're not checking those things? It has data that can tell you if it's being received or not?

Susan Harris:

Right, and they have control. I mean, they can choose. Do they want all the things? Do they want the phone call, the email, the text, or do they just want one? So, they really have control on how they want to be communicated with.

Tara Adams:

For sure. The funsie one is just Canva. We like to play with Canva a lot.

Kirsten Wilson:

I don't know anyone that does not like to play with Canva, personally.

Tara Adams:

[inaudible 00:12:32].

Kirsten Wilson:

I am 100% onboard with you on that one, Tara. Did you know that they have cartoons? You can make cartoons with Canva?

Tara Adams:

Yes. It's so cool. It does so many things. Even the little QR code that will never go ... Instead of having to Google, "Hey, a free QR code. Canva giving it right to you."

Kirsten Wilson:

Yeah.

Tara Adams:

That's nice.

Kirsten Wilson:

So what are some strategic ways you've been able to involve family and community through your department? What are some of the key players in making that happen for you all?

Susan Harris:

So, I think it starts at the top. Our superintendent is very intentional. He has a weekly update, and so he's very transparent. Whether he's sharing good news or if there's some challenging things going on on-campus that he needs to address with the parents, it really makes him approachable. People feel like they really know him. There's a little girl that has a birthday tomorrow and she's like, "I want to have lunch with John Cook." And he's going to make me happen. I mean, the kids know him. So every level, it just seems like we work really hard to build those relationships.

Tara Adams:

For sure.

Kirsten Wilson:

Well, and then that just totally infuses into the culture of your school, and to your community. That story about the birthday, just ... I don't even think I knew who my superintendent was when I was little.

Tara Adams:

I say that all the time. I knew his name, because my dad and both my parents were teachers, but I never saw him. I never saw him. And Mr. Cook walks through the primary and they're like, "Mr. Cook." And even our assistant superintendent. All of them. They're in their buildings. Our principals, they're not behind their desks unless they have to be for something. They're out. They're doing duty. They're having lunch with kids. They relate to their students, and they're there. So, their students know who they are. Everybody's seen. But yeah, Mr. Cook, they love Mr. Cook.

Susan Harris:

They do. He eats lunch at the junior high almost every day, and he doesn't sit with the administrators. He sits with the kids.

Kirsten Wilson:

Okay. I used to do junior high lunch. That's a very brave thing.

Tara Adams:

Yes, is.

Kirsten Wilson:

I feel like I need to send him some sort of prize or something for sitting and eating lunch with middle schoolers.

Susan Harris:

But they're very honest, and they will tell him exactly what's going on.

Tara Adams:

Every week we do a Soup with the Supe, where he invites students, or it's our bus drivers. They just come in, a few of them have lunch with him, and he's like, "What could make your life easier? What

would make Lakeside better?" It's a time for him to sit, and listen, and take feedback. Some really cool things have come out of those.

Kirsten Wilson:

Well, and that's super-innovative too. And the thing is, is that, when we're talking about equity and voice, he's getting that voice from all different angles. That makes sure that we're meeting the needs of more staff, more students, and the community themselves. That's awesome. I love that. Share one of your favorite stories. And you've already shared some pretty good stories, by the way. But one of your favorite stories of impact that your work with communications at Lakeside School District has had, and then why is that one your favorite?

Tara Adams:

Five years ago, we approached Mr. Cook and we were like ... We'd been working a lot with our broadcasting teacher, Chris Lee. He was the broadcasting teacher at the time. We would be like, "Hey, can we get this video for the district? Could we highlight this program? Could we do this?" For two years, we had been going to him. And then about five years ago we went to Mr. Cook, and we were like, "Hey, we really see the need for a class period that just does district content. How can we work that out?" So he worked with the principal and the counselor to figure out a way to create a class, and it's called Lakeside District Press. It's our district press class, and it's our top broadcasting students that apply to be in the program. So it's kind of like an internship for them, but they also get their class credit. So, that is probably the biggest impact.

Susan Harris:

It's just been so fun to see those kids really take ownership of the school and tell those good stories. They bring us their finished video and we're like, "Hey, I think this needs to be fixed, and let's do this, and let's do ..." And they're not used to getting criticism. These are great kids, and some of them have never heard challenging words or had their work really critiqued. We've had some tears, but to see how they have thrived. We have had several kids go on to college and lead their broadcasting team. We've had one at Oklahoma State leading the sports media team, and Oral Roberts. Just to see them ignite that passion of communication, it's just been so exciting.

Tara Adams:

It's like we're giving back, and our kids are doing great things. It's exciting that we get to share our passion with communication with them.

Susan Harris:

And to see their love and spark that passion.

