

Tammy Friend ([00:04](#)):

Welcome to the G.U.I.D.E. 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. I am Tammy Friend. And joining me today is our 2023 Arkansas Teacher of the Year, Capri Bell-Salaam. Hello, Capri. How are you today?

Capri Bell-Salaam ([00:34](#)):

Good. Thank you for having me.

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

Well, I'm glad you had time to join us. I'm so excited as I'm sure you are to start your, I guess you could say reign. So, you're at North Rock Middle School?

Capri Bell-Salaam ([00:47](#)):

I am at North Rock Middle School, seven and eighth grade campus.

Tammy Friend ([00:50](#)):

Okay. How did you get into education?

Capri Bell-Salaam ([00:53](#)):

I actually took the non-traditional route. I did not come through a traditional education program. In fact, I attended school at the University of Central Arkansas to major in English, and graduated with my degree, and tried a couple of other different career paths and they just didn't seem like they were fulfilling to me. And during my downtime, I was still working with children. Every summer, I was continuing to work with nonprofit organizations where I could mentor or teach during the summer, just to be involved with kids in some way. And I was actually a 911 dispatcher when one of my coworkers mentioned that her godson needed a teacher in the middle of the school year. And she encouraged me to apply and it was a charter school, so I was like, okay, I'm kind of interested in that, let me apply and see what happens.

([01:49](#)):

And I was hired and began in November. And my students told me that you're our fifth teacher for this year. And so, I just kind of fell in love with them. And I started as a third grade teacher and got into the MAT program at Arkansas Tech University and realized I really was in love with middle level education. And so, my friend told me that North Little Rock was hiring, because she was actually moving to the high school and there was a position open and so I applied. And that's how I got into the middle level realm teaching. My first job here was as a seventh grade English teacher.

Tammy Friend ([02:28](#)):

I spent many years as an eighth grade English teacher, and I too took the non-traditional route. My undergrad is journalism, actually. And that's so cool that you were a dispatcher. I love finding out the different paths and how people find their way into education. And now there are more opportunities, programs out there for recruiting teachers now than there ever have been, but that's exciting. That really

is. And those middle schoolers are something else, aren't they? They're not little, they're not young, but they're not grown. They're that in between, quirky age.

Capri Bell-Salaam ([03:04](#)):

In my current role, I'm teaching eighth grade. I always tell people I love this age group, because this is the last moments to me that they are actually still like children before they make that transition into young adults. I think eighth grade is that pivotal year where you have the best of both worlds.

Tammy Friend ([03:22](#)):

Yes. They're still silly, I know what you're saying.

Capri Bell-Salaam ([03:25](#)):

Yes, absolutely.

Tammy Friend ([03:26](#)):

They're like not babies, not littles, but then they still have that charm about them, some of the naivety. So, was there one particular person that influenced you to pursue education? I know that wasn't your original path.

Capri Bell-Salaam ([03:42](#)):

Yes. I actually thought I wanted to attend law school.

Tammy Friend ([03:46](#)):

Okay. Yes.

Capri Bell-Salaam ([03:47](#)):

So, one summer I had the opportunity to work at a law firm. And instead of being just pre-law, they encouraged me to get a background in writing of some sort, either English, and I did consider journalism as well, something along those lines. And I was like, that'll be great. And then I can take a break year and then I can go into law school or something like that. But I was very fortunate throughout my kindergarten through 12th grade years to have a lot of really amazing teachers. And I went to school in Helena, West Helena School District, but it was my grandmother that really kind of influenced me to be a teacher. She always held teachers in such a high regard. During her last few years with us, she moved in with my parents after she was diagnosed with Alzheimer's.

([04:33](#)):

And she and I would have these conversations. And when she found out that I was going to transfer to the University of Central Arkansas, she just was so proud because that was the teacher's college. And I just thought that was amazing, number one, that she still remembered that that was the teacher's college in the midst of all of her thoughts. She was just so proud. And I never had the heart to tell her, oh no, girl, mom, I'm not going to be a teacher. I just went along with it. In fact, while I was at UCA, I took Praxis one just to see if I could pass it, because it was always in the back of my mind that maybe I wanted to be a senior English teacher. So, I took Praxis one and passed it with no problems.

Tammy Friend ([05:13](#)):

I'm not surprised. I'm not surprised. That is so cool. It just wasn't your time right then.

Capri Bell-Salaam ([05:21](#)):

No, and I think everything has its time and its place.

Tammy Friend ([05:25](#)):

My first teaching job was also in the North Little Rock School District. It was at the North Little Rock High School, the west campus and what used to be the Ole Main building. So, lots of fond memories.

