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Speaker 2:

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 is me, your host, Michael Holtz in the communications and marketing department at the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education, and it is a new year for the Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellowship. There's a new cohort that has started, and that means that I have a new co-host for the AEF series of podcasts that we're going to do in the coming months, and I'm really excited to have this conversation. Zachary Proffitt and I have met virtually briefly before, but we're going to go a little in-depth. Just get to know Zach a little bit before we throw him to the wild, as it were, as a co-host for the podcast. Zach, welcome to the ORISE Featurecast.

Zachary Proffitt:

Thank you. Thank you for having me. I'm glad to be here.

Michael Holtz:

I'm so excited to have you as a co-host. We started this series of podcasts with Amy Szczepanski last cohort, and she did a great job, and I love, as you probably heard, as you listen to those episodes, I love this program. I think the AEF program is one of the coolest things because amazing teachers from all over the country get to come to Washington D.C for 11 months and learn new things and get to do incredible things with various agencies throughout the federal government. And this year, you're one of those people.

Zachary Proffitt:

I am. Very lucky.

Michael Holtz

Talk about, so you are part of this year's cohort, but talk to me about basically where you taught, where you teach before you apply to be part of the AEF.

Zachary Proffitt:

Sure. I'm happy to do that. So before this fellowship, I was teaching in Loudon County, Virginia, so in Northern Virginia at a public STEM magnet school called the Academies of Loudoun, and that's sort of a concurrent academy for Loudoun County High School students. So they can go to both a geographically close home high school, and then they can also come to the academies if they want to pursue advanced STEM or a CTE pathway. Huge shout out to that community. I mean, the school is amazing. It's every bit the sort of technical wonder of what you imagine a STEM high school might be. It supports all different kinds of students.

I taught personally in a research focused magnet, and so I taught integrated science, which was a really cool way to teach science in which we taught the three physical sciences together to freshmen, and then I also ran a research lab for the upperclassmen.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome.

Zachary Proffitt:

And so we were very fortunate to have different specialties for different laboratories. Different students were all able to investigate their passions, and so I got to sort of supervise a group of projects that's biomedical and computational and sort of the things that I love in the science world.

Michael Holtz:

Very cool. Zak, was teaching something you always wanted to do?

Zachary Proffitt:

I wish I was one of those kids who was like, it was third grade and-

Michael Holtz:

And I knew immediately.

Zachary Proffitt:

... this part was an inspiration. No. But there were many teachers when I was in day-twelve education that I can think back on that. I remember feeling seen and excited about teaching. I was excited about learning as a student, but also I could see myself doing that thing. Ironically, it was a lot of times history or English teachers that I had, or social studies or English teachers, had a great civics teacher in high school, a couple of great English teachers, some great government teachers. It wasn't even that I thought I wanted to be a teacher, but I could tell the difference between classrooms in which I felt a part in classrooms in which I didn't feel a part as a student. And so that brought me back after college, I got my degree to the education world.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome. So what made you decide then to apply for the Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellowship?

Zachary Proffitt:

Gosh. Well, I was born in... No, I'm just kidding. I don't want to go that far back, probably not relevant.

Michael Holtz:

It was a log cabin.

Zachary Proffitt:

Yeah. This will be a long one. No. So in teaching, one of the threads that kind of grew on me over the course of my tenure was supporting student research, helping students find the agency in what they do, and then that transition to mentorship and apprenticeship and supporting new teachers as I went on. And I really started to feel that sense of community with other teachers. And I was fortunate enough to attend NSTA last year, able to present and meet a whole new different group of people. I call them my people. I love working with teachers. They're some of the hardest working, most humble, kind people. They're so generous and so compassionate.

And so, really AEF for me was about wanting to extend that conversation, wanting to meet more people, wanting to develop myself as an educator to support students better, to support the educational sphere better. It's been a total whirlwind since I've been here, but it seems like it's going that way. I've loved every moment of it. And I was very fortunate to know a previous fellow. She was a PI on a grant I was working on. And so she sort of introduced me to what this whole thing was all about. And boy, it's even better than I could have imagined.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome. Where are you doing your fellowship?

Zachary Proffitt:

So I'm in the Department of Energy, which is an interesting placement. So Department of Energy does all sorts of stuff. Primarily within the focus of my role, it's the steward of the National Laboratories. And so I'm in a program office, which basically means that we support a specific initiative within the Department of Energy called the Workforce Development for Teachers and Scientists office. And so really what our goal is, is to elevate and enhance student and teacher scientific experience through placement in the laboratories.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome.

Zachary Proffitt:

And so we work with the laboratories to help them develop educational programming, and we run this massive competition, which is super fun called the National Science Bowl. And so we generally are trying to support scientific knowledge for students of all ages.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome. The National Science Bowl is one of the coolest things ever.

Zachary Proffitt:

It's wild.

Michael Holtz:

I'm excited that you get to be a part of that.

Zachary Proffitt:

Me too. And I was fortunate to be a part of a meeting recently working with some of the regional coordinators, these people who have had lifelong scientific experience and now are doing this because they love it. And just hearing all of their stories, hearing the ways in which this science bowl, some of these people were participants in the science bowl, and now they're coming back to help lead it and facilitate it. It's really an amazing community.

