

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.

Tammy Friend ([00:18](#)):

Thank you for joining us today. I'm Tammy Friend, and joining us is Brian Fults, the success coach at Little Rock West High School, the School of Innovation. How are you doing today, Brian?

Brian Fults ([00:35](#)):

I'm fantastic. How about yourself?

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

Doing well, doing well. So tell us a little bit about yourself and your journey into education.

Brian Fults ([00:45](#)):

All right. Well, I was kind of one of those kids in high school that fell through the cracks, learning disorders. I never really got any services or anything because I kind of went to a rural school, so we didn't have really any services, so I didn't graduate and I was just kind of going through life and realized at 30 years old that I was like, "Okay, I need to do something with my life." So I got a GED and started going to school. Wound up getting a associates from Classy Tech. I went to UCA, got a bachelor's in psychology and a minor in addiction, and I transferred to UALR for Social Work Masters. And I wanted to work at the VA. And so that's why I had every intentions on doing, and I got internship here at Little Rock West High School, and I pretty much fell in love with this place. What I noticed is that coming in here, not expecting to work with kids and the staff administration, these kids just kind of suck me in.

Tammy Friend ([01:54](#)):

It's easy, isn't it?

Brian Fults ([01:56](#)):

Yes, ma'am.

Tammy Friend ([01:56](#)):

After being in the classroom 18 years. Yeah, I miss that interaction in those connections you make. So very relatable. So the success coach, what all does that entail?

Brian Fults ([02:08](#)):

So basically what we do, we try to do emotional support therapy. We try to make sure the kids stay out of trouble. We do interventions between kids if they're have high school kids, they want to get in fights and everything. So we kind of do interventions. They can talk it out instead of going on. We try to provide every bit of mental health therapy we can for the kids. With this school, it's amazing because they really appreciate what we do as success coaches. If a child's not mentally healthy and prepared in the classroom, they're not going to be successful.

Tammy Friend ([02:49](#)):

That's right. They can't learn.

Brian Fults ([02:50](#)):

You're right. I mean, there's things that happen at home like abuse or malnourishment. There's all kinds of stuff, even mental health problems that may have not been detected until now. They allow us to go that extra mile and give these kids the mental health that they need. Give them the resources they may need, the family they may need. I know this is kind of going off subject to what we're talking about, but we do provide clothing, food, all that stuff for kids because that is part of the mental health that if somebody's coming to school in rags and tags because they can't afford clothes, they're not going to be willing to learn or anything that as well. Yeah, so that's what we do is we try to get donations and clothes, food, provide mental health therapy. And we also started providing, this is kind of going into what this interview's about, is the animal therapy.

Tammy Friend ([03:44](#)):

Sure, yes. And we know animals provide comfort, support, help reduce stress, anxiety, and then also teach some of the skills, the social, emotional, personal competency skills that we address in the G.U.I.D.E for Life, such as responsibility, empathy, compassion. And that is exactly right. When I heard some of the work that you are doing over there at Little Rock West, I thought, "I have got to reach out to Mr. Fults." So do share, share the activities. I know there was a no fooling around incentive. I saw last spring and you brought some animals, and I know that's just one snapshot of the work, the important work, vital really, that you are doing at the school. So yeah, share with us.

Brian Fults ([04:27](#)):

I live in the rural areas and everything, and my son's autistic. So we've been doing Equine Assisted Therapy with him to help him with his balance and patience and everything. And my daughter had grown up with horses and everything. And I have a therapy dog as well, and she's a bit older now, but we did bring her in last year. It's all kind of stemmed just from the knowledge that animals do provide, all those things you're talking about. And so we spoke to the administration and they ran it up flag pole to see if we could bring dogs in and they had to be certified to therapy dogs, they said yes. So we started doing that and it made a huge impact on a lot of the kids, some of the kids, some days they just have a real bad day and they would come knock on the door, ask if they could just spend a little time with the dog, any of the kids in the... They're going through some emotional issues. She would a lot of times come over rub against their leg and that it would give them that relief.

