Michael Holtz:

I love that.

Amy Szczepanski:

I love that getting harpooned and the thing that brings me joy are in the same couple sentences that is it's a first for the podcast.

Michael Holtz:

That brings me joy.

Amy Szczepanski:

Let's say, Michael, what is something huge for this week? Is it also being harpooned?

Steve Robinson:

It's just a surprise. It's surprising when that happens.

Amy Szczepanski:

They're building connections.

Michael Holtz:

That's right.

Amy Szczepanski:

Transdisciplinary learning.

Michael Holtz:

That's right. Exactly.

Speaker 3:

This is the ORISE Featurecast. Join host Michael Holtz for conversations with ORISE experts on STEM workforce development, scientific and technical reviews, and the evaluation of radiation exposure and environmental contamination. You'll also hear from ORISE research program participants and their mentors as they talk about their experiences and how they are helping shape the future of science. Welcome to the ORISE Featurecast.

Michael Holtz:

Welcome to the ORISE Featurecast. As ever, it's me, your host, Michael Holtz in the communications and marketing department at the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education. And I am so excited today. I am talking to my friend, my occasional co-host, Amy Szczepanski about the Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellowship. Amy, welcome back. It's been a minute.

Amy Szczepanski:

Thank you so much. I am really honored that I'm listed as friend and occasional co-host. That makes me feel really good. I'm glad it's not the reverse of like occasional friend, constant co-host.

Michael Holtz:

That's right.

Amy Szczepanski:

Thank you so much.

Michael Holtz:

That's right.

Amy Szczepanski:

It's so good to be back and doing this again.

Michael Holtz:

Oh, my gosh. And we're going to have so much fun today. We have a great conversation on tap. I know you've helped round up some great fellows who are and or have worked on Capitol Hill during their fellowships and I'm really interested to dig into what they're doing, what they've done, where they want to go, all of those things. So Amy, who do we have this episode?

Amy Szczepanski:

Sure. We have three wonderful, wonderful fellows. Going from most recent, we have Jackie Sutherland. She is currently working in the office of Suzanne Bonamici.

Michael Holtz:

Nice.

Amy Szczepanski:

We have Tyler Dufrene, who was a fellow last year. And I asked Tyler, I was like, "Where did you actually work?" And his response was, "Kind of all over the place." So, I'll let him talk a little bit-

Michael Holtz:

I've been everywhere, man. That's what, he just started singing.

Amy Szczepanski:

Exactly. Tyler has a pretty cool story, so I'm looking forward to hearing that. And then we have Steve Robinson, who was a fellow in 2005, 2006, and he worked in the office of a little known senator named Barack Obama. So we have a super-

Michael Holtz:

Some guy.

Amy Szczepanski:

This guy, I mean they talked that he was going to do big things. So we have these wonderful people here and I'm so excited to hear more about what their experience was like on the Hill, and I guess for Jackie, what that experience continues to be like since she is still in the office for another two months.

Michael Holtz:

Absolutely. So Jackie, let's start with you. I know that you're on the Hill now, but tell us basically where you came from, how you got to where you are today. I always like to start with how did I become an Albert Einstein fellow? So how did you become an Albert Einstein fellow?

Jackie Sutherland:

Well, back in 1903. No, I'm originally a New Jersey native. My background is in biology. I originally wanted to be a biologist, plant biologist, so I went to school to study plant biology at the University of Georgia. Did not complete because I got sick and then I entered into teaching because I needed a job. And from there, I fell in love with the concept of teaching and delivering science in a relative fashion. And I started introducing concept of social advocacy and why science is relevant to society as a whole. And then, from there, I instituted curriculum development, environmental science programs, student agency programs, advocacy programs. It grew from there. And then, somebody said, "You should apply to this fellowship." And I was just like, "Sure, okay."

Michael Holtz:

Why not?

Jackie Sutherland:

Yeah, why not? And I ended up here. I'm currently in Congresswoman Bonamici's office of Oregon, District One, and I work on her whole child policy as well as something a little called convergence. We might know it as cross curriculum or transdisciplinary. And I'm working in that as well as environmental science. And I'm dabbling into childcare now.

Michael Holtz:

Nice. So you're busy basically is what I'm hearing.

Jackie Sutherland:

Just a little.

Michael Holtz:

Just a little. Tyler, how about you?

Jackie Sutherland:

Running the gamut.

Michael Holtz:

That's right, exactly.

Tyler Dufrene:

Thank you so much for this opportunity to be here with all of you today. When I reflect back on my time before being an Albert Einstein fellow, I have to be honest and really did not anticipate being here in the Washington DC area getting to impact change on a national level. I started out as a math major for my undergrad, went on to teach mathematics for approximately two years at the high school level, and then I made a switch to the cool side, that being chemistry and physics and robotics. I continued to do that for seven years. And in the midst of all of that, just really fell in love with STEM and inspiring my students to think outside the box and just trying to provide them first-rate learning opportunities that they wouldn't get anywhere else. And throughout that process, I also obtained my master's in educational leadership and decided to make a run for my local school board. And I was truly blessed and humbled to have received the support needed to be elected to that position.

We brought about real change in that parish for four years. It was at that time towards the end of that fourth year in which I found out about my selection to the Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellowship. So I was really torn because I didn't want to really resign from that position. I felt we had a lot of momentum going. We were seeing a lot of changes headed in the right direction. But upon some sincere reflection, I felt now was the time to go to the national arena and really see how I can lend a helping hand, or at least be the voice that educators and staff really need policymakers to hear because the policies that they are drafting and implementing ultimately affect us in the classroom. And so, we need to make sure that our voice is represented and that what's being passed is actually feasible.

