Natasja Brown: Back in Mississippi, I worked three to four jobs and I was part of a non-profit and I volunteered at the Boys % Girls Club. But those things, they're not work to me. Like really having an impact on a student's life or child's life that brings me joy and I feel like that gives me happiness at the end of the day.

Speaker 2: This is the ORISE Feature Cast. 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 Feature Cast.

Michael Holtz: Welcome to the ORISE Feature Cast. 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 if you are a regular listener to the ORISE feature cast you know that I have a special place in my heart for the Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellowship. And this episode we introduce my co-host for this year's round of AEF podcast, Natasja Brown. We are going to chat just the two of us for this episode so you can get to know a little bit more about her as will I. And then in our next episode, we will start talking to other members of her cohort and alumni of the program. So let's get started and let me introduce Natasja Brown. Natasja, welcome to the ORISE Feature Cast and to the AEF program.

Natasja Brown: Hey, I'm excited.

Michael Holtz: I'm so excited for you to be here. If you would just briefly tell me a little bit about who you are, give me a little taste of your background.

Natasja Brown: Sure. So I'm super excited to co-host and I can't wait to have all the other fellows. There's tons of different personalities as cohorts, so it'll be exciting. But a little bit about me. My name is Natasja Brown. I came from the Mississippi Gulf Coast about an hour and a half east of New Orleans. For those of you that need to situate yourself there. It's called Ocean Springs, Mississippi.

Michael Holtz: Oh, I know where that is.

Natasja Brown: I taught there. Oh, perfect. Yeah. I love that area. Yeah. Ocean Springs High School is where I taught. I also teach at the community college. I still do that now. Before that I went to Mississippi State University to earn my undergrad and graduate degree there, and that's where I started my teaching career. And of course now I'm here. I'm sure we'll get a little bit more into my background, but that's just a brief intro with me.

Michael Holtz: A brief taste. So what do you teach specifically?

Natasja Brown: So my background is in biological sciences. I've taught seventh grade and eighth grade science, and then more recently I taught accelerated biology.

Michael Holtz: Awesome. Okay. So you are in this current cohort of Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellows. Talk to me about that process for you. I know it is not an easy process, it's a bit arduous. How did you feel going into the process and submitting your application, all of those things?

Natasja Brown: Yeah. We'll talk more about it in the future as well as fellows, but just a little bit on my side. So it was actually the second time that I applied, and I'm sure you'll hear from other fellows, don't stop, keep going until they tell you no every time. But keep going until you hear that yes. So the first time I applied, I am a very humble person, so I don't like to brag about myself. So I think the first time I applied, I didn't really showcase everything that I did. And so I had my stepmom, who was also a career coach and things like that. She looked at it and she's like, "Well, what about this thing that you hosted and what about this and what about award?" And I'm like, "They don't care about those little things." And she's like, "No. Put everything in." So the second time I applied, I just bragged about myself. I put every tiny thing that I'd ever been a part of or something that I created, I put in there. I guess it worked because here I am.

But the process, it was to me a reflection of everything that I'd done in my career thus far. And so it was cool to go back and look at everything when I started up until I just recently ended the last school year. And so it was great reflection. It was difficult to put everything in there, remember everything, but overall it was a great process. And they also have office hours, so I was able to join those and ask questions to pass fellows just to get an insight of exactly what they were looking for.

Michael Holtz: Awesome. I am one of those people too. I don't like to brag about myself and remember everything we've done, but every once in a while, it's nice to reflect on all of those steps and all of the things you've been part of as your career and be able to map that out. So it sounds like the application process gives you a little bit of an opportunity to do that.

Natasja Brown: Right. Yeah. For sure.

Michael Holtz: What are you most looking forward to in this current cohort?

Natasja Brown: So most looking forward to .... So I'm working for the Office of Science for the Department of Energy with Jan Tyler, and one big thing is National Science Bowl, which I'm sure we'll talk about in the future as well. And so I actually am the person who started the National Science Bowl team for the high school and the middle school at Ocean Springs. No one had done it before. I got an email from the regional coordinator and I got super excited about it. I got my students super excited about it, and so I'm really excited to be a part of it on this side because obviously I've been on the coaches side. But now being on this side of actually helping all those thousands of kids and coaches come to DC next spring and helping implement different activities for the coaches and for the students while they're so that's what I'm looking most forward to. I'm also looking forward to exploring different things that maybe I didn't have time for before. Because when you're a teacher, every single second is taken up, which is great, all for my students, but being able to do things maybe I didn't have the time to do before and exploring different aspects of my career that I wasn't able to.

