Speaker 1:

This is ORISE Feature Cast, a special edition of Further Together, the ORAU podcast. Join your host, Michael and Jenna for conversations with 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:

Hey, Jenna, how's it going?

Jenna:

It's going. How are you doing?

Michael:

It's good. Week 993 of self quarantine and working from... Feel tired, right?

Jenna:

I'm feeling it this week. For some reason, it has just hit me this week.

Michael:

I was off yesterday. I was actually doing a virtual lobby day for my wife outside of ORAU and ORISE. And it was exhausting. I mean, even though I was at home all day talking to lawmakers, it felt like I was in DC running around like a crazy person, like I normally would be doing if I-

Jenna:

It's cool though that it could continue like that. I mean-

Michael:

It is cool that it can continue, and that's a great thing about what we're doing today, because we're-

Jenna:

Life goes on.

Michael:

We got our podcast completely virtually too. We have a great guest today. I'm so excited about this because Jill Latchana was one of the first people I think I worked with when I came to ORAU three-ish years ago, to work on an Albert Einstein distinguished educator fellowship and spreading the word about that program. So I'm really happy to have her here to talk about the Einstein Fellowship Program and the other very interesting things she has done in her life. So Jill, welcome to the ORISE feature cast.

Jill:

Thank you so much, Michael and Jenna. I didn't realize that I was one of the first people you worked with. Wow, that's impressive. I'm excited about that. And yes, 999,000 days of [inaudible 00:02:07] is happening here in the DC Metro area as well. I'm glad to hear that you were on [inaudible 00:02:13] too.

Michael:

I mean, DC is pretty much still in the state of deep quarantine. There's not a whole lot of loosening of restrictions, right?

Jill:

Oh no. No loosening whatsoever of restriction. I'm in Montgomery County, actually. I live right outside in the DC Metro in Rockville. Yeah. And so, what's interesting for us is that whenever I hear people going to the grocery store, I hear people going to the store, I hear people actually walking out and doing "normal-ish" type things, we aren't doing any of that. We Instacart all the groceries. We go outside to play, but there's no people or kids, no parks. None of that stuff is open. So yeah.

Jenna:

Which is crazy day for you because when you say we, you mean...

Jill:

I mean we with a big capital W. Yes. Yeah, that's not-

Michael:

Maybe a capital D at this point.

Jill:

Yeah. D. Yes, that.

Jenna:

Explain that. Explain how many people you have in your house right now.

Jill:

999. My husband and I have been foster parents for 13 years, and we have four amazing kids who have been adopted out of the foster system, and one currently in the foster system. And so, that's five kids that seem like 999,000 with a capital W and a couple E, that every day have to Zoom call and take virtual lessons, and do the homeschooling, and do the jobs of two adults. Yeah. We are still knee deep in the working from, what is it, WF.H, working from home with no sign of offices any time soon.

Michael:

I always joke that when I see those three letters, I think of another letter instead of, you owe me nothing then?

Jill:

Which does not mean the same thing.

Michael:

It does not.

Jill:

I do as well.

Michael:

It does not mean the same thing. Jill, and so all of this started with quarantine madness in March, which for you is like the busiest time of your year because of you manage the Albert Einstein Fellowship Program for the Department of Energy. Tell us a little bit about what that program is and why March madness is for real.

Jill:

Yeah. I love that you called it March madness. So, typically, my everyday career life is I'm a Project Manager for the Albert Einstein Distinguished Educator Fellowship Program, which brings teachers, STEM teachers, to the DC area for 11 months. And what we do during that time is they work in a federal office and we support them on the project team in making sure they have professional development that really enriches their specific plan. So whatever plan they come with and what they'd like to really expand upon in their STEM career, maybe it's policy, maybe they want to learn a specific skill, maybe they want to expand.

Jill:

I have one teacher I just talked to who's working on his physics program and really revamping the way physics is taught throughout the country, which amen brother for that. Yeah. Normally right now it's very, very busy anyways, and March is a time in which the fellows are heavily into conference season. And so, when Governor Hogan shut down Maryland, we were actually all at a conference. We had just finished a panel in which we probably had, I don't know, 70 or so people hat the fellows had spoken about their experiences.