Brian Fults ([05:26](#)):

It just kind of went from there to where I work with Stable Horizons. They're a nonprofit equine intervention program. Well, I got to talking to them and asked, "Hey, is this something we can provide for the kids?" And there's a licensed social worker that is provided as well and getting to talk to administration there as well. They were all for it. Parents have to sign off on and everything. So kids started coming out to the ranch and they just started realizing, "Okay, if I don't get my grades up, I can't come out on Sunday and ride." Of course, this was after them learning to bond with the horse, realizing how much fun it is and how much structure its giving them, because it does provide social interaction with other students here at the school that they didn't even know.

Tammy Friend ([06:17](#)):

That would connect different friend groups that might not necessarily associate for any other reason. Maybe they just don't cross paths, but during school. And so you're making those connections.

Brian Fults ([06:35](#)):

100% and quite a few of the kids that have been coming out that were extreme loners in the beginning, had social anxiety, were having panic attacks. It's a side note here. We do have one student that when she came to me, she would always wear a hoodie, sweatpants, and she always wanted to be in the corner. She would eat lunch in the bathroom, stuff like that. And she started coming out. She would interact with the other students and she hasn't had a panic attack this school year. She came out through the summer. I wouldn't say she's very social now, but she does interact with other students. Her mom said that she's never seen her kid like this. And that's just one of the kids.

Brian Fults ([07:15](#)):

We have another student that similar situation, social anxiety disorder, panic attacks. Went from that to now she's starting to do rodeos and she's actually very popular in the school. Funny enough, her mom's friend came up to me and said, "Man, I've never seen her like this. She's got a glimmer in her eye now." This program, what it also provides for some of these kids is another outlet for future. For some of these kids, it gives them something for a competition. If they get good enough, they're scholarships available. A lot of these kids wouldn't even have the opportunity seeing how it's the city. A lot of these kids have never even seen a horse, now they're riding horses.

Tammy Friend ([07:54](#)):

That is awesome.

Brian Fults ([07:56](#)):

It's exciting. It really is.

Tammy Friend ([07:59](#)):

Sharing these stories. It's always a good day and a good time to share success stories and see the growth of our students, see them evolve to where they do feel comfortable interacting with others, stepping out of their comfort zone. And you being that one teacher, that one adult to invest in them is invaluable. I mean, that makes the difference. So now you have the rodeo club, did you say?

Brian Fults ([08:28](#)):

So, yeah, funny story. The first day back to school, we were talking about the young lady that started doing rodeos this summer, and she's kind of in a different level now. She's a cowgirl, she's rodeo, all that stuff. So a lot of the kids that have been coming out for the interventions and they've seen her ride and they all kind of got to talking and we got talking and asked if we could do a rodeo team. So I started looking into it, finding out what all we need. I talked to administration and they gave the approval. They're excited about it. And Little Rock West High School is the best school because they are very, very supportive of all this stuff that we're willing to do for these kids, to put them in the next level and give them something to look forward to.

Tammy Friend ([09:17](#)):

Yes, I was researching the school and I was really blown away by all the opportunities that are provided for students. Whatever you're into, let's figure out a way to give you the resources you need to explore further. Personalized support in all areas, academic, extracurricular, whatever they're into, they harness that, enroll with it and find a way to support the students. So you're not wrong is what I'm saying. I see the work they've done. So I'm sorry, carry on, carry on. So the rodeo team.

Brian Fults ([09:49](#)):

So they were 100% supportive of it. They tell me I have to look into... Find out what all we need. The kids have to have a 3.0 GPA. It's just like any other sport. You can't get in trouble, anything like that. What we decided to do was go ahead and start an official team, and it is the first official team for the school because we already own the school. Now there's only one young lady that's actually going to compete this school year because the other kids are spending this school year learning how to do everything. And so by next school year, they'll be ready to rock and run.

Brian Fults ([10:25](#)):

And again, the rodeos can provide very structured environment, make sure you have to maintain a good GPA. You stay out of trouble. It gives you something to look forward to. And again, it gives you opportunities for success in scholarships. There's schools that look at these kids that even if you don't win trophies and buckles and all that stuff, you have schools that look into you and go, "Oh hey, they can provide us with something just like any other sport." So I mean that's exciting in itself.