So looking back, I would've never thought that my journey would have brought me here to the Washington DC area. And I will say that I served my fellowship with the Committee on Education and the workforce under chairwoman, Dr. Virginia Fox, and it was truly, truly a dream come true.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome. And Steve, how about you?

Steve Robinson:

I was incredibly lucky to be an Albert Einstein fellow, but it happened basically through a series of stumbling forward. I was actually a bench scientist. I have a PhD in cell and molecular biology. I ran a university research lab and didn't really like that. And so, I quit and ended up being a high school science teacher in Eugene, Oregon.

And my wife at the time was a computer scientist and was very interested then and still is in equity and diversity issues in computer science. So she had won a presidential mentoring fellowship during the Bush Administration and had gone to National Science Foundation, gone to Washington DC. And National Science Foundation noticed that she was doing this diversity work and they said we should do something like that at National Science Foundation in computer science.

So she moved to DC and was living there and said, "You should find something to do in DC." And there was a notice by the elevator at National Science Foundation that the Albert Einstein fellows were having a chili cook-off contest. And she said, "Maybe you should look into this." And so, I did. And I was awarded a fellowship. And in 2005, I moved to Washington DC and that same year, Barack Obama moved to Washington DC.

Michael Holtz:

Gotcha.

Steve Robinson:

He was a new senator. I interviewed in his office and some other offices on the Hill, but he didn't have anybody working on education. I was an educator, walked in the door, and I was free to him from a staffing point of view. So I joined, so I became a Hill fellow in the office of the junior senator from Illinois in 2005.

Michael Holtz:

That's amazing.

Steve Robinson:

So that's why got there. Yeah, that's why I got there.

Michael Holtz:

Right. All it took was a bowl of chili.

Steve Robinson:

Yeah.

Amy Szczepanski:

I was going to say this whole story is amazing, but I'm mostly noting if you want to recruit people, have a chili cook-off.

Steve Robinson:

And when I got there, I realized I knew absolutely nothing about education policy, nothing.

Michael Holtz:

Sure.

Steve Robinson:

Because that's what I was going to be working on. So it was a very fast learning curve.

Michael Holtz:

Absolutely.

Amy Szczepanski:

Yeah. I think part of the fellowship is, I mean one of the parts I guess that I underestimated for myself was originally I was thinking how did I get here? I don't know really anything about policy. You can put me in front of any group of kids teaching any science, but I'm not totally familiar with how the policy is.

And hearing what all of you do each and every day or when you were a fellow, what you did is all super varied. And I think that is true of most people in the fellowship at their agencies, their day-to-day is going to be varied, but I think it's especially true for Hill fellows. Y'all come in and do some wild things. And I say that in a very positive way, but I think just in conversations with you all, you end up working on things that you never really anticipated. Can you all talk about what, and I'm sure that your answer, well, I guess I won't make assumptions. I'll ask this question. What did a typical day or what does a typical day in your office look like? And I guess we can start with Jackie.

Jackie Sutherland:

Awesome, thank you. A typical day, like I said, the expectation of it ranges. There'll be days I come in, there's a reception, somebody's giving you donuts as soon as you come off the subway and then you're at a hearing, then you're writing a memo, and then you're home. And then other days, you're just sitting in the office like, "What are we doing today?" And then, there's days where it is nose to the grind, you are trying to meet a deadline. Appropriation season just started and ended at the same time, and you're trying to get everything funded before things close out. So it's sporadic, but it's nothing like teaching where it's constantly you're always trying to think of plan A through Z. It ebbs and flows and actually it's a steady pace once you get the procedures and the rhythms down.

Amy Szczepanski:

Yeah, that's really fascinating to hear educators say, "Working on the Hill is nothing like teaching. There's a lot more downtime." There may be these periods of intensity, but teaching, again, thinking of those plans like A through Z. So definitely a transfer of skills though from the classroom for sure.

Jackie Sutherland:

Oh, yeah. Product, project management.

Amy Szczepanski:

Tyler, what did your day look like? Yes.

Tyler Dufrene:

Immediately when you asked about a typical day, in my mind I thought, wait, there's a typical day on the Hill because I'm not aware of that. And so, I like to think of it in terms of days in which we are in session and days in which we are out of session. And days that we were in session, it was truly a rushed and compact schedule, whether it was running to the floor to provide last minute updates to a speech that the congresswoman had to give or sitting inside of a hearing room marking off questions as they were asked to witnesses. Some days, it was monitoring the headlines on the news and conducting research to see what letters and information we'd have to draft and which offices would be likely to sign on or which offices we'd have to convince to eventually sign on.

Other days, it was a little bit more laid back where I was able to take some different stakeholder meetings in the office, different advocacy groups would come in and share what their thoughts on K to 12 or higher education policy were. And I was able to sit down and truly understand their situation and their point of view and offer the assistance of what the committee was actually able to do. Some days, I went through budgets to see what funding was available. Sometimes I sat through information sessions from federal agencies to see what the latest updates were. In particular, towards the end of my fellowship, I was handed the child care and child nutrition portfolios from my mentor once she retired.

And so, in looking at all of that when I first came on, I think it's pretty safe to say probably for all of us there were severe imposter syndrome. I was thinking to myself, how did I end up here and why did they pick me? But then, as you start to learn the procedures that take place on the Hill and the way things are done, you realize that you do have a space and that they need to hear your voice and your perspective. And that was what was somewhat missing from the policy perspective originally.

So having that K to 12 educator voice come in and say, "Well, let's think of it from this area or this point of view," was really impactful and meaningful to me. But each day brought about its own rewards and challenges. I don't think I technically had a typical day because working with the committee, you work with so many different offices and like I said, depending on what the headlines brought, what votes were coming up, what bills were being introduced or possibly marked up in a committee hearing, that really drove the agenda for the day.

Amy Szczepanski:

I love just hearing this constant use of the word sometimes. Sometimes we would do this.

