

Teacher Reporting Labs: LIVE! Transcript

Mike Conrad [00:00:00] From PBS News Student Reporting Labs. This is Teacher Reporting labs. I'm Mike Conrad from Royal Oak High School in Royal Oak, Michigan. We're shaking it up by putting educators like me behind the mic to report back on a mix of topics, triumphs and challenges that we face in the classroom with some great candid conversation. This is an extra bonus episode that was recorded live at our 2024 Teacher Workshop in Washington, D.C., with my friend and fellow SRO educator, Dr. Sequoyah Wharton from Brentwood, New York. The teacher workshop was a weekend full of learning and doing. We had dozens of teachers come together and participate in journalism trainings, including one about how to podcast in the podcast training. Teachers interviewed each other, asking the question: what are some passions, hobbies and pursuits that keep you grounded and fulfilled outside of the classroom? So with that, we're first going to hear a montage from what some of those teachers recorded in their training session, and then we'll share the live conversation from our event.

Teacher 1 [00:01:03] Let's answer the hardest question for a teacher to answer. What are some passions, hobbies and pursuits that keep you grounded and fulfilled outside of the classroom in your free time? My biggest passion has become poetry. I used to love music as a child.

Teacher 2 [00:01:18] I think the things that have been most helpful for me are physical activities that really require me to be present. I have a 12 year old who played Little League this spring and I was one of the assistant coaches on the field and I'm hitting fly balls to, you know, a lot of kids out in the outfield. And I realized how cathartic that is for me.

Teacher 3 [00:01:37] I have a business. It's a selfie museum, so I'm planning parties. I do balloon art, and I also do donor relations for a nonprofit.

Teacher 4 [00:01:45] One thing I'd like to do, but I think it's just still in my dreams, is to get back to some individual pursuits; painting, photography, gardening, songwriting.

Teacher 5 [00:01:56] The hardest thing is when I'm creating something, I suddenly think, I can turn this into a lesson. I can start thinking about how I can do this with students, and I have to find hobbies and pursuits that allow me to break that barrier.

Teacher 6 [00:02:09] I had a very difficult year. There are many other teachers who are looking for things to do so they can keep themselves grounded. It's great to know that I'm not alone, that this is something normal, that I just have to find things that fulfill me outside of the classroom.

Sequoyah Wharton [00:02:23] Wow. Those are just some of the amazing teachers here from the SRL community.

Mike Conrad [00:02:27] That's right. We are here live from Arlington, Virginia, right outside of Washington, D.C. for the teacher workshop for Student Reporting labs. Give it up, everybody. Let them know you're here! Awesome. I'm Mike Conrad, and today I'm here with Sequoyah Wharton.

Sequoyah Wharton [00:02:44] Hey, Mike. It's a pleasure to be here.

Mike Conrad [00:02:46] Listening to the cuts...and I want to thank all the teachers that contributed yesterday. That was a lot of fun. In one of the previous episodes, I talked about how my son called me out saying that I was doing too much and my wife was doing too much and we had to back off and really take a step back because we were working all the time. And ever since the pandemic, I've found that even at lunchtime at school—how many of you work through lunch with kids? Yeah, yeah, I used to do that. And then my lunch is 35 minutes long. I shut the doors, now at lunch. I read a book. I play a game of chess on the computer. I just do some time for me because I only get a 35 minute break in my whole day. I'm a sprint all day long. I've really found that I needed to take back some of that stuff. So while I think I was probably the best teacher I was during that time when I was working like crazy, but I was also not me.

Sequoyah Wharton [00:03:29] Well, you say you were the best teacher at the time, but maybe your best is even more so since you're giving yourself time. You know? You know, you found that you needed that mental break to be your best. So. So do you think now that you take a little bit of time for yourself that maybe your lessons are better or you as an individual is better?

Mike Conrad [00:03:50] That's a good question. And I think that my atmosphere, my classroom is calmer. I'm not so hardcore on deadlines coming from broadcast. I was always like, This is your deadline. If it's not in, it's a zero. That's broadcast. I'm a lot more lenient. So we have teachers here in the room today that are first year teachers, 25 year teachers, 28 year teachers. Some of them are going to have to have aspects of their life that they talked about in that montage that were really important to them about mental health, about trying to be who you are. So let's talk to some of those teachers that we have here in the room, Sequoia. Tell us a little bit about Franki Foster.

Sequoyah Wharton [00:04:21] You got it. Frankie is a multimedia journalist with over 20 years experience who transitioned to teaching a year ago. Franki also owns the Photoshop Selfie Museum in Columbus, Georgia. All right.

Mike Conrad [00:04:33] Everybody, give it up for Franki. Welcome. Tell me about the selfie museum.

Franki [00:04:40] I'm a selfie. Museum is a dream of me and my. My two of my best friends were my really good girlfriends. And during the pandemic, I did a lot of traveling. And everywhere I went, I would see these selfie museums and we would go, we would have a great time. And, you know, I was like, How do we bring that back to Columbus? Because we are like trying to be a tourism town. So we built it in the heart of downtown, right near the river walk, right near where the whitewater rafting is happening. And it's just been a great experience ever since. But it's a place you can come and take all kind of pictures. We have like 20 to 30 different backgrounds and we also do events.

