

Wildkit Way Transcript: Season 2, Episode 2

Announcer (00:03):

Welcome to the Wildkit Way, a podcast that gives the mic to Dr. Marcus Campbell, the superintendent of Evanston Township High School. Join us on this audio journey as Dr. Campbell shares his stories and insights and has honest real conversations with people who make ETHS and our community, the incredible place it is.

(00:30):

Student Voice. It can help shape their classroom, their school, and ultimately their own learning and growth. On this episode of The Wildkit Way, Dr. Campbell sits down with Gabby Burnett and Romel Rojas-Leon, proud members of the Wildkit class of 2024. They share their personal experiences, successes, challenges, and give invaluable advice on what it takes to feel belonging at ETHS. Let's get started.

Marcus Campbell (01:02):

Welcome everyone to the Wildkit Way podcast. I'm Dr. Campbell here and I am really proud to have two ETHS students that are with me today and I'm going to let them introduce themselves. I guess Romel, we'll start with you.

Romel Rojas-Leon (01:18):

My name's Romel. I'm a senior and I use he/him pronouns.

Marcus Campbell (01:22):

Okay.

Gabby Burnett (01:22):

My name's Gabby. I'm also a senior and I use she/her pronouns.

Marcus Campbell (01:25):

Alright. And once again, I'm Dr. Campbell. I use he/him pronouns. And I guess we'll start with how the year is going so far. What's going on?

Romel Rojas-Leon (01:36):

For me personally, just mostly just college apps. I mean, the year just started so there's nothing really much to it.

Marcus Campbell (01:45):

But I'm sure you're very busy with college applications.

Romel Rojas-Leon (01:48):

Oh yeah. And I guess just having to do homework and basically just keeping up with all of that.

Marcus Campbell (01:54):

Yeah. Yeah. Alright. What about you?

Gabby Burnett (01:56):

Same with me. I'm choosing to avoid college stuff until I have to get down to it. I like to live in a blissful ignorance, so I'm choosing to avoid it. But homework, labs, more homework, clubs, a little more homework. It's just homework for me. That's it.

Marcus Campbell (02:15):

Homework, homework, labs, homework and college stuff. You all are both seniors, right. And how would you describe your four years at ETHS thus far?

Romel Rojas-Leon (02:28):

Okay. Well, being that my first year or our first year was online, well for me it was really hard actually. A lot of people are just like, oh, I use Google most of the time. It was actually really hard for me. I didn't use Google and I'm more of a hands-on learner. So having to do that through a Chromebook was really hard. But getting back for sophomore and junior year was pretty easy and I loved it.

Marcus Campbell (02:52):

And you were part of the Royal Court for homecoming too, so. There's a lot that's happened since freshman year. Yeah. Gabby, what about you?

Gabby Burnett (03:03):

Last year, they didn't lie. When they said junior year was hard, it was the hardest year ever.

Marcus Campbell (03:07):

Junior year.

Gabby Burnett (03:09):

Sophomore year was kind of like a fever dream for me. My entire family went to the school, my grandpa, my mom, my uncle, my cousin, all of us. So when I came in here for the first time for real, going to all my classes, I came home mom, they had south and they don't call it Beardsley anymore, they don't call it Bacon. They have this. She's like, okay, I know. But I was so excited to be here. I still am senior year. I'm no hate to the school. This is my school eTown Pride, but I'm ready to go.

Marcus Campbell (03:37):

What about you? Are you ready to go too Romel?

Romel Rojas-Leon (03:38):

Sometimes I have those moments I'm just like, I need to go.

Marcus Campbell (03:41):

Yeah, you kind of grow up and you kind of get over it all and you'll realize second semester they're like, oh wow, this is really happening. With graduating. And you'll feel good about it and you may feel sad about it and all of those emotions are appropriate and whatever other ones you have to. Yeah. So what do you all think is on the minds of Wildkits these days? You think about your peers and the other students, maybe even the underclassmen. What do you think is on their mind these days?

Romel Rojas-Leon (04:12):

Well, like I said, for seniors, mostly just college stuff and graduating or just work. But I'm friends with some underclassmen and they're just telling me how excited they are to be here. My cousin is a freshman and she's always telling me about just freshmen stuff.

Marcus Campbell (04:32):

Freshman stuff.

Romel Rojas-Leon (04:33):

And then, I don't know, I guess they just seem excited about being here and honestly I would too if I was a freshman.

Marcus Campbell (04:39):

And as I say, you were part of the homecoming royalty. So what's that been like for your journey too?

Romel Rojas-Leon (04:47):

I mean, it was nice knowing that so many people had my support and they supported me too. And honestly it just made a really powerful memory for me here and it's something that I'll be able to look

back on and hopefully these underclassmen can take inspiration from me and also run as homecoming court.

Marcus Campbell (05:09):

Yeah, that student section just roared when your name was called that night at the football game.

Romel Rojas-Leon (05:15):

I was a little nervous. I kind of just blocked everything out, but I was really excited.

Marcus Campbell (05:22):

And Gabby, what about you? How are you reflecting back on this time? You talked about belonging in the video that you did with Dr. Kinzie and why did that come up for you and how are you thinking about that these days?