Jill:

I always have fellows and alumni talking, so there were a bunch of alumni there as well. Then we went back to the booth and we were talking to people who were continuing to be interested in doing that kind of booth babe moment where you're handing out information and sharing about your program, when the person got on the loudspeaker and just said, "The governor has just shut down Maryland in a state of emergency. So we'll need you all to pack up."

Michael:

Wow.

Jill:

Yeah, but I'll tell you, this just to speaks to teachers because as a former DC public school teacher, I can tell you, you always had a plan B. And these teachers were fabulous. That booth was packed up in like 2.2 seconds. And they're all like, "Okay, so what can we do next? Okay. I'm ready to go." I mean, no lie. Pivot is like middle name of every teacher. And these teachers really genuinely, we got everything packed up to be shipped back to Oak Ridge.

Jill:

And then, what we were supposed to do is go to Chicago next. We actually were supposed to pack everything up and send it to Chicago conference next. And I said, "You know what? I have this feeling we probably should just ship it back to Oak Ridge and just put that on pause." And that's what we did, thankfully, because if not, it would have been in Chicago for the next couple of months, because what we ended up doing is all of us, after that conference, became part of this pandemic. And so, all of the fellows who were in DC until July went back to their homes and continue to do their jobs from their homes.

Jill:

So Capitol Hill fellows continue to work with constituents every day. Fellows at NASA are writing the fabulous NASA at home lessons. Fellow at Library of Congress is having virtual Library of Congress hours, so you can tour the Library of Congress. Then our fellow at Carderock is doing something that's called Wavelets, which are all activities that parents and kids and teachers and any STEM professional, or any non STEM professional can do with students. And so, they continue to do their work, and I continue to do mine. We just have to think out of the box in the way we give the professional development.

Jill:

I just did a really fun activity, full day PD with the National African-American History Museum downtown. And though it would have been fabulous to be downtown in that museum, we did a really great PD, and it worked out well. The fellows were into it and the presenters were into it. So it was great. We just had to pivot, but I think that nobody pivots better than teachers. They always have a plan B and something in their pocket. We continue on.

Michael:

And so, they're still doing their thing and you're still doing your thing. It just happens that you do Zoom meetings and Zoom calls, and you might have a bunch of kids rolling around your desk and in the background.

Jill:

Yeah. And it's too bad you can't this. But when you said that, I actually looked to see what was under there. So currently there is a box of Legos, a lunchbox, and a groot, a singing dancing groot. And that's what's under there now. But at any given day, there could be a costume, there could be some Barbies. It just depends on who wanders in and what they're playing with at the time ends up underneath my desk. So yeah, the kids will sit through the lessons and sometimes in a meeting, or someone will hand me a computer to fix or print off something, or have a question.

Jill:

My oldest is 14 and she's our like woman on the stage lately. I say that I don't know how we're going to do it without her these days, because if my husband and I are both in meetings, that 16-month old can get loose from one of us. And so, that 14-year old is pretty quick. She chases her down and makes sure she doesn't pop her head in and then won't leave for the meetings. But sometimes it's just... Especially the five-year-old, she likes to come in and just sit under the desk and play something. So if she's going to be quiet, fine, Yeah. As long as she doesn't interrupt too much or ask too many questions, I can normally handle that. So she just plays under the desk and keeps it rolling.

Jenna:

That's fantastic. So speaking of pivoting, you've had to pivot your way of normal life and work life there at home. So how do you handle, I mean, helping your children, like you said, five kids with schoolwork? They have to continue with their schoolwork and with meetings. Has your manager been really understanding? I mean, how do you balance all of that?

Jill:

It depends on the day. The article that came out that makes it sound like there's some sort of superhero cap is not true. That is not true. It just depends on the day. I have a fantastic manager. Igrid Gregory has been by far... She knew in the beginning we did not have five kids. We had three, five years ago. And she knew we were foster parents, so she knew at any given Sunday, we could have more kids, and kids could wander in or not. So that has been something that she knew came with the Jill Latchana package. But has been more than understanding in this situation.

Jill:

Our sponsor two at DOE, Jan Tyler, has also been fantastic. And sometimes in the afternoons... I do mornings in my office. And so, right now I'm in the home office that's in the basement. It's pretty quiet down here. And my husband takes the full role of starting up Zoom calls, making sure everybody gets on their calls, making sure everybody gets in their classes. Then at lunchtime around noon, I come upstairs, I make lunch. We all sit down and have lunch together. And then normally in the afternoons we go outside, we play a couple of games, and then I make sure everybody's work is turned in.