Michael Holtz:

Sometimes.

Amy Szczepanski:

Sometimes we would do this. It depends on this. Like I said, I was going to make the assumption that the response was going to be, there's not a typical day, but I wasn't going to assume, I guess. Steve, what did your typical day look like?

Steve Robinson:

Well, this is going to be a bit of a challenge for me because after the fellowship, I stayed on in the Obama world for eight years. So when I first got there, as I mentioned, I didn't know anything about education policy. So my first realization was I better learn it because I'm working for a person who's very popular and has a lot of attention and I was the education guy. So one of the first things I remember was there was a meeting with the comms team in the office and they said, "Oh, the center is going to be giving a speech on education at the Center for American Progress in October." And I said, "Oh, great. What's it about?" And they all looked at me and they said, "Well, you're the education guy. What should it be about?"

Amy Szczepanski:

Oh, my gosh.

Michael Holtz:

You tell us.

Steve Robinson:

And I realized I better think about this. I knew a few things that he had proposed when he was running for the Senate, but it wasn't a full agenda and he was going to give this talk at Center for American Progress, very prominent location. So the first few months were basically being on the phone talking to people, and I have a huge respect for education policy wonks in DC and the expertise they have.

The expertise they don't have is how does the classroom work? So I just started talking to people. My first months were being on the phone talking to people and then trying to, like a teacher does, you gather information from a bunch of sources and you try to synthesize it in a way to make it understandable for others. That's what I did. So we came up with a proposal for lots of things that the senator agreed to do, wanted to do because he was willing to break the mold.

And I remember I ended up with the office writing a bill that we introduced I think in March of, I'd been there for a few months, that made education policy reformers ecstatic and made the unions unhappy and the senator was willing to go with that. Then, we picked that apart over the years when I worked for him and put that in different places.

So what was the day typically like? I'll go back to the idea that it was synthesizing information and trying to present it in a different way to a different audience. People ask me what was the most important thing I did in the time that I was there, and this is true of both my time as a fellow and my time in his office later on, I prevented some stupid things from happening because I think education policy makers often have ideas about what should be done. And I would just say, "I can't imagine how this would work in any of the schools that I've been in or my classroom." So we have to think about this differently somehow. And I'm proud of some things that I stopped as opposed to some things that we might have done, to be honest with you.

Michael Holtz:

Applying that real-world, actual teacher on the ground experience. Very important.

Steve Robinson:

And when people ask me about this is when you're in a classroom, you have to keep your eye on 20 or 30 people. You don't know what's going to happen when you're in a high school classroom. You don't know what the kids are going to ask you or what they're going to come up with. When you're on the Hill and someone comes to talk to you, you know what they're going to talk about. It's a bunch of adults. You're not going to have to break up any fights and they're going to give you one pager at the end. You know what you're going to say, and you know what they're going to say basically. They're going to come to you with some proposal and you have some idea of what it is. When you're teaching a high school kid, they could ask you anything about anything at any time. And that doesn't really happen so much in Washington DC.

Michael Holtz:

Right.

Amy Szczepanski:

This is not the time or place, but I really want to know what are the stupid things that you are preventing? I know this, again, this is a podcast. This is not the time or place. We should not be [inaudible 00:21:10]. I'm desperate to know about the stupid things.

Michael Holtz:

I'm thinking cocktails.

Amy Szczepanski:

Yeah, right?

Steve Robinson:

The flip side of that was some people would come by. I remember a group came in to talk to us about positive behavioral interventions and supports, and they had been talking with this about different offices and people had no idea what they were talking about. I had gotten my teaching certification rather late in life, and I had taken a class at University of Oregon from George Sugai who was kind of the father of PBIS. So they came to us and I said, "This is great. This is really necessary in classrooms." And they were so surprised that someone actually knew what they were talking about because I had been in a classroom and knew George Sugai and I said, "Yeah, let's do this." And we turned it into a bill and worked on it for a long time. So that's-

Amy Szczepanski:

That is very cool.

Michael Holtz:

That's awesome. For all three of you, it sounds like you also had the opportunity to speak with constituents and people obviously who wanted to speak with the lawmakers in whose offices you worked. How important is that, and I ask this question as someone who meets with lawmakers, staff members regularly from a cancer advocacy perspective. But how important is it for staff members to meet with constituents and what do you take personally but also professionally from those meetings to your boss, to the elected official that you work for? And Jackie, I'll start with you on that one.

Jackie Sutherland:

Yeah, thank you for that one. That's a really good question. I meet with constituents from not only from K through 12, but also higher ed as well as art integration, art education, and cancer research as well as a dabble in healthcare. So it really provides a grounded perspective of what's going on with the constituents in your district as well as on a national level because you do meet with national organizations and they give you the large perspective, but also the local perspective. It helps really those stories of storytelling and having the people come in and talk about why this policy has a gap and a gap is something like maybe a policy, it's great, but we really were thinking about this situation. And you have constituents coming to us and telling us about certain things that went awry or it just didn't, that just didn't gel and they want more support and more guidance on how to go about it.

A prime example is the congresswoman is really avid about the drug cases that were going on in Beaverton. We lost a student in Beaverton and the parents decided to move forward in their grief and take action, and that social advocacy piece, they literally went to school to develop programs to fight against fentanyl, and to this day, they had zero deaths in Beaverton. So we're super excited about those successes and we took their model and we developed it into the FACTS Act. So it was a great progression of seeing what it can look like on the ground, how does it grow, what is the process, and how can the federal government support the constituents and the nation as a whole.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome. Tyler, how about you?