Mike Conrad [00:05:17] And you just finished your first year of teaching, right? Yes. Okay. After your first year of teaching, are you still doing your selfie museum work or have you lost time to do that?

Franki [00:05:26] What I've learned is that there's no such thing as balance. There is compromise and every day is a compromise. Some days during this first year of teaching, I lost my niece to gun violence in Columbus. My grandfather passed away. My daughter had a car accident. These things happen in your life. And I think it's important that, number

one, that you're transparent with your students and they know that you're human and going through things. The best way to survive all that is to not try to act like it's not happening. So many teachers, I see them going through things and they come into that building and it's like, you know, nothing happened. Or they retreat, which is the other wrong thing to do. And they keep it to themselves, you know? And I don't know, I like for people to know what's going on with me. I find for the most part, people are very supportive.

Mike Conrad [00:06:13] And I think that's big. Kids come to the school with baggage and we have to understand that. Well, guess what? So do we. And we come to school back and it's okay to talk about that and be transparent. Let them know that you're human. You're not just a piece of furniture in a building.

Sequoyah Wharton [00:06:25] Yeah, that vulnerability is important. You can't act like you're just, I don't know, a robot or something. You know that.

Franki [00:06:31] You know everything. Because I tell them real quick, I don't know anything like you. Whenever some there's like, you're the teacher you're supposed to know. Nope, I don't know anything. And I'm going to find out together. That's my favorite thing. Well, let's find out together.

Mike Conrad [00:06:41] All right. Thanks. Thanks.

Franki [00:06:42] Thank you for having me.

Mike Conrad [00:06:43] Thank. All right. Let's get to Zach Green.

Sequoyah Wharton [00:06:49] Come on. Is that so? Zach is a schoolwide enrichment model teacher at Whittier, S.E. So specializing in digital art specifically.

Mike Conrad [00:06:59] All right, let's give it up for Zach. How are you doing?

Zach [00:07:05] I'm pretty good. Have a show.

Sequoyah Wharton [00:07:07] All right. Pretty good. Pretty good.

Mike Conrad [00:07:08] Tell us about your life at Whittier.

Zach [00:07:09] Yeah. So it'll be my first year at Whittier. I was at a middle school previously from our first year. I wanted to go to the lower level. Was grades 1 to 5. I thought it would be important to kind of make that impact at an earlier age. Other kids are still like valuable, you know, they're still enthusiastic less, I would say apathetic as well. And just to see how that is and to give them an opportunity to be as creative as possible in the classroom.

Mike Conrad [00:07:34] This is your first year. How was the year?

Zach [00:07:35] It was definitely a good learning experience. I would say it wasn't easy at all, but it was also a culture shock as well. I mean, I've been a student most of my life, and then to be on the other side of the table or the desk rather, was eye opening. And there's so much that goes on behind the scenes, so much planning, so many meetings.

Sequoyah Wharton [00:07:53] Making decisions in your classroom.

Zach [00:07:54] Right? Yeah. I mean, like a thousand macro decisions, like in just an hour. It's actually insane.

Mike Conrad [00:07:59] You love photography?

Zach [00:08:01] I do, yeah.

Mike Conrad [00:08:01] So tell me about that, because in your in your interview, you talked a lot about photography. How do you use that to step away from your job? For me.

Zach [00:08:08] Photography has always been my escape in terms of just being creative as well as finding some type of alone time even, and also connecting with my friends and my family or just random people that I meet. I started photography in the pandemic. I had a lot of time to do that, and my aunt gave me my first camera. It was like an old Nikon 5200 model. So and I got started with that. I just grab some friends, hey, you know, do a photo shoot, you know, And that's how I got started with it. And I've just been getting deeper and deeper into it.

Sequoyah Wharton [00:08:38] Yeah. You had mentioned regarding those portraits that you take of friends, family. What are some of the things that you were trying to capture?

Zach [00:08:46] For me is about telling stories of people, not only who they are, but what do they do. I try and capture them in the moment of what they're doing. I have friends who are models, friends who are deejays, etc., etc. and I try and capture them in that moment, see when the audience sees them. Haley, who is this person? Are they are they this or are they that? And that's kind of how I go about it.

Mike Conrad [00:09:05] That's a career in its own right right there.

Zach [00:09:07] Definitely. Yeah.

Mike Conrad [00:09:08] Right. Yeah. So do you still have find time to do that?

Zach [00:09:11] So that's the thing. Then my first year, you know, I definitely lost some of that time to do that consistently. So my main focus has been trying to regain that, that boundless, trying to find the sweet spot.

Mike Conrad [00:09:24] So here's a straight up question. You're saying you lost some time. Have you touched your camera this year while teaching?

Zach [00:09:31] I will say in October of last year and September of last year, yeah, after that I put it down and I was. I was straight on.