Capri Bell-Salaam ([05:38](#)):

I was in the Ole Main building a few months ago. One of the seniors is doing a project where they are cleaning up Ole Main, and has invited the community to come in on Saturdays to volunteer to clean up Ole Main. And so, that was my first time actually in the building. That was my first time being able to see the trophy case, and offices, and all of those things, the library. And she's doing a really good job with it and she'll ask for volunteers. So, the next time I will reach out to you and see if you want to come over and volunteer.

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

Yes, please do. Please. Because that is just so many good memories. I remember the rolls. They had the best rolls for lunch in the whole school. I was on the third floor and that... Anyway, let's talk about your platform, improving mental health. You want to share a little bit about that?

Capri Bell-Salaam ([06:35](#)):

Yes, of course. Improving the mental health of both students and staff is just one of the platforms that I'm so passionate about. I'm also really passionate about early intervention for our little babies and even about new teacher and teacher retention. But yes, improving the mental health of staff and students is definitely something that I am deeply committed to. And I think the reason being is post-COVID, all the statistics and the data came out. The CDC have declared a national emergency in child and adolescent mental health. I think they say one in five children either currently or at some point will have a seriously debilitating mental illness. And fortunately, though, in today's society, mental illness doesn't quite carry the stigma that it used to carry. People are more open to having conversations about topics in the sense that we are all just trying to become the best versions of ourselves. I love the fact that we are transitioning to a society that is more focused on accepting self-care and encouraging therapy.

Tammy Friend ([07:46](#)):

Absolutely.

Capri Bell-Salaam ([07:47](#)):

My students know I am serious about their mental health. Every Monday, we do a digital Google form for a mental health check-in, where I send out to them and ask them, "Hey, are you all sleeping well? Are you eating nutritious food? Is there anything you would like to tell me?" I give it to them in that manner, because sometimes kids don't want to talk to you immediately, but they'll say something like, "Hey, can I come to you later on so we can discuss middle school problems?" And I also have a mental health corner

in my classroom. It's there for them to take a break. It's an oversized chair, and it's positioned so that if they need to take a break, they can sit in it and just practice some of those grounding techniques, reflect, breathe, just if they need to cry, they can cry.

(08:43):

I have tissue in the mirrors, because I always tell them, "Okay, now, after you've let it out, I need you to get yourself together." I have a mirror over there and we fix our face. And surprisingly, none of the kids ever abused that corner. Nobody's just sitting over there to sit there. And while people are over there, they allow them to just be.

Tammy Friend (09:04):

They respect the space.

Capri Bell-Salaam (09:05):

We respect the space, and it's just there for that moment. And when they come out of that corner, it's not an open conversation about, "Well, are you okay?" It's just really for them to practice some of those skills about being resilient, coping. I like having that protected space and time for them. And if it gets to the point where I need to, "Hey, let's go down to the counselor," then that's what we do. We take those next steps. And even for me being a teacher, I'm really big on that for my teachers, because you can't pour from an empty cup. And being a middle school teacher, you're constantly pouring into your 100, 150 students that you have. And so, having time at home where you have a work-life balance is important.

Tammy Friend (09:54):

Absolutely. What were some other focus areas that you are planning to address?

Capri Bell-Salaam (10:00):

Yes. Early intervention with our young babies and that being, I am the mommy to a child that has been diagnosed with autism. And I actually went back and got a second master's degree in special education so that I can advocate for him and I really can be the best parent for him in terms of day-to-day living and strategies and coping. He's only five right now, but we noticed the signs. My husband and I noticed the signs very early with him. So, we understand the importance of early intervention and getting children the speech therapy or the ABA therapy, occupational and physical, in order for them to be successful, because ultimately we want our children, our students to be successful and giving them that foundation is so important.

Tammy Friend (10:54):

Well, and then educating parents to even know what to look for.

Capri Bell-Salaam (10:59):

That's one of the things that I do love about my relationship with my parents. Having those conversations where I'm open and sharing my own personal experience, being a parent and coming to terms with... I'm noticing that he's not looking me in the eye. I noticed just those characteristics and signs. And then I've had a lot of parents reach out to me, "Well, what do you see in the classroom?" And being available to recommend to them, this is how you can get the services. These are the steps that you

need to take so that we can grow our child together. Because I'm always the one that, once your child is in my class, that's our child.

Tammy Friend ([11:44](#)):

Absolutely.

Capri Bell-Salaam ([11:45](#)):

And I often refer to them as my kids, so I think that confuses people. Once my student, always my student.