Tyler Dufrene:

When you asked the question, I was immediately reminded of the family culture and the grounding that the committee on education and the workforce has because we were concerned about one another, but we were also concerned about the voters and the constituents. And I know for Dr. Fox herself, when she took that oath of office, she realized that she's representing the very people that put her in that office, and we never lost sight of that. And so, the ability to stay in contact and maintain communication with constituents, but also different stakeholder groups is vital because we need to make sure that we have solid relationships with these individuals as they may be the ones that help us get someone from the opposite side of the aisle to co-sign a piece of legislation that can have monumental impacts across the country. We also like staying in contact because it allows us to really understand what's going on in the country, what are the issues that are most pertinent to the voters? What is it that they want us to be working for and fighting for?

And then, on the flip side of that, we also want to instill confidence that what we're doing here in DC is actually putting the voters first, that we have their best interests at heart. And the only way to do that is to maintain those open lines of communication. And so, every stakeholder group that I went into, I went in with an open mind, I listened to what they had to say, I asked questions to learn more about the process, and I was just very transparent about what the committee could and could not do at certain times, but that the information they gave me would not land on deaf ears, but rather would be communicated back to the congresswoman and the rest of the committee staff so we could take the appropriate next steps. And I think that developed true trust between the committee and those that came into the office and then so much was accomplished because of that. So I think as long as we remember who put us in that office and who we're actually serving, and if we don't lose sight of that, then we can't go wrong.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome. Steve?

Steve Robinson:

I met with constituents almost exclusively on education or science issues because Senate office was larger, had people working in very different portfolios. So people who came to talk to me were, for me, another source of information about what was going on as we were thinking about policy, what was important to the citizens of Illinois all over the state at all levels from pre-K through graduate education. And they were a terrific resource.

So one of the things that I learned that I was told that I think when I first got there was follow up with every person who you visit with an email thanking them for coming. So you're building a network and you're building a reference base of people who are practitioners, experts in the state who can help you as you're thinking through things. I said when I went to DC I knew nothing about policy. I knew something about education. I knew mostly about teaching high school science, but I met people who could help me broaden that knowledge base and who I could count on as reliable sources of what was going on in the state that could be useful to the senator. And I tried to stay in touch with those people throughout my time. I still have hundreds of names in my contact list. It's crazy. I don't really remember who they are, but I still have them on my phone.

Michael Holtz:

Right. But they're there.

Steve Robinson:

They're there, yeah.

Amy Szczepanski:

I love it. So as we're talking about this, I'm so impressed with all the stuff that y'all were able to do during your fellowship, and I'm marrying these two ideas that we talked about. There is really no typical day on the Hill, but I got to do all these things. And this gets me thinking about the way that I thought of the Hill position before I was a fellow. To be clear, I am not on the Hill for those of you who are listening for the first time, I work in the Department of Energy. But when I was thinking about maybe I'll end up on the Hill, I had this image of me running around Capitol Hill looking like Olivia Pope, maybe without the scandal piece, but looking like Olivia Pope and being very important and running around to meetings. And Jackie, I know you've shared this quite a few times with our cohort about misconceptions that people have about the Hill and what it's actually like. I'd love for you to talk a little bit more about the misconceptions of what it's like to be on the Hill.

Jackie Sutherland:

Sure. I've made this comparison so many times. My legislative director on the first day realized that I was having huge imposter syndrome, and he just said, "Look at me. It's not the House of Cards, it's Veep." And I was just like, "Oh, okay." There's no running around. If there is running around, it's more like your office is telling you to get lost, get familiar with the territory, learn the area, say hello to people, get connected, reach out, and have coffees and meet up. But they were saying, "It's more relaxed." There's this high expectation of what's going on on the Hill is serious. It is, it's very serious. We are taking care of the nation as a whole. We're trying to make sure that everybody is moving in the same pace in an equitable, inclusive place. And there's a lot of big questions being asked in a lot of different answers. And we're all fighting for our answer to work because we believe that our answer is going to work and we hope that it works.

But at the end of the day, you're huddled over a computer typing with one hand, eating a wrap out of the cafeteria on another hand, and you're trying to get your point across so you can hope and pray that you get a bipartisan or maybe a partner in the Senate or the House. And it's a lot of like Tyler and Steve were saying, you're building networks and building connections, and it really is coming down to what type of relationships can you build and what is the trust that you're building to move forward to come up with a compromise. And I think that's the beauty of the Hill.

Michael Holtz:

I love that answer.

Tyler Dufrene:

When I think about misconceptions that I had, I had pretty much two extremes. And of course, it was neither. One was that we were going to constantly be on the floor of the House having bills going through voting, and we would just be sitting there trying to advise the congresswoman on how to vote and what her speech should say. On the other hand, I said, as an Einstein fellow, maybe they might just put me behind the scenes and never to really see the light of day. I'll just be doing research the whole time.

And actually, it was somewhere in the middle. I was able to be part of that research process and write some talking points, but I was also allowed a seat at the table where we had some prominent figures come in and I was allowed to participate in those conversations. So it was quite meaningful. And then, personally, one of the things that I've always loved about politics is just campaign season itself, the thrill of going out and getting voters to understand what your platform is and to understand that you're fighting for them and the issues that they believe in.

So when I became an Einstein fellow and thought about being on the Hill and then was told, "You are on the Hill," I thought maybe my role would have something to do with campaigning and maybe developing slogans, flyers, and so on. But that couldn't have been further from the truth because part of our job description and being an Albert Einstein fellow is we're not allowed to participate in any of those functions. So that part was-

Amy Szczepanski:

Sorry.