Michael Holtz: Awesome. One of the things that people may not know about the fellowship is you spend time in DC you basically have to uproot and move to DC for a period of time. What has that transition been like for you?

Natasja Brown: So I am one. I'm not married. I don't have any kids, so for me, it's pretty easy. I know other fellows, they have families. They have to consider if they're going to move them or if they're going to go back and forth. So for me, I was able to just pack up everything, not renew my lease and head on out. So I was pretty excited for that like I have been in the past. Ocean Springs I was only there for six years before I moved. So a lot of people are like, "Do you know anybody there?" And I was like, "Nope, I don't know anybody in DC." And they're like, "Are you scared?" And I was like, "No. I'm excited." So that's just my personality. I'm ready to go wherever I need to go for opportunities to be there.

Michael Holtz: And just pack up and head on down the road.

Natasja Brown: Exactly. Yeah.

Michael Holtz: Now, how long is the fellowship? I know you just started a month or so ago. What's the period of time that the fellowship lasts?

Natasja Brown: So it's 11 months, so we started end of August and we'll end next year in July. End of July. So it's 11 months.

Michael Holtz: And I know that Jill Latchana, who will be joining us in future episodes, at least to listen to the conversation, she and the team at DOE plan a lot of activities for the fellows in terms of after hours and other educational opportunities, things for you all to learn. Is there anything in particular that you're looking forward to in terms of getting to know other members of your cohort more closely, seeing more of DC, all of the above?

Natasja Brown: Yeah. So yeah. Jill's really great. Every week she sends us an email just about what we've got coming up in the city or conferences we can attend or talks. And then with my cohort, we of course have our own little private group chat. So if somebody finds something like, "Hey, they're giving a talk on AI this week. Let's go.", or something like that. So we've tried to always get together. We were actually just this past Thursday, we were at an educator's night at the Spy Museum, so that was really cool. And four other fellows and I were able to go. This Friday there's another educator's night at the Air and Space Museum. So we've been trying really well to always get together. And then of course with Jill, we do meet twice a month for professional development, so she figures out what our interests are. And so then from there, she books different places for us to get together and have some professional development. And then the fellows and I are each responsible for a lesson. And so that can look different. And we're going to have our first one actually this Friday where we'll have both Michaels. Michael Lowry, Michael Smith are going to be giving us a little geology lesson. So that'll be really interesting.

Michael Holtz: Oh, so you have to create a lesson for your fellows.

Natasja Brown: Correct.

Michael Holtz: For the fellows in your cohort. I got it. Okay.

Natasja Brown: Yep.

Michael Holtz: So y'all are busy. I mean, here's no moss setting on those rocks, right? Y'all are rolling.

Natasja Brown: Oh yeah, for sure. Yeah. Which is one thing like. I definitely came here to be busy, but busy in a good way. We're learning, we're absorbing. So it's not busy work necessarily. I feel busy, but I also feel like I'm accomplishing something.

Michael Holtz: Right. Absolutely. Well, and the point of ... Or the goal I should say of the fellowship is to get a better understanding of the educational enterprise really as a whole and either be able to take that back to your community or expand your knowledge in your work. I know it's early in your fellowship. Do you have your sights set on what might happen next, what you might take back, or if you're even going back to the classroom? I know some fellows decide not to.

Natasja Brown: Right. Yeah. So for me, I'm not sure. So I'm completely open. Just like I said earlier, I'm very flexible. If I head back, that'd be great. If I stay here or if another opportunity somewhere else in the country or in the world presents itself, I'm open to that. I've already started sending things back. So for example, we just launched the presidential AI challenge, so I've sent that back to my community. We're about to start application processes for community college students for the national labs. There're actually tons of opportunities, which I didn't know about, which I already sent back to my schools in Mississippi that students have who are in community college to be able to actually have an internship at our national lab. So something there that you can do that you can actually get paid for and something to add to your resume for those community college students that they probably didn't know about. Because I think a lot of times community college students think that they're at a disadvantage than the ones that attend four year university, but things like that are things that can open the doors for them as well.