Tammy Friend ([10:55](#)):

Yes. Well, and to see this one young lady who started out more introverted and then now evolving into this leadership role and inspiring others, kind of mentoring the younger students. We want to see them take it and run with it where they can roll with it on their own. The culture at your school obviously is a very positive, warm environment from everything that I've seen. I was going to ask how it's changed the culture at your school. I guess it's so much hadn't changed it as enhanced.

Brian Fults ([11:27](#)):

Yes, I think so. I think that with the canine therapy, the equine program, with all the support the school provides for the kids, I think you're right. It hasn't really changed anything. It's just advanced the opportunities for the kids to get the assistance they need, the resources they need, and it gives them something else to look forward to in life itself. Not just coming to school and going, "Man, I got to get this grades done and all that stuff."

Tammy Friend ([12:01](#)):

Well, and so anyone interested maybe in either obtaining therapy animals or implementing a program such as yours. Any advice, suggestions you would share?

Brian Fults ([12:14](#)):

Find some certified therapy dogs. Emotional support animals is fine, but certified therapy dogs work best because they are more... They feel the presence of the kids. Look into getting those or if you have a dog that you feel could go through that training, go for that. If you're looking to the equine world, there are a

couple nonprofit equine programs around the state. Just kind of reach out to them, see if you can partner with them or work with them. Anything like that. You can get the services for the students and say, "Hey, this is available. You might want to try it out." Because we don't have to be involved in it. We just need to be able to provide the resources for them to reach out.

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

And that's how some of the best programs are born. Now you mentioned Stable Horizons. Did you say that was the nonprofit you worked with?

Brian Fults ([13:13](#)):

Yes ma'am.

Tammy Friend ([13:14](#)):

I'm going to include that in the show notes.

Brian Fults ([13:16](#)):

Cool, thank you. They'll enjoy that.

Tammy Friend ([13:20](#)):

So do you have any final thoughts you want to leave with us today?

Brian Fults ([13:24](#)):

I will say this, finding funding for these programs, since how they're not, they're not funded by the school. That is probably the hardest part. It's great that Little Rock West does support it in the aspect of, "Yeah, do it." But unfortunately we're having to do fundraisers and get people to donate and everything like that, just to be able to provide the services for the students. That's the hardest part. I would definitely suggest to anybody that wants to do this stuff, do it. There's plenty of resources out there. Find it. Find this stuff for these kids that give them something to look forward to. There's so many of these kids that get put in this box where they just feel they're never get out of and they get lost. I mean, that's where I was at. I didn't feel like I had support in high school, wasn't provided resources and everything.

Brian Fults ([14:24](#)):

And I think that's what pushes me so hard for these kids is to be like, "You know what? I'm not going to let you fail." We go above and beyond that. We did learn that with COVID. It put these kids in a different mind space. They were separated from their friends. They didn't have the place to get out there. So the anxiety and depression still kind of lingers, unfortunately. And especially in today's world, everything, social media, all that. So it pushes a lot of negativity on the kids as well. So we need to give them something they may not get at home. So if you have some niche, something that's completely different than the norm, completely innovative that might strike an interest in five kids, that's five kids that are learning new skills and opportunities in life that they had never would've imagined they would've even done. But these kids that are coming to ride the horses that they've never even seen horses, like I said, and now they're riding them. It's amazing. I mean, it's really amazing.

Tammy Friend ([15:38](#)):

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Just to circle back to providing resources, don't know what you don't know. So if they can come to you and you can show them, or any educator, counselor, administrator can show them what's out there, just making sure they're aware that resources even exist.

Brian Fults ([15:58](#)):

Yes ma'am. The opportunities are there. We just got to present them to the kids.

Tammy Friend ([16:01](#)):

Well, I certainly appreciate you spending time with us and sharing your story, both your personal and professional story. I know that's an inspiration too. Who better to share their story, who didn't go the traditional route and then now is thriving in making huge gains in the lives of your students. So we appreciate the work that you do.

Brian Fults ([16:27](#)):

Yes, ma'am. Thank you so much for this opportunity. It was fun. I enjoyed it.

Tammy Friend ([16:30](#)):

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