Tyler Dufrene:

But it was still interesting to see how the House really functioned. And that for the most part, the work doesn't really take place on the floor of the House. It takes place behind the scenes in these committee rooms and hearing rooms where the details are hashed out. And for me to be able to have a part of that was really eye-opening to see that process unfold. And then, furthermore, I didn't realize I would have the time afforded to me to be able to form those crucial relationships. Even if it were people that were not directly affiliated with the committee. I had time to venture out, go have a coffee with them, and try to understand their portfolio, what they were working on, what their congress member was really focused on and their priorities, and then how we could possibly join forces somewhere down the road for the greater good of all of the country. And so, in a good way, those misconceptions that I brought with me actually turned out bigger and better than I could have ever imagined.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome. Steve, how about for you?

Steve Robinson:

Well, I think the biggest misconception is a national misconception that people who work in Washington are money-grubbing bureaucrats who aren't really doing good for people, they're out for themselves. And I think that's opposite of the truth. I think all the people that I worked with were well-intentioned, intelligent, hardworking people, and they were working for their bosses, whoever their bosses might be, and they might have different viewpoints, but they were there because they wanted to do something good. They wanted to be helpful in some way. They wanted to serve in some way.

I think that's the same motivation that most teachers have. Most teachers aren't in it for the money. I think most people who work on the Hill aren't in it for the money. They're in it because they want to do something, they want to be effective in some positive way. So I just think it's a huge misconception of what people in Washington do and who they are and what their intentions are. And I think that's really sad because I think it's led to a lot of, I think it's damaging the country thinking that people in Washington are evil money-grubbers. But I think that misconception is pretty common in America. It's very-

Michael Holtz:

Right. Yeah, I think you're right. That's very unfortunate. I know the staffers I've met on both sides of the aisle, they want to do the right thing. They're in it for the common good. They're not in it for themselves, and they're not making enough money to get rich in DC because it's expensive to live there.

Steve Robinson:

They have different views of what the right thing is, I understand that there are different views about methods and what the end point should be, but I don't think they're evildoers. I think they're attempting to do good things, and I just don't think most people believe that.

Michael Holtz:

Right. Agree.

Amy Szczepanski:

Yeah. I love that comparison between people working on the Hill and teachers just trying to do the right thing and be helpful and hopefully help the greater good.

Michael Holtz:

Pick something good for the world.

Steve Robinson:

And they totally [inaudible 00:37:41] because I was there such a long time ago, I was there before Veep or House of Cards. The model that I think a lot of people had was it was the west wing. We have fought for people having big conversations about important issues and trying to do the right thing. That's very different.

Michael Holtz:

Jackie and Tyler, you both talked about imposter syndrome, and I want to dig in a little bit into that, and Steve bring you into that as well. I know imposter syndrome is real. I know it seems, Amy, like when we talk to Einstein fellows in particular, they have that sense of I don't belong here.

Amy Szczepanski:

Absolutely. This is a topic that comes up every time we talk to Einstein fellows.

Michael Holtz:

Not only-

Amy Szczepanski:

It's nice to see that it's [inaudible 00:38:35].

Michael Holtz:

Right. It's universal across the board no matter where you are, that I don't deserve to be here. I don't belong here. This isn't my place. Wherever you're placed in DC whether it's on the Hill or at the Department of Energy or NSF or wherever, where does that come from? And Steve, I want to start with you on that question. Did you feel that, and I guess where did that sense of imposter come from?

Steve Robinson:

Well, I think imposter syndrome is probably something that everyone who's accomplished feels I could be doing more, I could be better. There are people who are better than me doing this. I'll always say it was dumb luck that got me into the office. It wasn't a path. I didn't make a decision. It was total dumb luck that I ended up there. And I always felt that, but I'll have to say I felt that my whole life. I think the only people who don't have imposter syndrome are people who are totally unself-aware or sociopaths.

Michael Holtz:

I'll buy that. Absolutely.

Steve Robinson:

Basically, I think most people feel like, yeah, there are people who are better than me and I'm scraping by. But working in a lot of the, basically either in teaching jobs around the Hill, you don't really have time to dwell on that. You can feel that, but you have to keep going forward anyway. So you might feel bad about what you're doing, but you got to do it. You might feel like there's someone better to do it, but they're not here right now. So I got to do it. And maybe someone could do a better job-

Amy Szczepanski:

Fair.

Steve Robinson:

Maybe someone could do a better job, but I'm the one who's got the job right now.

Michael Holtz:

I'm the guy sitting in the chair today.

Steve Robinson:

Yeah, they're depending on me to do my best. I think that's true as a teacher. I actually think I felt that more as a teacher. I always felt inadequate as a teacher, to be honest with you, until the last day that I taught. And one of the reasons when I left DC, I went back to teach because I thought, I want to teach in a more difficult situation and I want to become a better teacher, and it's time to do that now. So I think that feeling of I could be better, it's really tied to the imposter syndrome. I could be better, there are people who know better than me and I better figure out how to do this better now. Not that I conquered my job in DC, but I felt like I was done with it.

Michael Holtz:

Gotcha.

Steve Robinson:

And go back to something that I thought I could improve at.

Michael Holtz:

Did you become the better teacher you hope to become?

Steve Robinson:

That's a long-

Michael Holtz:

When you went back to the classroom?

Steve Robinson:

That's a long question. My model was always my high school biology teacher, Mr. Benton. I always wanted to be Mr. Benton, who was an amazing teacher. And the reason that I went into teaching. I'd have to say I never became as good a teacher as Mr. Benton, but I became a better teacher after the fellowship than I was before the fellowship because I chose to go back to a school that was going to challenge me. And I had the luxury of, after the fellowship, I ended up working at the White House. So I had the luxury of teaching at a lot of different schools when I left the White House.

I chose a school that was known as a place that was going to be really hard working with a difficult group of students, but I would get support within the school. And I had a very clear idea from working on policy. What does it mean? How does one become a better teacher? One becomes a better teacher, not from drive-by professional development opportunities, which were never useful, but by having a community of other teachers who were observing you, critiquing you, and helping you and holding you accountable. So I went to a school where I worked really hard and I became better. Did I ever become really good? I don't know because I'm an imposter.