Jill:

And so we've kind of balanced that. My husband then does afternoons down in the downstairs office. We have been doing this now for two months. It seems to work pretty well for us. Like I said, it's no perfect system whatsoever because there's always some sort of glitch or I have an afternoon meeting, or in his case, sometimes he has a morning meeting. So that's when we have wanders or kids who will come in and sit under the desk. Or in some cases, somebody has to take a zoom call and they're behind me in my team meetings.

Jill:

But my team is fantastic too. The SOD team, they know that I have five kids. So they will sometimes see the kids in the background. It's funny because they'll wave at the kids and the kids will wave at them. And then it just, "Okay." Then we just move on. So there'll be some times the kids that will be behind me, or if they'll know that there's a kid underneath the desk, especially if it's the afternoon. If it's the morning, my husband is completely handling it for the most part.

Jill:

There are little feet that are [inaudible 00:12:46], as I said, little feet that are going... I can hear them upstairs. I'm probably the only one that can, but I can hear them running around upstairs still.

Michael:

It's that mom sense, right?

Jill:

Oh yeah. As a former teacher, it's always been pretty on point that I was a middle school teacher. So I honed that to a superhero skill, that knowing when there's some shenanigans happening is something that... Yeah. I can give the look without any words, and I'll do that occasionally. There's a point and a stair that says like, "You are mine, mister. Knock off the shenanigans." The look, you know the look. Mommas get it and then you like... By this many kids, it is laser. It is laser. It is like [crosstalk 00:13:31]-

Michael:

Jenna, you've seen that look at work all the time, so-

Jill:

Right? Yeah, so that you know.

Michael:

So I know.

Jill:

It means you better come correct, is what that look looks like. Like, "I am not playing with you. I own your next meal. You best come correct."

Michael:

So, Jill, you said you and your husband... Your husband's name is Neil, right?

Jill:

Yes.

Michael:

You've been fostering for 13 years. How did you get involved in fostering children?

Jill:

I taught in-

Michael:

If it's not too personal [crosstalk 00:14:07]-

Jill:

Not at all. No. And I want to give full amazing credit to my husband because I'm not a single parent at all. I don't know how people do foster as single parents all the time around the County. But I was a foster parent before I met my husband. I taught in Anacostia, which in DC is a highly impacted area. The kids there really desperately needed a lot. And I learned pretty quickly one of my students, she hadn't had electricity all year and that's why she wasn't turning in her homework. And so, she was the reason I became a foster parent because I couldn't bring her home safely and legally without becoming a foster parent.

Jill:

So I became a foster parent in DC. And then, when I met my husband in Borders bookstore, I was doing some research for a curriculum, and he came up with the very heavy line of, "Hey, what are you reading? Seems interesting," which we laugh because he has no line. He has no swag what that goes with. But it works. So it obviously it worked for me. But I told him before we went on our second date, so that was our first one when we met. Before we'd done the second date, I said, "Listen, I'm a foster parent. I come with this, and this is what I'm going to continue to do. So I want you to know that before we continue dating."

Jill:

He didn't call me for a week. And I was like, "Yeah." I mean, our anniversary is yesterday, so I remind him of that. Our 15-year anniversary was yesterday. So I remind him that like, "You didn't call me for a week." And he goes, "I had to really think about it. It's a really serious deal." And it is. It is a very serious deal. He knew that it was important to me, but it was also something I was going to continue.

Jill:

So then when we got married, he became one as well. He started taking the classes and got licensed and certified. And then when we moved to Maryland, we had to do the certification all over again. And we did that and then just, yeah, kept it going. And that little girl who I first became a foster parent for is a social worker, a manager in North Carolina. She deals with all of the cases that come into that tiny little town and manages them all. I was there for her high school graduation, for her undergrad graduation, and her master's graduation. And as she says, I always harass her to greatness. I consider her to be by far one of my greatest achievements.

Michael:

That's amazing. I love that story. I don't even know where to go from there.

Jill:

Well, and if you met this little girl, she... Well, she's not little anymore. She has her own children and family. But if you met her, her story just continues to amaze me. And yeah, I will harass her to greatness. I told her I will harass her to the grave. She will never be rid of me. But yeah. She is what my kids call aunt. They call her auntie. So she's always been a member of their family.

