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Tammy Friend ([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. Hi, I'm Tammy Friend and I am here with Jessica Saum, our 2022 Arkansas Teacher of the Year. Jessica, thank you for joining us today.

Jessica Saum ([00:34](#)):

Good morning. It's so good to be here.

Tammy Friend ([00:36](#)):

Well, so I'd like to get to know you a little bit, maybe share a fun fact and your journey into the field of education.

Jessica Saum ([00:43](#)):

Absolutely. So I started college right out of high school. I was originally a theater major. I wasn't really sure what I wanted to do with that, but I just was not very successful right out of high school. I didn't do well in school and ended up stepping back from college. I ended up going to esthetician school and worked at a day spa, I did skincare. And once I got married and moved to Arkansas, my husband just really encouraged me that he knew I always wanted to finish my degree and I had really become more interested in education.

Jessica Saum ([01:14](#)):

And he really encouraged me before we started our own family to prioritize that and prioritize my education. So I went through the teacher program at Arkansas State through the BB Campus. I lived here in Cabot. I was able to work part-time and finish that degree. Then we moved to Germany right after I graduated. I did not get to teach right away, but while there I got to work as a paraprofessional. And that was a really great experience, especially now being a special education teacher and having paraprofessionals, just learning the other side of that relationship because they're so critical to our students' success.

Jessica Saum ([01:48](#)):

And then we moved back to Arkansas. I had two young children, and my daughter began receiving speech services. And so they were in preschool and opened the door for me to be able to go back to work by taking a part-time, long-term sub position working in early childhood special education. I always tell her she's older now. She understands that it's different receiving speech services and she still gets pulled for that but that I thank her. I'm like, "You are the reason I was able to start back to work and you opened the door for so many amazing opportunities for us." So I like to celebrate in that with her and let her know how important that is to our story now.

Tammy Friend ([02:26](#)):

Absolutely, absolutely. I think it's so critical to even share these stories, how not everyone that becomes an educator starts out with that in mind.

Jessica Saum ([02:37](#)):

Yes.

Tammy Friend ([02:37](#)):

And how life gets involved and affects these decisions. So what or maybe who inspired you to apply for the Arkansas Teacher of the Year?

Jessica Saum ([02:48](#)):

Cabot schools do Building Level Awards every year where parents, or coworkers, or administrators can nominate teachers for the Building Level Award. And so I actually have a parent in my room, her child's in fourth grade and I've had her since first grade. And it's funny, she's nominated me for so many things. She just is such a supportive parent and she did not nominate me this year but another parent did. And so I was nominated on the building level and I won that. And then that goes to a grade level. So we have an elementary, a mid-level and a high school winner. And then so I won for the elementary level and then ended up winning as our district's teacher of the year.

Jessica Saum ([03:27](#)):

And so that was announced at a really fun ceremony at our end of year meeting. Then I applied for the state position so that was really exciting. It's a lot of work. It's a lot of reflecting on your practice and on your year. But I had just been doing a lot of reflecting of what I could do outside of the classroom to make not only my school a better place, but our community, the district, the state. I had applied for some advocacy fellowships and so I started with the Arkansas State Teachers Association one. It was their inaugural fellowship and it really was amazing to cultivate me as a writer, and a thinker and just an advocator.

Jessica Saum ([04:06](#)):

I'd always looked at myself in that way for my students, but realized there's so much more to do outside of the building. I then applied for the Association of American Educators Advocacy Fellowship starting in 2021 and that's on the national level. And it was so neat to take some of the experience I had in our state and then apply that and learn more on that national level. And just having my administrators, my principal, and these people, and these teachers' groups really nurture me, nurture my writing, help elevate my voice and find places to plug in my experiences, I was able to be published nationally and at the state level.

Jessica Saum ([04:45](#)):

And it really just lit a fire inside of me. It was exciting to see that, yes, I'm making a difference in my classroom. Yes, we're doing these things in our school, but there's people out there that want to hear from teachers, and our voices belong where these decisions are being made. They belong in every aspect of where education decisions are being made. And so to be able to see okay, there's people listening, there's people looking to teachers, this is a huge opportunity. And it was exciting for me to see that and how that led to applying for the state level, and then now at the national level, because what better opportunity is there to have a teacher's voice heard?

Jessica Saum ([05:22](#)):

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Even now, I've been able to speak at a few places in my community, and speak to you and just see where people want to hear from teachers. They're valuing our opinions and our experiences. They're taking that into the decisions they're making at a legislative level and just even in our community level.

Tammy Friend ([05:38](#)):

Absolutely. And as a teacher, I was in the classroom for 18 years. I taught theater at the high school level, and journalism, English, those classes. And again, just being freshly out of the classroom, it is so important to have a voice of the educator, someone to speak on their behalf. I can completely relate for having that fire lit and excited to be able to be a voice and an advocate for students and teachers.