Michael Holtz:

Gotcha. Tyler, how about for you? The whole imposter syndrome thing?

Tyler Dufrene:

For myself, I've experienced it on two different levels. The first being selected as an Albert Einstein fellow. In reading the biographies of the fellows that came before me and those in my cohort, I was like, "How did I win such a prestigious honor to be able to be in this national program and distinguished program?" And I realized after months of being here and surrounding myself with the others, that I too was accomplished in my own right. But I was also humble enough to realize that I wasn't always the smartest person in the room and I could continue to learn from others around me.

And then, the second part of that was actually being on the Hill because I was selected for the fellowship at age 28. I was just really starting out my career less than 10 years in. And some of the fellows have completed their career or towards the end of the career, and they were remarkable, they've accomplished so much. And looking back, it was like, how do I fit in with these individuals? But I had to then realize my self-worth that I too can contribute positive things and positive change to the environments in which I'm exposed.

And then, furthermore, I would say on the Hill, being surrounded by individuals who went to Ivy League schools, prestigious universities, who have doctorates, and who have spent 15, 20 years studying federal policy and doing just this, and here I am, a seven, eight-year teacher coming in trying to do the same job as them and not realizing that they wanted to see me succeed as well. So they were excellent mentors, took me under their wing, showed me the ropes, and really made me feel comfortable to where I can ask any question that I wanted to. And that's what really helped me break that imposter syndrome, the realization that they have other people that want help me succeed and that it's okay not to know everything. Everyone has to start somewhere no matter how young or how old you may be or how far you are along in your career. So that's really how I experienced it, both as a fellow and on the Hill itself.

Michael Holtz:

Okay. And Jackie, for you too, it sounds like you felt imposter syndrome. How did you overcome that? And we've talked about feeling that before we got to the Hill as teachers, everybody has imposter syndrome on some level. So how do you overcome that?

Jackie Sutherland:

Reflecting back on my journey, I never thought that I would be in these positions as a person of color and a woman in science on the Hill. Teacher, yes, because teachers, like my mom says, runs in the family. I didn't know that until I got into the teaching profession. But really, it came down to three things. The first thing was something that I heard in passing, and believe it or not, it was from Steve Harvey, I heard it on TikTok, take this as you will, is that you just keep showing up. You keep showing up over and over and over again. Eventually, you are going to have a breakthrough because you keep yourself in that space. Nobody's pushing you out. The only one that's pushing you out is what the conversation you're having in your head. And so, just keep showing up, keep showing up, keep willing to learn, keep willing to try something new, keep willing to explore and expand.

The second thing that I had to get comfortable with is that when I entered into Hill in this fellowship, I was, by the end of my 10 years, like Tyler and everybody in this room, I was a shooting star in my district. I came in, I reevaluated, reorganized curriculum, I led PDs, I got my master's in education technology, and I started doing professional development and trainings for that. I started initializing new innovative practices like convergence. And from there, I was a leader, I was the big fish in the small pond. And then I get here and I'm like, I know absolutely nothing. So it was learning to get comfortable with becoming the mentee again, becoming that beginner teacher again and telling yourself that you need to learn and it's okay to make mistakes and go forward.

Here's a little fun fact, when I help reintroduce the whole child resolution for this congress, the 118th Congress, if you look up the whole child resolution, you'll see two versions of them. And that's because I introduced the old version by accident and you can't take that back. And I literally turned to my mentor and I was just like, "How do I undo this? How do I undo this?"

Amy Szczepanski:

That's amazing.

Jackie Sutherland:

He's just like, he gave me a look like you can't, keep moving forward. And now, there's two. And now, I say the story of that's true transparency. You see how far we've grown, look at this. And so, I use that as a way of you keep learning. And then, the third thing is is trying to expand on yourself and improve this experience has allowed me to do what teachers dream of, which is reflect and reflecting has been the key part of, I started asking the question of why I was here, a lot of whys. And then, it graduated into, okay, how can I utilize this time? When can I, and then it started becoming statements rather than questions. And then, when that happened, I realized that I'm like, all right, I'm starting to get this. And I realized that the whole journey was just exciting.

Steve Robinson:

Could I-

Tyler Dufrene:

Have to piggyback for a minute off of Jackie's statement because I couldn't agree more. We left an environment in which we were the masters. We were in complete control of our classroom. We knew the ins and outs, we knew how to make sure students were engaged and were succeeding at the highest levels possible. And then, we enter into a room in which we don't have any bearing. We don't know which way to go. We don't know what the protocol is. And again, we are that student instead of the teacher.

But what also helped me overcome that imposter syndrome was to realize that my office, one, could have easily said, "No, we don't want him as our fellow, give him to someone else," which they didn't. Thankfully, I loved every moment with them. And then, two, they kept asking me to take on additional task and they kept asking me to be a part of more procedures and processes.

For example, when I first started, I was doing research and writing memos and summaries of legislation, and then it moved into interviewing witnesses, potential witnesses for hearings, then to developing actual hearing questions, then to taking on stakeholder meetings on my own. And so, as I grew, I started to realize that I too was growing as a professional and that I was becoming a better leader, a better communicator. And I don't think I would have learned that or saw that growth in myself had I stayed put just in the classroom. Leaving that classroom and stepping outside of my comfort zone really allowed me to grow both personally and professionally. And so, in overcoming that imposter syndrome, I know that I couldn't have done it without the support of all of the fellow staffers in the office and especially my two mentors who were just absolutely amazing.