Michael Holtz:

It really is kind of cool. We see that too with the Tennessee Science Bowl because ORISE manages the Tennessee Science Bowl as well. And yeah, we see the same thing. The same volunteers come back year after year. They just have so much fun being part of that whole process.

Zachary Proffitt:

Yes, yes.

Michael Holtz:

It's pretty cool.

Zachary Proffitt:

It's kind of infectious. Yeah.

Michael Holtz:

It really kind of is. Yeah, absolutely. So Zach, the application process for the Albert Einstein Fellowship is pretty arduous. Was there any point in the process where you were like, oh, this isn't going to happen. There's no freaking way.

Zachary Proffitt:

You're talking about the whole thing, right?

Michael Holtz:

Yeah. Yeah.

Zachary Proffitt:

Oh yeah. I think one of the pieces, well, so first of all, the application is lengthy and just getting the letters reference and getting the essays done and all that stuff in the midst of the fall semester, it's a lot.

Michael Holtz:

Because you're not teaching or anything.

Zachary Proffitt:

No, no. I have nothing else going on. So I was able to just sit there. I found it valuable. I really liked it because it helped me externalize the things that I had been developing, some of those passions that I had had throughout my career that I hadn't really even thought about. A lot of them were very reflective, very important questions that I feel like educators could benefit from just answering on a semi-regular basis about what do you find valuable? What do you find meaningful in science education, or how are you as a leader? Those kinds of questions we develop almost implicitly throughout our lives, but it helps to be able to write about them and make them more explicit, I think. I submitted the application just thinking I'm a big fan of just the worst they can say is no.

Michael Holtz:

Right. Right. Absolutely.

Zachary Proffitt:

Yeah. Those were some long months between when I submitted and then when I finally got an email saying that I had been selected for semi-finalists interviews. But I can say from the moment that we got here in DC for semi-finalists interviews, I felt nothing but care and compassion and support from the team that led everything. Jill's amazing. Beth's amazing.

Michael Holtz:

Oh my gosh.

Zachary Proffitt:

I cannot say enough about how kind and supportive they've been throughout the whole process, even before I was an actual fellow, and I was just a pretend fellow. And then getting to meet all these amazing teachers who are from everywhere. That's another crazy cool thing about the Einstein Fellowship is you just meet so many different people with so many different perspectives on what it means to be in education and to be an educator.

Michael Holtz:

And learn from each other. And you'll spend time together and do the whole professional development thing. I just love it. And I wish Jill was here such a cheerleader for-

Zachary Proffitt:

She really is.

Michael Holtz:

... all of you, and for all of the participants, and just, I love talking to her about this program because she's so enthusiastic about it.

Zachary Proffitt:

She embodies the mindset, which I love of educators, which is there's this transition that's happened where educators... I think the best educators go from being gatekeepers to groundskeepers. They are clearing the way, helping us find our path. They're making sure we can grow wherever we land. And that's what really this fellowship is all about. She's been such a, well, the whole staff has been so supportive.

Michael Holtz:

Yeah. And I love what you said too about some of the questions and the applications, some of the essays that you have to answer. What do you value about teaching science? And I think for all of us, whether we teach science or not, I think answering some of those questions about our own work, our own lives is valuable just to, are we doing the things that we value and that bring value to us, right?

Zachary Proffitt:

Absolutely.

Michael Holtz:

You sort of have to sit down and take stock. And it definitely sounds like the application process for the Albert Einstein Fellowship gives you the opportunity to take stock in where you are in your career, and why are you doing this, and where do you want to go? And I love that about the application process.

Zachary Proffitt:

Yeah. Yes. I really liked it, and it provided some really, and it made me ask those questions to other people as I was sampling and trying to develop my own response. And those conversations were amazing. I was very fortunate to have the support of my school. I was very fortunate to have the support of my mentors, and I just can only see this as growth through that process. This is an important piece of viewing the long game with professional development for teachers, I think is an important piece.

Michael Holtz:

Absolutely. I know it's early in your fellowship because it's only been what, a couple months?

Zachary Proffitt:

About a month.

Michael Holtz:

About a month. What do you hope to take back to the classroom after your fellowship?

Zachary Proffitt:

Well, there's a long list that's already started. In this sort of basket of life where we're all sort of just putting things into our basket, number one is that as much as I could have felt like I understood what meaningful education looked like from my own perspective, even from my own county's perspective, that there's always more to that story. That the story is always deeper than you can account for in one lifetime. The fellowship has taught me that seeking out other people and learning from other people directly can be the most important growth opportunity we have in education. I know that in this digital age, everybody thinks, oh, I can just Google it, or I can use AI or whatever to help me with my problems. But there is nothing quite like a personal narrative. There's nothing quite reflecting off another human being directly.

Michael Holtz:

Absolutely.

Zachary Proffitt:

That's a big one.

Michael Holtz:

That is a big one.