Tammy Friend ([11:51](#)):

Yes. I was in the classroom for 18 years. And you go to the grocery store, Walmart and you feel like a rockstar when some, Miss Friend, calls out your name, you think you were a celebrity, that I do miss that, that interaction. So, building those relationships with your parents is so crucial and it builds that trust so they know that you have their children in their best interest, and they're probably more susceptible to hearing what you have to say.

Capri Bell-Salaam ([12:23](#)):

I actually email a weekly newsletter to my parents on Sunday nights that include, this is what's going on in the school, this is what we'll be covering this week in class. Here are some upcoming events, reminders, inclement weather, even community events. If I think that it is a resource or something that the children and our families will be interested in, I go ahead and push it out to them. And parents have told me they look forward to that every single week. And I know being middle school parents, often kind of step back in order to let their children grow. They're letting them get a little bit more responsibility on their own. And so, that newsletter really helps parents feel like they're in the know, that they still have that same kind of relationship. But I know parents try and give children a foundation in elementary so they can be successful in middle school with organizing their schedule, with managing homework. And so, this is just the natural time for them coming into adulthood that they find their way.

Tammy Friend ([13:35](#)):

And that transition period between elementary and high school is so crucial. That is where they are becoming more independent and switching classes, teachers. I remember the panic on some of the middle schoolers faced working a locker for the first time. So, even something that you might take for granted, something as simple as taking time to show and work with them on getting their locker open and closed. What about as far as teacher of the year and the process for applying? How did that come about or is there anything you want to share regarding that? I'm always in awe at how much is involved in the process to get here.

Capri Bell-Salaam ([14:21](#)):

In the fall of 2021, we had nominations for building level teacher of the year. And our middle school is quite big. And so, we have one on the sixth grade campus and then there are two co-teachers on the seventh and eighth grade campus. And when they announce all of these amazing educators that are building level, they have the opportunity to apply to be the district level teacher of the year. And I found out in April that I was the North Little Rock School District Teacher of the Year. So, that was 2022. And

This transcript was exported on Feb 06, 2023 - view latest version [here](#).

from there, you can apply to be the Arkansas State Teacher of the Year. And there is another application process that goes along with that and it's just step by step. It is very intensive, I will say.

Tammy Friend ([15:18](#)):

Now, are there interviews?

Capri Bell-Salaam ([15:20](#)):

In the land of technology, filming is quite popular for answering questions and then there are interview portions that come along with each of those steps with committee members. It is quite intensive.

Tammy Friend ([15:36](#)):

Sure. I would be so nervous. So, that is very exciting. Do you have any final thoughts to leave with us?

Capri Bell-Salaam ([15:43](#)):

I'm still processing being the Arkansas Teacher of the Year. 2023, my year of service starts on July 1 and then it carries over into June of 2024. So, I'm still absorbing this entire process. Lucky for me, I have Jessica Saum, who is the 2022 Arkansas Teacher of the Year, as well as all the other former A toys who have welcomed me with open arms to just kind of encourage me along this journey. But I'm very excited to represent Arkansas. I'm very honored and humbled that I was chosen trying to process everything, because currently I'm still in the classroom until June. Now, my students are so excited, because I looped with the majority of my students, like 80% of them were my seventh graders from last year. So, they have actually been with me throughout this entire journey and they are very excited for me, very proud.

Tammy Friend ([16:53](#)):

Sure. It's like a win for them too. That's awesome. Well, I sure do appreciate you taking time. I know you're at school right now, so I appreciate you taking the time to step out and visit with us today. And I cannot wait. I hope to have the opportunity to get to visit with you again for the podcast. Please, I'm definitely interested in showing up at North Little Rock to the Ole Main campus on a cleanup day.

Capri Bell-Salaam ([17:22](#)):

Yes, I would love that. I'm sure over the next year we will meet at some point in person. When our student sends out the information, she goes, "I know you guys have helped in the past, please share." So, the next time they open it up and have cleanup, I would definitely reach out to you and say, "Hey, this is the weekend."

Tammy Friend ([17:39](#)):

Well, thank you again. I wish you the best, finishing out their school year and then rolling up your sleeves and back to work just to look a little bit differently.

Capri Bell-Salaam ([17:49](#)):

Yes.

Tammy Friend ([17:50](#)):

This transcript was exported on Feb 06, 2023 - view latest version [here](#).

Well, thank you, Capri, and you have a great rest of the year. We'll be in touch.

Capri Bell-Salaam ([17:55](#)):

Thank you.

Tammy Friend ([17:56](#)):

G.U.I.D.E. For Life, instilling real world skills in Arkansas students. Thank you for listening to today's podcast. The transcript for today's episode and links to our resources can be found in the show notes. And remember to share and subscribe to the G.U.I.D.E. For Life podcast.