Steve Robinson:

Could I jump back in for just a second? Hearing both Tyler and Jackie talk, they said they were masters in the classroom. I never felt that. And Michael, you keep asking, "How do you overcome the imposter syndrome?" I never have. I'm 72 years old and I'm retired. I never overcame it. But I think that what I did was two things. One, I compartmentalized it. I said, "Yeah, I'm an imposter, but it doesn't matter because I have a job to do and I'm going to do it. What I said before, there's nobody else here. I got to do this." So part of it's compartmentalizing and then part of it is surfing on it. You do something and people don't say, "Hey, you're really stupid and you really screwed this up." So you go, "Hey, I fooled these people too. And that's kind of fun. I'm going to keep going. I'm going to keep surfing on the edge of I'm an imposter, but I'm doing okay, so I'm just going to keep moving forward." But I overcome it? Never did.

Amy Szczepanski:

Like I said, y'all have had this super diverse experience and it sounds like you all took at least one thing from this, if not many, many things. So my last question for you would be, what advice do you have for teachers who are considering applying for the fellowship? And I'll let whoever wants to start start, whoever has the burning desire to jump in first. Like I was saying, y'all are so wise, so-

Jackie Sutherland:

I can start.

Amy Szczepanski:

Thanks, Jackie.

Jackie Sutherland:

No worries. I say allow yourself to be open to possibilities, even if they appear to be scary because of whatever misconceptions you have. Really be willing to challenge yourself. I think we tell our kids as students like, "The world is your oyster. Limit is the sky." And then, when we get to ourselves, we put ourselves in a box and we try to limit ourselves based off of what our past experiences, maybe past traumas, maybe good or bad, however that looks like. But we don't take the same advice that we give our kids. And at the same time, honestly, we're really just big kids at the end of the day. We're just enjoying the ride. Everybody's learning. Everybody's growing. So why don't you just take your own advice? I mean, this was a really big breakthrough for me, for somebody who been through cancer and PhD programs and traveling the country, it really taught me to take life by the horns. But I'm not guiding, controlling the bull. I'm riding with the bull. Enjoy it. We're in this together. There's only one way out.

Amy Szczepanski:

So wise, so wise.

Michael Holtz:

I like it. Absolutely.

Steve Robinson:

So maybe I would, I'm going to piggyback on that a little bit, because I worked for President Obama, I had the opportunity to give speeches every once in a while, like graduation speeches. And the graduation speech that I settled on as my favorite was I said, was it one of the high schools I had taught at. And I said, "If I had said five years ago when I was teaching you biology, I'm going to be working at the White House for the President of the United States, you would've thought I was crazy and you would've been right." And I said, "So it's great to have a plan for your future." But I think that what has really worked out for me was, although I have a very vague plan, I recognize opportunity. I recognize the possibility of opportunity.

I'm well enough educated, and although I have imposter syndrome confident enough to think I can probably do it. And if I screw up, just screw up in some quiet way that people don't notice and just be willing to take that leap. If you see an opportunity, it's only an opportunity if you're willing to take a jump. So you have to be comfortable with being uncomfortable, and I think that's important in everything that you do. You have to be comfortable with being at least slightly uncomfortable and doing things you think you might not be able to do. Otherwise, you're going to get stuck.

So that's what the fellowship was for me. I was giving up a job. I had a good teaching job. I didn't think I was a great teacher, but I could have retired. I could have done that for decades and retired, but I thought, well, this sounds pretty cool. I'm going to go to Washington DC. I don't know what I'm going to do there. I have no idea. I'm going to go to this interview process. I really don't know what it's about. And when I went to the interview process, I thought everybody else here was better than me, I'm not going to be chosen. So this was kind a fun trip to DC for free, but we ended up being much more than that. You have to take the leap-

Michael Holtz:

We hear that all the time too. "Everyone else here is better than I am."

Amy Szczepanski:

I love it.

Michael Holtz:

Tyler?

Tyler Dufrene:

For educators who are considering applying or who have merely even just heard of the program, know that you are worthy and you deserve the chance to be here in the national arena. You deserve to have your voice heard. If you are passionate about educating your students and providing them the most prestigious of learning opportunities, if you believe that you have the potential to impact change, and then you can bring that to this level and you can do just that, you have to believe in yourself. As my fellow colleagues have already said, as a fan of quotes, I think Gandhi said it best, "Be the change you wish to see in the world."

Step up to the plate, step up and answer that call to your country, to your community, and to your students. You are what this program needs. Become a part of something much bigger than yourself. You have different strengths and abilities that you may not realize will be quite impactful while you're here in this 11-month fellowship. And you're going to realize that that 11 months flies by really fast. And just as soon as you're somewhat getting comfortable and you're getting into the routine of things, it's time to say goodbye.

But the experience in itself is so worth it. The change that you get to make, you may not see that change happen right away, but I promise you, if you plant those seeds, they will continue to grow and blossom over the course of many years. And yeah, trust yourself, know that you are worthy. You deserve to be here, you deserve that shot, and you have something important to contribute to the national education arena.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome.

Steve Robinson:

Can I just add one more thing? It's not just that you're worthy, but you're necessary, right?

Tyler Dufrene:

Yes, yes.

Steve Robinson:

Education, the people who work in education policy, by and large, went to good schools, good colleges, and understand policy, but they weren't teachers. And they're talking about teaching and education, and the voice of educators is so important to policy. So you're not just worthy, you're important. So try.

Jackie Sutherland:

Can I just add one thing?

Michael Holtz:

Yep, sure.

Jackie Sutherland:

There's just so many parallels to teaching and policymaking that you would be amazed on how well-aligned you are already prepared for this field and just put yourself in there. It's just jumping into a pool, just you'll swim. And like Tyler was saying, like Steve was saying, there's so much support, so many people that offer their sponsorship to you are willing to teach you and allow you to explore in these spaces.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome. Amy, I think we just, between the three of them recorded a recruitment video for the AEF, I think.