Michael:

Yeah. Yeah. That's wonderful. So now you have a house full.

Jill:

Yeah. Goodness gravy.

Michael:

For real.

Jill:

For real.

Michael:

You've talked about balancing their school and your work and Neil's work. And you're not leaving the house much, if at all. Going out in your yard, but not anywhere else. How are they handling all of this?

Jill:

One of the things that I always hear from everybody else is they're trying to teach their kids to be independent. They're trying to teach their kids to be resilient. They're trying to teach their kids tenacity. And I think my kids come with that already. They've been part of a very rough system. They've come from very, very hard beginnings. So tenacity isn't something I have to teach them, nor is this fierce streak of independence. So I actually think that they handle the unknown much better than those of us who grew up with the known all the time.

Jill:

The one thing that they definitely need is a schedule. And I set that up on day one, so they'd know what to expect. And it's something that I knew from years past, kids in care need to understand when they're going to be fed, when nighttime is, when daytime is, water breaks. We all get dressed in the morning. We all are on a school schedule. So none of that is unusual for them to get up in the morning to get dressed, to brush your teeth, breakfast will be at this time, this is what you do with your bowl, this is what you do with your spoon. So all that stuff never changed for them.And so, for them, they just pivot really well. They bounce through this.

Jill:

The one thing that's a little bit harder for them, and I will say this, is they have the ability to make a lot of friends really quickly. And then, when those friends have disappeared, they've made each other friends, which is actually quite cute because they span in age from eight, 14, six, five, and 16 months. But I saw them, just like now in lunch, the two closest in age, the five and six-year old were taking the 16-month old's tricycle and they were pushing her along on it, and gently, not like pushing her down on a really [inaudible 00:19:33]. I know. I was watching.

Jill:

Let's be clear, that could have happened. I mean, my husband and I are both watching as we're making lunch. But what's great is they've really stepped up to take care of each other really well. And I love that because they're so used to being away from each other. They're not all in the same schools. They're not all in the same programs. And so, they're coming and going. We're all doing that. So what I love about this is they're really taking care of each other as friends, like asking, "How's your day going?" or asking you how you slept the night before.

Jill:

What's really cute, my six year old just asked me when I got back, "How are your meetings this morning, mommy?" Yeah, he said. And then, that's not uncommon. Because I ask him, "How did your class go today? How did your work get done? Did you see your friends and your teacher? So that's been great because I love that they're able to just go with that and go, "Okay, well, these are the people..." The 16-month old thinks she's the only one on earth for sure. She doesn't [inaudible 00:20:37] anybody else for sure. And they kind of like go with that and say, "Okay, well, these are my peeps, and these are going to be my peeps. And there's clearly no one else near us, so might as well make the best of it.

Jenna:

It's probably making really good memories for them, just forcing them into this. It's probably something that they'll remember for the rest of their lives, just how close they got to their siblings during this weird time in their young lives. So that's a really cool to hear.

Jill:

Yeah, because it was our anniversary, one of them is infamous for dressing up for everything. And she said, "Can we wear fancy clothes?" And I said, "Oh, sure, wear fancy clothes to dinner." And so, she got all the other siblings to dress up and then we had a dance party. And she picked all the Alexa songs for the dance party. So there might have been like a tad bit of Moana there, and definitely best hits from Frozen. There was also like, "What music did you listen to on your wedding day?" So it was good because my husband and I necessarily wouldn't talk about these sort of things, but it gave us also pause to say, "Oh, we need to share some of this "Before you all, there was us" story.

Michael:

Wow. So besides Let It Go and... What else did you listen to?

Jill:

Okay. The kids might know that mom was really a Destiny's Child fan. I might have let them know that because that was in rotation. A 14-year old never forgets any of that stuff. There was a couple Boys II Men, which was very sweet. There were some Whitney Houston that was nice.

Michael:

Nice.

Jill:

My husband, who is heavily like old soul, 1950s, we had a lot of the songs that were sang at the wedding that were by this acoustic group. Yeah, they would sing these songs. So there were several songs in the 1950s and '60s that he liked and they remembered those. So it gave us a chance to share them. But also the kids are like, "Dad listens to old people music." Yeah. But they saw him get his kitchen swagger on, so that was always funny to them. And a little bit embarrassing to the 14-year old who's always like, "[inaudible 00:22:55]."