Jessica Saum ([06:08](#)):

Absolutely.

Tammy Friend ([06:08](#)):

As far as being selected and you're right, it is quite the process [crosstalk 00:06:13]-

Jessica Saum ([06:13](#)):

It is.

Tammy Friend ([06:13](#)):

... applying. I had no idea until this role and researching the process. How did you learn that you had been selected as the 2022 Arkansas Teacher of the Year?

Jessica Saum ([06:25](#)):

After you're a district winner, those winners go to regional finalists. And that is just at a beautiful ceremony they do at the governor's mansion, and the top 12 regional finalists were there. And that day they announced the top four winners. So all 12 were acknowledged and then the top four were announced there at the end. After that, you have a site visit where I had, I believe, six or seven different adults from the state in my classroom where they could actually see me teach. And then in an interview, we talked about my thoughts on education, what I wanted to see happen, and how I felt I could serve as the Arkansas Teacher of the Year.

Jessica Saum ([07:02](#)):

That happened in September because I remember thinking, "Oh, my goodness, I only have six weeks for when the school year starts," and you're still figuring things out with your students. It was a great day. Being a special education teacher that I teach in, they got to see that unique opportunity. I have to interact with so many different students on so many different levels, and then you play the waiting game. And so all the teachers were observed and you just wait. I knew that in years past, towards the end of October, the teachers had been announced. So I had that last week of October of somebody's going to find out something this week.

Jessica Saum ([07:37](#)):

But it was about a week, maybe 10 days earlier than the previous winners had been announced. We had a reading pep rally that our whole school was going to. We had looked at our ACT Aspire scores, and some of our MAP testing, and really wanted to focus on literacy this year. We were wanting to get books in children's hands and have them reading more. We did a one book, one school initiative, which was Charlotte's Web. And we had brought a pig into the school and all the kids got to see this little pig. We had Charlotte, one of the students got to win Charlotte to take home.

Jessica Saum ([08:08](#)):

We just had all these really, neat farm animals come out to the school that we were really just all pouring into this one book, one school and every grade level enjoying this same book together in whatever way they could. So this was the culminating event. It was a big Charlotte's Web reading pep rally at the high school. We had the band, we had the cheerleaders. So all the students arrive, our whole school goes. And the cheerleaders are cheering for Charlotte's Web and it's just it's really fun and neat. And then they were going to do a contest of blindfold and try to guess what was in your hand. One teacher had a rotten egg. One teacher had like a toy spider, and I was the last one and I had the blue ribbon.

Tammy Friend ([08:47](#)):

Oh.

Jessica Saum ([08:47](#)):

And so I really didn't... The ribbon didn't connect to me with winning. That wasn't really... I just knew I was down there and I was like, "I'm the last one up here and I'm blindfolded." And they slowly spun me and I think that's when I was like, "Oh my goodness, this is not about Charlotte's Web."

Tammy Friend ([09:06](#)):

Yes.

Jessica Saum ([09:06](#)):

And so they took the blindfold off and there was Johnny Key. And he said, "Miss Saum, you have won Arkansas Teacher of the Year." And it had gone from cheerleaders and people all around us, to all these former Arkansas teachers of the year, people from the state department, building administrators and my parents. That was the biggest surprise. My parents are from South Carolina and they were sitting there on the front row.

Tammy Friend ([09:30](#)):

How exciting.

Jessica Saum ([09:31](#)):

It was amazing.

Tammy Friend ([09:32](#)):

And what a creative approach to announcing. That is so exciting.

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Jessica Saum ([09:37](#)):

It was wonderful. And my husband is active duty military. He's deployed right now and so he was not able to be there, but they had planned with him. They had a prerecorded video that he spoke. And then a friend of mine ended up Face-Timing him so he got to be there as much as he could. It was really, really special.

Tammy Friend ([09:56](#)):

My husband is also active duty and deployed, but he is still local.

Jessica Saum ([10:00](#)):

Okay.

Tammy Friend ([10:01](#)):

It's quite a bit different, of course. That is awesome.

Jessica Saum ([10:07](#)):

It was wonderful.

Tammy Friend ([10:08](#)):

Well, so you won't officially begin, I guess, your role as far as your advocacy, your platform, until the summer, but maybe shed a little light on what your platform is.

Jessica Saum ([10:22](#)):

Absolutely. This year, we had to file a national application for the National Teacher of the Year so all the different states get to do that. In years past, they have asked about a platform. This year, they asked about a message, but that still doesn't change my platform here focusing on the state. And so I really am focusing around the theme of uniting all. I think that connects to my military connections, as well as a special educator. We need educators, service providers, the community stakeholders, parents, parents or caregivers. We need everyone uniting to do what's best for children.