Amy Szczepanski:

Right. I was like, "Tyler, you enjoy campaign writing. You don't say, wow. [inaudible 01:01:18]."

Michael Holtz:

So last question for everybody, and then I promise we'll let you go. What brings you joy today? And Amy, I'm going to start with you.

Amy Szczepanski:

Oh, dang. I was waiting to see what the tone was going to be for this. Going to get real deep, I guess. So I knew you were going to ask this question because I know you always ask this question. So I was actually thinking about this before I got on, and my joy is not necessarily coming from something that happened today, but I do have to give an AEF plug for something that is bringing me joy.

So about two and a half weeks ago, we had the finals for National Science Bowl, and it was one of the most amazing things that I've ever been able to be a part of in terms of education. Like I said, little shameless plug, we brought about 1,000 students, coaches, volunteers from all over the country. And that in itself gave me so much joy. And to see our Department of Energy team really come through and Jan Tyler and Kelly Day just made amazing, amazing things happen.

But the secondary part of that was I was running a few things at science school and I reached out to my AEF family and I was like, "Hey, can I please have people volunteer? I need some help." And the just response that I got to asking for volunteers was so overwhelmingly kind and people were so helpful, and it was just a ton of fun, and I had a really, really great time. So I have so much joy and so much gratitude for all of my AEF fellows coming to my rescue and keeping me sane, and also giving 700 children a really, really excellent time. So to all of my AEF people who helped out in big and small ways, thank you, thank you so much. You are the source of my joy, so thank you, thank you, thank you.

Michael Holtz:

Nice. Whoever wants to go next can take the mic.

Tyler Dufrene:

I would say as a professional learning specialist now after the fellowship, one of the things that brings me the most joy is seeing educators and other staff members wanting to improve upon their practices, wanting to find those strategies that will engage students in hands-on problem-based learning opportunities and just real-world scenarios. And seeing the enthusiasm and that intellectual curiosity rise above within students to try and figure out how something works or what the answer is to that solution, being in a room like that with that energy is so inspiring, and it causes me to really want to learn more and be the best version of myself that I can be. So overall, just seeing them seeking continuous improvement, knowing that we are all lifelong learners and that we can inspire and support each other along the way, that just brings me truly so much joy.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome.

Jackie Sutherland:

I'll jump in now. What's giving me joy right now is the power of presence. And that is evolving for me every day. And right now, the power of presence means involvement and just engaging. So I say that because through AEF, I'm learning about so much opportunities of being involved in the community, being involved in different issues that didn't even know was happening. For example, I just got out of a, what is it, period poverty event, which was we were packing kits, menstrual kits for girls and young women who did not have the resources or means to have access because it was either their choice of choosing between food and menstrual materials. So just listening to those stories, being involved in packing up those kits, hearing about how can we expand on this, talking about moving forward and just being present and involved really shaped my scope. It is the same thing with teaching and circling back. Just being in the moment and having those conversations and embracing your small input is changing someone's life.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome, Steve?

Amy Szczepanski:

I love it.

Steve Robinson:

That's a tough question for me. I'm retired and I'm trying to redefine what I'm doing. So I'm continuing to try to challenge myself. I'm thinking of writing memoirs and I write a little bit every day, but my imposter syndrome says, "Well, who would want to read what I have to say? Nobody."

Michael Holtz:

I'll buy that book, I'm just telling you.

Steve Robinson:

I'm just thinking about a couple of things that have brought me joy recently. I mentioned that I was just down in Yosemite. I challenged myself at age 66 to become a rock climber. And a couple of days ago, I climbed 600 feet on granite walls in Yosemite and that was pretty cool. But I also, as I was sitting there at the end of the day, there were several groups of high school students from San Francisco who were just so astounded to be in this incredibly beautiful place. And I thought, it's so great that these students have this opportunity to see this.

And the one thing that I'm doing on a regular schedule now is I volunteer. I live right near the aquarium in Seattle and I love invertebrates. So people come up to me and I'm there four hours a week and people come up and they'll look at a tide pool filled with anemones and starfish and chitons and all kinds of stuff. And they'll say, "Is anything in here alive?" And then I'll say, "Yeah, there's lots of stuff alive." And then they'll say, "Are any of these living things animals?" And I'll say, "Yeah, stick your finger into an anemone and it will harpoon you and then we can have a discussion."

I still love sharing what for me is the beauty of the natural world and our understanding of it by studying it carefully and testing our knowledge of the world against the world itself and being able to share that with other people. I still love that.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome.

Steve Robinson:

I'm going to be working tomorrow afternoon at the aquarium, so I'm looking forward to that.

Michael Holtz:

Sweet.

Amy Szczepanski:

I love that getting harpooned and the thing that brings me joy are in the same couple sentences. That is it's the first with a podcast.

Michael Holtz:

That brings me joy.

Amy Szczepanski:

Let's say, Michael, what is something huge for this week? Is it also being harpooned?

Steve Robinson:

Yeah, it's just a surprise. It's surprising when that happens.

Amy Szczepanski:

They're building connections.

Michael Holtz:

That's right.

Amy Szczepanski:

Transdisciplinary learning.

Michael Holtz:

Exactly. What's bringing me joy is, so I had surgery to fix a massively torn rotator cuff about six weeks ago, and I finally got out of a sling. And it's nothing like being able to move your arm again after being immobile for six weeks. I have a whole new appreciation for people who don't have the ability, who don't have two arms or can't use both arms, because holy cow, that was a long six weeks.

Amy Szczepanski:

Amazing. Amazing. That's so great.

Michael Holtz:

So there you go. All right. Well, thank you everybody for your time today, for weathering through the technical challenges that we've had with this episode. Lord, have mercy. I just really appreciate you all being here. Thank you so much.

Speaker 3:

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