Michael:

Who's always mortified, right?

Jill:

Mortified. But I always tell her, "That's my jam." I love middle-schoolers, so I'm in that mindset of embarrassment is I use as my tool to get what I need and want at all times. So I know I can pull that out even the Zoom room. I don't mind Zoom bombing her class and letting her know that she hadn't brushed her teeth that morning, and maybe she... [inaudible 00:23:25] mom, or dad will come by and he hadn't brushed his hair. And then he doesn't mind standing on camera either and being like, "Yes, this is what my hair looks like in the morning." So we will fully pull that out at any given time. High school too. Yeah. No shame.

Michael:

Absolutely. I love it. So you foster children. When do you make the decision to adopt, or to officially, I guess, legally with paperwork and judges and all of that, make the decision to add to your family?

Jill:

A good question. We're emergency foster parents. So we get those calls mostly Fridays and Saturdays at two o'clock in the morning. And we have always said that any child who comes to us is welcome to stay for as long as possible, until their situation changes, or until if it doesn't, the judge decides to have them available for adoption. And so, we've had one of our kids who boomeranged back. That's what we call it, where he was with us from age five months until three, and he boomeranged back. And then went out of the country. We always told his mom, we always kept in contact with her throughout that year and told her, "If anything ever happens, anything ever changes, if anything ever gets rough, you know that we love and adore him. We love and adore you and we'll always be here for him."

Jill:

So she called us in that year, and she was out of the country and said, "Can you come get him?" My husband and I were both on the phone at the time. He was in South Africa and we're like, "You're going to have to give us a minute to figure that one out. But yeah, we'll do that."

Jenna:

Wow.

Jill:

And so we did. Yep, we did. He was our first boomeranger, and he's our six year old now today. We still stay in contact. We use WhatsApp to talk to his bio mom. He calls her mommy, calls me mom. So in some cases it's not like that. It's not like that in all our kids' cases. But for any of our children, we try to really develop a relationship with some bio family member. With our one child who's in care, she's been with us since she was three months old. She's 16 months old now. Her mother is very, very young.

Jill:

I'm not the most spring chicken. I might be a little older, let's just call it that. So the idea that I would have a 16-month old and still be carrying a diaper bag at my seasoned age is a little bit odd. But I consider now to be a time and a season in my life in which I can pour into both of them. She's a teenager. Her bio mom's a teenager, and so, for me, part of this whole being a foster parent is pouring into her. And for all of my kids who are adopted, Neil's the only father they've ever had. There's never any men in their lives, which is just as heartbreaking. So they know no other father.

Jill:

In our six year old's case, whenever his bio mom called us, she knew that he had a very strong relationship with my husband and knew him as his only father. So some of what we do is really pour into the whole family. And it's not just the child that you have in your care. You have to realize, if you're talking to a 15-year-old mother, she's a little girl too, and she needs a mom too. And there's a reason she's also in the system probably too. So in some cases we're pouring into both as much as possible.

Jill:

But as far as adoption goes, totally decided by the court. But any kid who comes to us is always welcome to stay and we would love to have him for as long as possible. Now, I say that, we've fostered 18 kids. So I'm just saying that now and push pause. I don't want more. I don't want more in this pandemic. There are too many [crosstalk 00:27:21]. There are too many. Yeah. I say that and then I knock wood heavily at the thought of all of them coming and staying forever. But that's what we've always said. And we mean it, that if you come here, you always have a home here. You always have a soft place to fall. We'll always be here for you no matter what happens next.

Michael:

I know you're a huge advocate for other people becoming fosters. I mean, obviously, you've seen the need. Your heart has been moved, yours and Neil's both, to foster children and adopt children who need then, and pour your lives into theirs and their families. If people are considering becoming foster parents, what advice do you give? What do people need to know about taking the steps that you all have taken?

Jill:

Given this pandemic, that there are no teacher's eyes on kids, 80% of the children who come into care, come into care because somebody saw them in a school setting. And if there is no one with eyes on them in a school setting, you know there's going to be a huge flood of children who come into the foster care system all around the country. So, if you think about it, an already overburdened system with already too many children in it, 468,000 children in the United States are in foster care.