Jessica Saum ([11:01](#)):

And thinking about that collaboration, and thinking about how much better students are served when we all work together, we know that is the answer for student success. And we know that we have to partner with these other teachers in our building, with the families if we're going to do what's best for children. So part of that, I have like three issues I'm focusing on with that uniting concept. The first is working to support military children, and their unique needs in military connected families. I think a lot of times their social-emotional needs are addressed.

Jessica Saum ([11:33](#)):

I know we have these military life counselors and they're embedding in some of these high populated military schools, which is great so they're meeting the needs of those students. But when we think about, especially these older students, these high schoolers, they're moving at some of the most critical

times in their lives. And so even if their social-emotional needs are met, their academic needs are often overlooked. And I really look at military families as this underrecognized subpopulation that we don't really see in data. We don't see how their moves and their deployments, their parents' retirements, how that affects them.

Jessica Saum ([12:08](#)):

I think Arkansas is an extremely military friendly state. We do a fantastic sick job. Our state branch of the military, the MIC3 Council, is strong and we are looking out for students. But when students leave us, they aren't always as served. I just want to empower our schools, our counselors, our teachers to meet those needs. To recognize that a student might move in with a credit that doesn't necessarily transfer directly. But how can we get them in a course that is still going to put them on a pathway to graduate successfully, on time and be competitive for college if that's what they're choosing to do as their next step? They're already sacrificing so much. We cannot ask them to sacrifice their education.

Jessica Saum ([12:48](#)):

I think oftentimes parents, schools, we don't even really know all the resources and all the guarantees that students are allotted with that MIC3 Council that's nationally. So just bringing awareness to that and putting the power back to the parents and the schools to have that voice to do what's right for our students. My children are young. They've had moves, but their education hasn't been impacted in that way, but there's a lot of other families who are. I hear those stories and I hear families moving in or moving out, and not even really knowing about those resources, and families who have been in the military a long time.

Jessica Saum ([13:24](#)):

So I think there's just that breakdown of communication that we can do better. And Arkansas, like I said, I think we have an amazing council here. We can empower students not only as they come in, but as they leave so that they're finding success other places, and they know that Arkansas did the right thing for their students' education.

Tammy Friend ([13:42](#)):

Absolutely. Yes.

Jessica Saum ([13:44](#)):

My second is I want to make sure we emphasize, and we're seeing changes in this from the state. And so that's very exciting for me as a special education teacher, but that teachers, parents, principals, everyone understands that special education students are general education students first. They need to be treated as equals to their typically developing peers. They need to have opportunities academically, socially in sports that their peers are having because we have a ton of students.

Jessica Saum ([14:15](#)):

I think the 2019, 2020 school year, there were 7.3 million students who were serviced through federally funded, special education programs. They need opportunities for meaningful inclusion and we don't always see that. And part of that, I believe, is that general education teachers aren't with the resources

they need to help those students be successful. A lot of times in their undergraduate courses, they're taking exceptional child in the regular classroom, which covers your SPED kids to your GT kids.

Jessica Saum ([14:48](#)):

That is not enough to prepare them for these diverse learners to come in their rooms and have success and feel truly included. And a big piece of that is just some coaching and support on inclusion for these teachers, because I know they want to, they want to do what's best for kids.

Tammy Friend ([15:06](#)):

Sure.

Jessica Saum ([15:06](#)):

They just don't always feel prepared to. I want to give them some power back, some coaching, some opportunities to learn how to better serve kids, especially at the elementary age. This is where children's attitudes develop towards one another. And how as teachers, we're modeling acceptance, we're modeling inclusion, and that goes so much further than race, skin color, all these things. There's so many opportunities to see inclusion and diversity with including all of our peers in as many opportunities as possible. And no, the students in my class are not always going to get that grade level curriculum when in the general education classroom.

Jessica Saum ([15:47](#)):

It's just not always going to happen. I think that's a realistic understanding, but what can they get, what can they experience? If I teach them in my classroom to do something, whether it's sit on the carpet, and read a book, and listen to a book, or interact in conversation with a peer. If they can only do that in my classroom and not take it out with their peers, in their community, with their families, then I'm not truly equipping them for success.

Jessica Saum ([16:12](#)):

I just want to really, really make sure that people are understanding that these students are general education students as well. And that teachers, general education teachers, support staff, all of them have such a real opportunity to model inclusion, model acceptance, and provide some really meaningful, special experiences for all students.

Tammy Friend ([16:33](#)):

Absolutely. And that's exactly the focus of the GUIDE For Life is teaching those skills, those personal competency skills.

Jessica Saum ([16:41](#)):

Yes.