Zachary Proffitt:

I also love the idea that we're never finished growing. We in our own stories are never finished. This was a scary transition for me. I've always been a teacher. I always say I never had another grownup job other than teaching. And that being an educator can take a lot of different roles in life. And I'd love to take that back to my classroom and show students how being a teacher, it's almost like a mindset, less like a career, less say a job that you have, because being a teacher doesn't end in the classroom. And there's a lot of ways to impact the learning and development of young people in this country that are not just in the classroom all day long.

Michael Holtz:

Right. Absolutely.

Zachary Proffitt:

And then I guess finally the value of professional development and mentoring for new teachers. And I think that that's something that we can radically change and make better as we go forward. And this is just filled with those opportunities that I'm going to recommend. In my county, we have this wonderful coaching program for new teachers where teachers like myself will get a small cohort over and then sort of meet with them throughout the year, provide them with institutional knowledge.

Michael Holtz:

Oh, that's awesome.

Zachary Proffitt:

And help them sort of acclimate to the profession just to make sure they feel the community. And so I'm taking all this stuff back and saying, why don't you guys, let's use this. Let's take this field trip. Let's go here. Let's make these connections because community's essential.

Michael Holtz:

Here's what we can do now with the tools that I've brought, with the knowledge and the tools that I've gained. That's amazing.

Zachary Proffitt:

Yeah.

Michael Holtz:

Zach, is there anything I haven't asked you? And I know we'll have plenty of time to get to know each other and for listeners to get to know you. Anything that I haven't asked you that you want to make sure we talk about?

Zachary Proffitt:

Well, I think it's important, if people are considering applying to remember that number one, none of us have it figured out. I looked at previous fellows as like, wow, these guys must have gotten it figured out. At some point in education they were like, I'm an Einstein level.

Michael Holtz:

I'm applying for this program because I deserve it.

Zachary Proffitt:

And that's not the spirit of this thing. The spirit of this experience is that our voices as educators are meant to be heard and are valuable in many places, and the staff that are part of this program can only put you in those places if you apply. And so we just want people to apply because the more diverse of a representation we have in the program, the better the impact story of this program is, and the more we can do, the more change we can affect.

Michael Holtz:

I love that answer.

Zachary Proffitt:

So funnily enough, there's a specific date after semi finalists when they send you home and they're like, we'll give you a call starting at this time at some point. And if you don't hear from us after this end date you didn't get-

Michael Holtz:

It's not going to happen.

Zachary Proffitt:

... please try again. And I think the window might've started at 8:30 in the morning or something on that first day, and at nine that morning, I was already like, there's no way it can't happen. They haven't called me yet, just throw it.

Michael Holtz:

I'll just stay in Loudoun.

Zachary Proffitt:

Yeah, I'll apply again next year. I was sure of it. And so when I got the call, it just felt like a very human experience. I was totally surprised. I was totally excited and in disbelief the whole process. And being here is just an absolutely surreal experience, and I can't speak enough about just how well the program has been run, how excited I am for the future. The other fellows are just 10 times cooler than I am, and I'm so excited about this podcast because I want to help tell their stories. A lot of these people are doing amazing things and already have done amazing things that they might want to highlight. And so I'm really hyped about that part of this podcast because there are really some incredible people that I want to make sure they get to talk to.

Michael Holtz:

Absolutely. And that's what I love about the podcast in general, but this specific series of episodes is there are teachers doing some great stuff, and we get to tell those stories. And I look forward to telling those stories with you and asking really interesting and fun questions and learning about your progress as well as your fellow fellows during in this year's cohort. So I can't wait to get started and introduce the world to some of the folks in your cohort.

Zachary Proffitt:

Yes, I'm excited. And I'm just so grateful to be here, and I look forward to the year ahead.

Michael Holtz:

It's going to be a lot of fun. So last question for you, Zach. I know you know what this is because you've heard the episodes. Zach, what brings you joy?

Zachary Proffitt:

What brings me joy? I'm a big believer in finding joy in the small things. I think that the first thought, the first thing that comes to mind is my home. My family is an incredibly hardworking, committed, and powerful unit. I have a son who's a senior in high school and who I love, he's a drum major of his marching band.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome.

Zachary Proffitt:

I find incredible joy just getting to see him go out there, play music. My wife's also a musician and a former elementary educator. She was a music teacher for a long time. Now she works at a farm with workplace readiness skills for young adults, and they're just some of the most incredible people that I know. I've got a wonderful dog named Lucy who brings me joy, and she's a rescue that we've had for a couple of years now.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome.

Zachary Proffitt:

Those are the things that keep us, I mean, I find joy every day through that.

Michael Holtz:

Absolutely.

Zachary Proffitt:

I feel very grateful.

Michael Holtz:

Awesome. Well, Zak, thank you so much for spending this time with me and letting me get to know you a little bit, and I look forward to the coming year and getting to talk about your cohort members and telling the world about this year's group of AEF fellows.

Zachary Proffitt:

Wonderful, yeah.

Michael Holtz:

So think you Zak.

Zachary Proffitt:

Yes. Thank you. Yeah, I'm glad to be here.

Michael Holtz:

Have a great day.

Speaker 2:

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