Jill:

So if there's already an overburdened system, you know there's a desperate need for foster parents once this pandemic lifts. And so, before, you always had to take the classes, these home study classes. You had to take the classes and the classes were only done in person, which is so inconvenient for those of us who work full time. And now they're being done online, which is such a great leap forward into the 21st century. Welcome, foster care. But I think what's great is all these classes are online. So you actually can take all of the meat of the classes, which normally take anywhere from three to six months, take them all online now.

Jill:

If you're feeling lonely, and there are people out there, and I see there's this huge surge of people adopting pets. I don't think that that's a bad idea. I actually think it's a great idea. But if you're feeling that urge, or if thought you were on the edge, or you're interested, contact your local department of social services, every city and county has one, and ask them, "I'm interested in foster parenting. Where do I go next?" They always have these informational meetings. They're probably having them now by Zoom.

Jill:

But they have these informational meetings. They'll get you started. They'll tell you the classes that you need. Take those classes online instead of watching like Netflix forever, Really think about the classes that you're going to take because they prepare you for the next steps, which is the home study. And then they'll certify you. We're probably the only people that have a landline because it's required for our state. We have a fire evacuation plan and strange things like that.

Jill:

But I can tell you, those small things to think about, like when you get that call at two o'clock in the morning, and there's a child that was in the middle of the street, in the middle of a highway on the beltway, on 495, there are children right now that somebody's going to see them because it's going to get warmer outside, and the windows are going to open into these people's neighborhood in which you have no clue what's going on behind your own neighbors back door.

Jill:

Something could be happening to those children, but the weather will change. It will get warmer. The windows will open. And then suddenly you're like, "Oh, this is why she was talking about the children flooding the system." They're being neglected right now. They're being abused, and kids are desperate need of homes. And so, all of those fallacies that you believe about foster care, what it is, is the reason kids come into foster care is of no fault of their own. It is some adult that is doing something. It's not the children, it's the adult.

Jill:

And so, revamp your mind and rethink about that whenever you talk about possibility of becoming a foster parent, and then take a chance. Everybody deserves a safe and loving home. Everyone deserves that opportunity to lay their head down at night and know that they're going to be safe and cared for, and that they know where their next meal is coming from. And so, if you've thought about it, take the classes. Call your DSS and take the classes now and get certified.

Michael:

Wow, thank you for the...

Jenna:

Yeah. I don't know how better to end that. I mean, that's it. That's a message.

Michael:

Absolutely. Jill, is there anything we haven't touched on that you want to make sure that you say about your beautiful children and your beautiful family, the system, anything that we haven't covered?

Jill:

I will say this, my husband and I are not saints. There is no cap and superhero kind of thing. There are really hard days. Make sure you build a village to go along with your kids, whether you're the biological or not. Because pandemics like this, I think, really show that that village is a necessity. It can't just be you by yourself. You absolutely need to reach out to others and say, "Hey, I need help." We have a whole pack of therapists that travel along with us, whether it be occupational therapy, physical therapy, or mental health therapy.

Jill:

We are not embarrassed to preach about mental health therapy. It's a necessity in this house, regardless if the kids were here. So I'm saying like reach out because it is more than necessary to build that whole village. Um, it's not just two people doing it on their own for sure.

Michael:

Right. Okay. Let me ask you a little bit more about your village. So you've got mental health professionals, occupational professionals, etc. Who else? Are there family members for both you and Neil? Friends, etc?

Jill:

Yeah. My sister has 11 children, and one is biological. And so, yeah, we always laugh at him because if you're the only biological child in 17 children who come into the house, it's kind of interesting because people will always ask him... He's the oldest also and all of the kids, and they ask him at 23, like, "What was it like growing up with all of these children of all different races and nationalities and all different backgrounds? What does that do to the child who's biological? And he said, "It makes you less selfish."

Jill:

And I was like, "Yeah, that's what you want in your kids." It just makes you less selfish. He said, "I realized a long time ago that I have so many loving, caring adults that pour into me. From the moment I was ever conceived, everybody wanted me. And he said, "So it makes me focus less on myself and more there's a big world out there."

Jill:

So we have a huge village of people who understand us, regardless of what's going on in our lives, because my sister has fostered for 30 some years, and has had hundreds of children. She and my brother-in-law. So we have those two who provide a big village of adoptive moms, and I'm also very connected with adoptive and foster moms. But we also have grandparents that help out. Though they haven't during the pandemic because they're in that age group in which we keep them away from the kids. So we just call on FaceTime, but they're still a huge support.