Michael Holtz: Absolutely. Natasja, have you always wanted to teach? Was that always sort of the goal for you, or was it something you came to you maybe later in your educational process?

Natasja Brown: Ironically, I guess a little bit of both. My mom still jokes about it. When I was younger, I forced my sister to be my student and I still have a picture or my mom has a picture rather of where I made a desk and I had the alphabet and the numbers one through 20, and I would teach my sister when she was four or five, different things. And so it's funny, I was a teacher back then. Her and I were four years apart, so I was eight or nine at the time. But when I started undergrad at Mississippi State University, I at first thought about being a physician assistant. So I was taking all those basic classes, which those classes I needed anyway, even teaching. And so then I'll never forget, we were studying for a test or something like that, and I was explaining the Krebs cycle to one of my students. Or not my students, one of the students that was also taking the class.

And the professor was like, "Have you ever thought about teaching? Because the way you just explained something that's really complex made sense." And I was like, "No, I never thought about it." And he's like, "Well, maybe think about that because you could actually teach kids who want to be doctors or kids who never thought about being a doctor." And so that really resonated with me because I think a lot of times people are overlooked, especially if you have a bad reputation in school like, "Oh, well, I'm just going to have you pass through the class, but you're not going to amount to anything." And that's one of those things I don't like. And so I took that and I was like, "Yeah, I think I could be really good at that." And so I'm proud to say I am teaching kids who never thought about the medical field and they're now in med school, so that's really cool. So yes and no to that question.

Michael Holtz: Right. No, that is really cool though, because you're right, there's a sense of A, lots of kids being overlooked, but then also the need for more medical professionals is so great. So being able to light that spark for potential professionals in the field is really exciting. So hats off to you for that for sure. That's amazing. Let's see. I know it's early, again, in your process. Anything you've done or been part of so far that really it has been memorable, has been the most enjoyable thing in the first two months of your fellowship?

Natasja Brown: Yeah. Like you said, it's been early on, so we've only been doing this for a little over a month now, but just being able to meet with the other fellows and just getting different perspectives. We're all teachers. Some of us are math, science, or in the arts. And so that's one of the things that I've been really enjoying is getting to know other educators from other states and just hearing how they do things and me being able to tell them how we do things back at our school. So that's been really great. And then from the work side or serving side rather, being able to help out with the Presidential AI Challenge and talking to all these people, we've had office hours. So I've been able to zoom in with educators and middle school and high school students and just seeing how excited they are about something. Because this is something completely new that we've never done. So being able to be behind the scenes has been really interesting of how that whole process works.

Michael Holtz: Well, since you brought it up, talk more about the Presidential AI Challenge and what that is and how students can get involved if they still can.

Natasja Brown: Yeah. Oh yeah, they definitely can. It's not due until January 20th, so they still have plenty of time.

Michael Holtz: Plenty of time.

Natasja Brown: And there's different tracks. So basically what the AI challenge is, we want students and educators too, there's a track for educators only, to come up with an idea of something that could help in their community or in their school, in their personal life. And one big push is, of course, AI sometimes has some negative sides to it that a lot of people focus on, but we want to just show that AI is something that's coming about and being used more, and it can actually be really beneficial and helpful. And so we want students because of course their minds, the sky's the limit. So we just want to see what ideas students have just to make maybe issues that are in place right now, again, at their school or even their community, that AI could help alleviate. And then for educators, how can AI be used not to hinder your lesson, but to actually enhance your lesson. Because we know students are using it and how can educators use it to make their life a little bit easier? Maybe creating something that can automatically send a response to a student when they have a question or something like that. So the way that people can apply is going to the website and I can have that linked on there. I'm not sure if you can link anything on here, but there's a website that you can go to that has all the information.

Michael Holtz: Awesome. Yeah, we can drop the link in the show notes. So folks who are listening, if you'll go to the show notes, you'll see a link to the Presidential AI Challenge, which is really exciting. It's a great way to highlight, as you said, those positive aspects of AI. There's a lot of bad rap out there today just of the negatives, but there's a lot of good that can come from AI as well in terms of speeding up processes and helping people just think differently and think outside the box. So this is a great opportunity for students and educators to put their thinking caps on and come up with some great ideas. So excited to be part of that and to be talking about that.