Mike Conrad [00:09:40] Right.

Zach [00:09:40] Yeah.

Mike Conrad [00:09:41] It's hard, isn't it?

Zach [00:09:42] It definitely is. Yeah.

Mike Conrad [00:09:43] Pick up that camera. Go do that. Because that's what's going to help you out. Because that's. That's your passion, right? That's something that you need to do. And I think we all have those things that we put down that just they feel like they get in the way because I should be doing this. I should be doing that. I feel guilty because I'm not working right now. I'm watching a movie. I'm reading a book. I'm taking photographs. I should be working right now. Well, that's.

Sequoyah Wharton [00:10:04] A that's a key word that you said right there, the word guilt. Right. We feel guilty when we're not focused on our schoolwork. Right. Because we're taking away from our students. Right. And we don't want to do that. It's guilt. How do we get over that guilt? And that's something I've struggled with for quite some time. I don't know how to do it.

Mike Conrad [00:10:25] All right. Thanks, Zachary. Let's pick up that camera.

Zach [00:10:27] I appreciate it.

Mike Conrad [00:10:33] Sir, could you tell us about Amy Weighton?

Sequoyah Wharton [00:10:34] Absolutely. So Amy teaches broadcast journalism at Wakefield High School in Arlington. Amy has grown the program at Wakefield to more than 150 students in the past eight years.

Mike Conrad [00:10:46] All right. Welcome, Amy.

Amy [00:10:47] Thank you for having me.

Mike Conrad [00:10:49] So you found some of your time in poetry?

Amy [00:10:53] I actually started in the school doing a poetry club. And I realized because every Thursday that the poetry was helping me, too.

Mike Conrad [00:11:00] It's amazing.

Amy [00:11:00] And I helped the kids perform. And it was it became more focused on the kids. But I ended poetry Club a year ago. I did it for ten years. And so now the poetry has become more for me.

Mike Conrad [00:11:11] In what ways?

Amy [00:11:13] I write poetry and then I perform it at open Mikes. There's Busboys and Poets and Sure Ellington. They have an open mic every Monday night.

Mike Conrad [00:11:19] It's right around the corner.

Sequoyah Wharton [00:11:19] Yeah, That's awesome.

Mike Conrad [00:11:21] Well, maybe we should extend that one more day.

Sequoyah Wharton [00:11:23] Yeah. I want to hear some of that. Yeah. Yeah.

Mike Conrad [00:11:26] Give us a little poetry.

Amy [00:11:28] No, no. You got to come to the open mic.

Mike Conrad [00:11:31] That's fair. That's fair. That's fair. Do you still find time to do all that throughout the school year?

Amy [00:11:36] Everyone smile when I need to write poetry to get something out. I do. We had some things happen in our school last year, and I went to poetry to get it out. Now that I'm not doing poetry club, I can separate the two, but I don't because I have so many students that have graduated that are still in the area. So we go to the open mikes together. It's like a community building thing. The only thing that I can do that is separate from school is music. I go to concerts a lot. At the end of June, I went and saw Counting Crows and Santana and Cincinnati and I was like into it; Santana was just like Black Magic Womaning. And then I hear "Miss Wathen" right in the crowd. And I was like. And then I fixed my face to be a teacher face and turned around and there was one of my students.

Mike Conrad [00:12:17] It's really funny, honestly, that you turn around and you got this giant old beer in your hand.

Amy [00:12:21] You put the twister t down.

Mike Conrad [00:12:23] It's awesome. Thanks.

Amy [00:12:25] Okay. Thank you very.

Sequoyah Wharton [00:12:26] Much.

Mike Conrad [00:12:30] Well, hopefully those listening have thought about and taken some of the ideas we've talked about. I liked the fact that you pointed out guilt. I like the fact that you point out that that's a real feeling that we have around our jobs. Hopefully we can put down that guilt, find support groups through the things that we love to do and and give yourself some of that me time, even if it's just a little bit even if you pick up that camera next weekend. You know, even if it's that kind of a thing, try to find those moments. Get your butt to the gym, man. You'd like to lose in it.

Sequoyah Wharton [00:12:57] Maybe I should pick up playing guitars.

Mike Conrad [00:12:59] Yeah, well, yeah. We have so many people in here that play guitar.

Sequoyah Wharton [00:13:02] I know.

Mike Conrad [00:13:03] And there's a guitar here. I think Rawan's got a guitar.

Sequoyah Wharton [00:13:06] I know. I got to try.

Mike Conrad [00:13:07] All right, let's do it. We'll do it tonight. This episode was produced by SRL's Community Engagement Manager, Emily Hope Dobkin, a.k.a. Dobz, with support from lead podcast producer Bridet Ganske, Youth media director Victor Fernandez and youth media producer Chris Schwalm. This episode was edited and mixed by Becky Wandel.

Sequoyah Wharton [00:13:26] Many thanks to SRL's Editorial Director Marie Cusick and Executive Producer Leah Klapman.