Jill:

If shenanigans are happening in my house, I have no problem calling grandma. And I will put you on FaceTime and blast right there. And she will make you come correct. I mean, you think I have the stare, so grandma, grandma doesn't [crosstalk 00:35:00].

Michael:

Grandma stares even worse.

Jill:

She is my plan. She's not about the bribes. She's not going to give you anything. No, she is telling you, "Knock it off." And so, it works really well. And I'll pull that out anytime. So, we have grandparents, aunts, and uncles. And we also have friends who have just decided to pour into us and come alongside us. So whenever we need a break or we need to tap out, or we need a moment, I can call one of them. And no matter what's going on with my kids, my kids have the normal meltdowns.

Jill:

They also have trauma-related behaviors that are due to bio families and situations, and triggers of all kinds. And there's nothing that can happen that any of my friends or family was shocked about, complete shocked about. They roll with it. That's what it's going to be today? We've got to leave the grocery store right now and go sit in the car until the meltdown's done, then that's what we were going to do. Or if we have to sit right here in the middle of Costco, which we've done before in the middle of the frozen foods and just sit and cry because something triggered you, then we're just going to sit in Costco and cry a little bit.

Jill:

Then we get up and we dry our face and we get the little snacks at Costco, because that's why we're there. And then we just keep it moving. For me and for the village that we've built, we have a fantastic support system that knows that this could happen at any time, so we just need to be okay with it. I mean, none of my kids are the same race or ethnicity or background. So it helps because we're kind of an advertisement for foster care or adoption.

Jill:

I mean, we don't match. My husband and I don't match. So it's not going to be odd. People are going to ask questions, so we might as well be good advocates. We might as well be good at saying, "Hey, this is how it really is and we're okay with it."

Michael:

It's a Benetton ad [inaudible 00:36:49].

Jill:

Yeah. Yeah, people are like, "United nations." The guy at CVS is always like that too. Our pharmacist, CVS, he's like, "Where's the United patients?" Yeah, I think that's the best... I mean, my husband and I also of different cultures and different races. So we knew that comes with the territory. Whenever people talk about the diversity, I'm like, "Which do you need in the diverse play?" Right. But I do notice and recognize that there are huge equity gaps between how people treat my Indian and Chinese daughter, to how people treat my African and African-American sons.

Jill:

And so it's different, and it does speak to the disparity that is the United States, and where we have to address equity gaps and knowing that there are problems that are associated with biases that we need to just start recognizing and calling them out. My 14 year old who's wearing her pride shirt right now as she's walking around with my transgender daughter, she's going to always be the advocate, and always because these are her siblings. And I hope to continue to teach, as my kids get a little bit older, teaching that that's how America looks and we all need to know that there's a place and a space that's okay for that.

Michael:

I love it. Absolutely love it. Jill, one more question for you. What brings you joy?

Jill:

Besides the very silent choir when everybody's in bed? Because that is like... I'm just going to admit. At eight o'clock, mom is done. I quit. I'm done. And they always laugh at me because they're like, "But we're still awake." No, no, you're not. You're not here anymore. You're in your rooms. That does bring me joy. Double stuff oreos, not going to lie, that and skimmed milk brings me a lot of joy lately.

Jill:

But the other thing is, I think there's those little... Like the dance party we had yesterday was awesome. And knowing that you can pull out a song that cracks you up, a little early Michael Jackson of my husband's there, or a little Beyonce if he's not. And knowing that it's okay. We could have had a really hard, hard day on a big day like your anniversary. It could have been a hard, hard day, but you put on a little song, you dance a little in the kitchen, it's going to be okay. It's going to be all right.

Jill:

I would say that's pretty much the Latchana mantra. We stick together and it's going to be okay. No matter how bad or scary it gets, it's safe. We're safe here and it's going to be all right. We'll make it through.

Michael:

I love it. Jill Latchana, thank you so much for spending some time with us today.

Jill:

Thank you for asking me. With that DJ voice, I'd spend a lot of time just talking. We can just talk. You can just speak whatever, Michael, but thank you to you have both, Jenna, as well. I've enjoyed it. It's nice to be able to talk to all the ORAU family.

Speaker 1:

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