Is there anything else that at this point you want to let people know about you, about the fellowship? I know in our next episode we'll talk about the application process with a couple of folks, but I guess what are you looking forward to in terms of some of those conversations, and then anything we haven't covered that you want to make sure we talk about?

Natasja Brown: Yeah. Just to people listening that might be thinking about applying, definitely take it from me. Like I said, it was my second time around and just keep applying. And if you ever need any help or anything like that, those office hours I believe are already open so they can attend those. And then also just to not feel discouraged if you feel like you haven't done enough. I feel like sometimes I feel like I've done so much and then I compare myself to other people like, "Oh, I haven't done that before." So just don't feel discouraged. You have done enough to people listening and you are enough to be able to apply and to make it to the fellowship. And so far it's been really great. Like I said, it's early on, but there's tons I look forward to. Being able to travel to different national conferences and maybe presenting and even publishing an article on some things that I've been having in the works.

Michael Holtz: Awesome. There is, I know from previous conversations, this sort of theme of imposter syndrome, like this fear that I'm not going to measure up to the other applicants. Did you experience that at all?

Natasja Brown: A little bit. I feel like not as much as some of the other fellows because when we did the interview, for example, a funny story during the process, if you are among the top, I think 30, you get interviewed in February. And during that time, a lot of people prepare for it for hours and hours. And I'll never forget, I was actually sick the week before. I almost didn't even make it. Yeah, I almost didn't make it. I had a pretty high fever. It was like 105. And so the doctor was like, "If you still a fever, you're not advising you to leave." And obviously I would never want to get anyone else sick. And so luckily my fever broke, I was good to go, and I went ahead and went. But that day I had so many antibiotics and different medicines, I actually fell asleep right before the interview, and I'm sure everyone else was like, "Oh, that girl's never going to get it."

Everyone else is reviewing their cards and going back and studying. And so I was just so tired from everything. So I woke up half an hour before my interview and I just told myself, if I don't know it by now, whatever questions they have, then I'm not going to know the answer. So I went in there and I just felt like I just laid everything out and I honestly felt really good leaving. I felt like there was nothing I, "Oh, I didn't mention that." Or sometimes people are like, "Oh, I should have said that." I really felt like I laid it all out there. I answered to the best of my ability. And if for some reason they didn't like my answers, there was nothing I could do to change it. With imposter syndrome at that moment, I didn't feel like I had it. And then coming to it, a little bit, just because you hear other people, they have their PhDs. I have my master's and possibly working on my PhD. But again, to the people listen out there, that's not a requirement to have your PhD. Of course, that's a great accomplishment and one that I hope to have soon, but that was just one thing that I noticed. It's okay if you don't have your doctor title just yet. You still belong at this table as well.

Michael Holtz: Gotcha. The table is open.

Natasja Brown: Right. Yeah. Yep.

Michael Holtz: Awesome. Last question for you. Natasja, what brings you joy?

Natasja Brown: What brings me joy? That's a great question. Kind of feel like put on the spot. So of course my big answer or my generic answer is my family brings me joy and them being proud of me and things like that. My students, for them to have that aha light bulb moment, that's my cue that I've done something correct and that they truly understand it. But I feel like those things, they bring me happiness. And then just being able to give back. That's one big thing that brings me happiness. I know a lot of people probably look at my day back in Mississippi, I worked three to four jobs and I was part of a nonprofit and I volunteered at the Boys and Girls Club. But those things, they're not work to me. Like really having an impact on a student's life or child's life, that brings me joy. And I feel like that gives me happiness at the end of the day.

Michael Holtz: Awesome. And it sounds like you were sort of in the continuum of not just the education piece, but the life of your students-

Natasja Brown: Correct. Yeah.

Michael Holtz: Outside of the classroom with your volunteers and with the Boys and Girls Club and that sort of thing. So that's amazing. Well, I love that answer. All the parts of what brings you joy is amazing. Natasja, I'm so looking forward to this season of podcast conversations that we're going to have. It's going to be a great year, and I look forward to working with you and just can't wait to see what we do next.

Natasja Brown: Oh, for sure. It's going to be fun. So listeners, keep tuning in.

Michael Holtz: That's right. Exactly. Tune in for all the fun because it's great. And again, I love this program. I just have always had a soft spot in my heart for the AEF and the fellows that get to have this experience. So thank you for agreeing to be part of this year's series of conversations. I appreciate it.

Natasja Brown: Thank you.

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