Kirsten Wilson:

That's awesome. I love that they're getting that critical feedback, but it's refining them and growing them. That field and that industry can be really tough. So having the experience to receive that critical feedback now, before they step into that, really can help them understand, "Is this something I'm passionate about? Is this something I want to go forward with?" But then also growing them so they're

prepared for that kind of work when they get into the industry itself. I love that. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us and our listeners today?

Tara Adams:

Yeah. We have one more full event that our superintendent saw a need. He was at an event one time, and he saw our students with special needs, the families, and the care that it takes for an outing. So, they started a Parent's Night Out. So it's an event that parents with students with special needs can bring their children ... Or actually, they can stay after school, and they don't pick them up until 5:30 or so. 5:30 or 6:00. But they have activities, and they have lots of different things that these students can do. There's a nurse on-staff. Their occupational therapist is there. Any need that that student would have is going to be there. And then our high school students come down to our Partners Club. They'll assist. We have community partners that come in, and they'll feed them. Or even, whenever it's getting close to Christmas, one of our administrators, he'll dress up a Santa and he goes in and visits them.

So it's just a really cool night, but it gives those parents just a few hours to breathe, knowing that their student is completely take-care-of. One little boy one time was like, "Ah, this is the best birthday party ever." It wasn't his birthday. It was close to his birthday, but it's just a night for them. So, it's been really cool to see that blossom and grow. It's things like that, I think, that help us get to the next level. Just seeing the needs of families and parents, and meeting that need.

Susan Harris:

Meeting them where they are.

Kirsten Wilson:

So, is that something that's once-a-month, that-

Tara Adams:

They do it quarterly. So, four times a year. So, it's usually close to ... We do one in the fall, so they just have a hayride situation. They'll do one in December, and then they do one in February, and then they have a spring one. So, kind of close to holidays. So if you need to do your Christmas shopping, or if you just want to go out for dinner for Valentine's Day.

Kirsten Wilson:

Just being the friend of parents with kiddos with those challenges and things like that. I know that that it is very appreciated. I know that some of my friends would've been like, "I would've loved to have had something like that." And them being seen for what they do as a parent, that's huge. That's really huge. Well, thank you, Susan and Tara, for joining us today.

Susan Harris:

Thank you.

Tara Adams:

Yes. Thank you. Thank you for allowing us to share our district with you.

Cristian Haynes:

Well, I hope everyone enjoyed this chat as much as we did. In our upcoming final episode for season two, we're going to share some of our favorite moments of season two of Living in Beta Mode, and tie it all together through our acronym and theme, connect, and how connection through digital learning can transform education. Now for our segment, The E-learning Not-So-Secret Secret. Kirsten?

Kirsten Wilson:

So recently I attended a webinar about the geographic information systems, or GIS, application called Esri. Esri is the global market leader in geographic information system software, location intelligence, and mapping. Since 1969, they've supported customers with geographic science and geospatial analytics. What they call "the science of where." They take the geographic approach to problem-solving, brought to life by modern GIS technology. They're committed to using science and technology to build a sustainable world. At this webinar, they shared that they have an entire division and resources dedicated to K-12 learning that is free. They also have competitions and tools to create content related to GIS topics and sustainability.

Cristian Haynes:

How can they learn more about this?

Kirsten Wilson:

You can go to the Esri website, it's E-S-R-I website, at esri.com. And in their search bar, enter K-12. You can also go to the link, www.esri.com/en-us/industries/K12-education/community. Another option would be to email Esri at schools@esri.com, and they will connect you with the right team support person. That's The E-Learning Not-So-Secret Secret.

Cristian Haynes:

What are some of the things that are going on in the world of Arkansas education?

Kirsten Wilson:

In addition to our podcast, you can go to the DESE website and find other podcasts that are produced through the DESI Podcast Studio of Donnie Lee. Those include Smack Talk, G.U.I.D.E. for Life, AWARE, Arkansas 21st CCLC, and Alternative Education in Arkansas. We would love to share educational podcasts that are going on around the state that may be produced in your area. So if you have a podcast you would like for us to feature, please let us know.

Cristian Haynes:

Don't forget, you can stay up on all the latest happenings in Arkansas education through the Arkansas Department of Education's social media accounts on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, where you can learn about all the exciting work of our educators and students and education-related events happening all over Arkansas. If you have ideas, questions, or comments about e-learning in this podcast, let us know. You can connect with our co-hosts, Kirsten Wilson at kirsten.wilson@ade.arkansas.gov, or Christian Haynes at christian.haynes@ade.arkansas.gov. With that, we want to leave our listeners with this.

Kirsten Wilson:

Whatever you do, wherever you go, remember to embrace life and know that all of us are living in beta mode.

Cristian Haynes:

Thank you for listening to the sixth episode of season two of Living in Beta Mode. You can catch our next episode, Tying it All Together, where Kirsten, Christian, and Donnie share their favorites from season-two episodes. That is set to be released in two weeks, on November 29th, 2022.