Tammy Friend ([16:42](#)):

So I couldn't agree more.

Jessica Saum ([16:44](#)):

Absolutely. And then last is access to high quality preschool services and that's for all families. I taught pre-K before I came to Cabot and became a special education teacher. My undergrad was in preschool through fourth grade general education and special education. I taught in a general education preschool classroom. And if your child has ever attended a high quality preschool or an educator, especially kindergarten teachers, when you get students, who've come from a high quality preschool program, you see the difference. You know these children have been exposed to so much and not just academically, they know how to line up.

Jessica Saum ([17:22](#)):

They know how to carry a lunch tray. They know how to interact and listen. And we have kindergarten children showing up who have never been in a program. I'm not saying we have to require pre-K, but at least offer access to it. But they haven't been given that opportunity and they simply just don't know how to act. They're small, little people who just haven't been exposed to these opportunities. And yet we're teaching them to read, and write, and math and all these subject areas, but they don't have those foundations. They don't have those social-emotional skills. I remember when I taught pre-K, we ate lunch in my classroom.

Jessica Saum ([17:58](#)):

I think it was a second grade teacher walked by and we were eating lunch as a community, as a group family, and modeling how to break a barbecue sandwich in half so the children could eat it easier, because they're trying to pick it up and the meat's falling out.

Tammy Friend ([18:12](#)):

Sure.

Jessica Saum ([18:13](#)):

And she just laughs. She goes, "I forget how much you have to teach them before we get them." And it's like yes, even things like that and carrying your tray to the trash afterwards, those are really hard things for kindergartners to come in and be expected to do. We know other things too.

Jessica Saum ([18:28](#)):

Disadvantaged families, dual language learners, special education students, all of these under-resourced communities benefit so much from pre-K access, but so do all students. I really think there's a lot we can do to provide better access to high quality preschool for all students.

Tammy Friend ([18:49](#)):

I couldn't agree more. It's those skills that we maybe take for granted or we don't think about in our planning.

Jessica Saum ([18:57](#)):

Yes.

Tammy Friend ([18:58](#)):



I know as a gen ed teacher some of the things that you know what, I've got to back up. I need to meet them where they are right now.

Jessica Saum ([19:06](#)):

Yes.

Tammy Friend ([19:06](#)):

And we need to take a step back before we can move forward. I look forward in the spring, I hope to get to visit with you then. Jessica, is there anything else you'd like to share or a final thought you want to leave with us today?

Jessica Saum ([19:21](#)):

Yeah, I really do. It's been hard. When we think about my daughter was in first grade when COVID all started and she's in third grade right now. And when we think back to her last, what we'd call normal or typical year had been, was kindergarten, that's really hard for teachers to grasp. I think that we are seeing teacher burnout, teacher frustration at such a high level because there's so many things changing and they're always changing. We're adapting to new mask rules, we're adapting to shared supplies, not shared supplies, spacing our desks out, quarantining students, teaching virtually.

Jessica Saum ([19:59](#)):

It has been a lot for teachers and it's been a lot for students. I was running the Little Rock Half Marathon weekend just this last weekend before Thanksgiving. And I did the 5M Saturday and then the half marathon on Sunday. And the same woman was running somewhat in front of me both days. And she had a shirt on, and on the back of it said, "I can, I must." And I just like tried to keep pace with her and think, "Okay, that was just such an encouragement to me to keep running." And just to have her both days be there in front of me, I was like, "This is just such a sign. I need to follow her."

Jessica Saum ([20:37](#)):

But as I was running, I started thinking that aligns so much with us as educators. Like I can, I must, I have to show up, I have to keep doing this. But when we shift our mindset to, I can, I must, I choose to, it is just such a weight lifted off of us that we are actively showing up every day because we choose to. No one is forcing us to be in the field of education. We are choosing to do this and because we choose to, we have to do the best we can every day. And that's not going to look the same every day. We're going to have better days. We're going to have worse days, but we have to choose to do what's right for students every single day, because they're counting on us.

Jessica Saum ([21:18](#)):

We're heading into a brand new year and that's kind of that thought of a fresh start. And so I just encourage everyone when you're thinking about resolutions or however you start a brand new year, just really focus on that. I choose to, I choose to do what's best for students, for my coworkers, for my community. I think just shifting that mindset, that positivity, and that joy can really be felt in everything that you do.

Tammy Friend ([21:46](#)):

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Absolutely, yes. Well, I sure appreciate you visiting with us today.

Jessica Saum ([21:52](#)):

Yes.

Tammy Friend ([21:53](#)):

Again, I hope to visit with you in the spring, and see how it's progressing, and see how your plans are evolving.

Jessica Saum ([22:04](#)):

Absolutely. I'm very excited about that.

Tammy Friend ([22:12](#)):

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