Gabby Burnett (05:35):

That prompt we had was what really makes you feel like you're part of Evanston. And I was talking about my teachers and again, love my teachers with everything in me, but to move away from them, I feel like the community we all build, we're not going to lie and say, Evanston isn't cliquey. We're not going to lie and say Evanston doesn't have their specific groups, but you can always find that one person in all of them to be your friend, your companion in all of your clubs. I'm a part of Recording Club. Skateboard Club, which is a club that had no business being made, but we made it and then EMERGE. All these people who come together with me and we're all from the same kind of consensus. We're all from Evanston, we all grew up here. Even if the kids who didn't, they find a sense of belonging here really quick. And that's one thing I kind of adore about Evanston is even if we're small, even if there's a lot of us, even if there's a lot of arguments, we're always proud to say, oh yeah, I'm from Evanston. If you see somebody else around the way, I'm from Evanston, I'm from here, I'm from there. It just feels nice to be a part of Evanston.

Marcus Campbell (06:36):

Yeah. Okay. So can you talk a little bit about the video? Because one of the things that Dr. Kinzie did was she interviewed a bunch of students just to kind of talk about their experiences at ETHS and then we all, the entire staff and faculty saw the video and your presence in that video was just so strong.

Gabby Burnett (06:59):

What I was talking about or how I felt....it just felt so great to recognize my teachers and being, they asked me to be genuine and I thought really genuine as I can be. And I lowkey gave it to 'em. I told 'em like, yeah, this is my problem with this when you have those teachers. And with that video, when those teachers told me that they felt seen by what I said or Ms. Sangha said she felt appreciated or when any

of my other teachers were like, oh yeah, we knew you'd be able to do something like this. I definitely cried. I've been really been a bit of a cry baby since the day I was born. So when I was told that, oh yeah, you really kind of gave me a new perspective on Evanston, you gave me, you make me feel like I'm still doing my job even when I feel tired, even when I have a hard class. When you said that, when you said that those teachers who make relationships with the students, they're the best teachers ever. I felt really seen. I want all the teachers who do do that...the teachers who go out of their way to move past just work in business with the kids and go on to being in relationships. I can go out of my way and still contact those teachers...I want them to understand that they are probably the best kind of teacher a student will ever get. And they are what the schooling system needs. Instead of teachers who just look at us like paychecks and ones and zeros, the teachers who look at us as people who they want to get to know every school year, they just stay in my mind and I've never forgotten one of them.

Marcus Campbell (08:17):

That's very powerful. It's such a powerful thing for educators to hear is that the relationships in the classroom matter, the relationships in the hallway and the cafeterias, even with safety and so many of the other adults, they really do matter. And for you to say that the good and the challenges that are associated was just, it really resonated with the staff. So thank you for that. It helped us. It helped us as a community. And Romel, how do you characterize or think about your sense of belonging at ETHS?

Romel Rojas-Leon (08:51):

Well, I appreciate that ETHS has, like Gabby said, a lot of clubs like EMERGE or teamASAP and many things like that. And also there's teachers here that you can relate to and have a sense of belonging in their classroom. So I do appreciate that there's many things like that. And then there's also summits and me personally, I've never had an issue of not feeling, I guess not belonging here. So many opportunities for many people. I can see why some people feel like they don't belong here, mostly just because of students and things that go on in the student body, but it's not anything that the school has an issue with.

Marcus Campbell (09:34):

What do you tell those students who feel like they don't belong for whatever reason?

Romel Rojas-Leon (09:38):

Well, personally, I encourage them to try things that they'll feel seen. I told my cousin that she should try out for some sports that she liked and she was scared because most people are a certain, I guess, race of people. And I can see that why I would be nervous or why she would be nervous because I was nervous. I went through that freshman year when I tried out for a sport and it was mostly just one collective race and I just didn't continue it. So I don't want people to do what I did and I want them to continue that.

Marcus Campbell (10:17):

What about you, Gabby? What do you tell your peers, underclassmen who feel like they don't belong? What advice would you give them? I'll ask you that question.

Gabby Burnett (10:25):

That you have "belonging" with me. I've never been one to, if new kids to me, they don't seem like new kids. They just seem like kids, you're here to do the same thing I'm doing. Your path might be a little different, but me and you have one goal and it's to get out of here. So when there's new kids in the area, I always feel like, okay, well I feel like a welcome in person. I'm your starter friend. No matter what, you're going to find a friend in me until you find your real friend group or until you feel like staying my friend for this entire period of time, which of course, open arms over here, but I want every person to feel like if they don't belong that you will always have that one person and that one person will always be your go-to. And once you find that one person, and once you make that one connection, those connections are going to grow. There's a joke. It's not even a joke. It's the truth. Everybody in Evanston knows everybody. In Evanston, I was raised on that. So I don't want anybody who's new to Evanston or new, they're go to Niles and they transferred to Evanston to not feel like, Hey, you're, you're not a part of us. You're weird. You came from the outside. This isn't your group. We already have groups of staff. No. And Evanston has never been a community like that either. So for the people who come in, don't come in with a closed mind, find your person after you find your person, make everybody know you. Once you make everybody know you, then you're set. Evanston's your oyster.

Marcus Campbell (11:43):

That's really good advice. So I think what I hear you saying is find one person, right? Maybe not a crowd, but maybe if you can find your one, that can be very helpful. That's really good. So we're going to wrap up in a little bit, but I do want to ask you this. I think it's a good question. What would you tell your freshman self now about ETHS and or what would you tell any eighth grader coming in? But I'm curious when you go back and I know we were remote your freshman year and all of that, but what would you tell yourself?

Romel Rojas-Leon (12:18):

I would tell myself to start off strong. I remember my teachers in seventh grade and just like middle school, they would always be like, oh, high school isn't what you think it is. You need to work hard freshman year. And I kind of just took that for granted and didn't take it serious because it was online. But now that I look back as a senior, I'm like, oh, I wish I would've done better in freshman year because just academic wise.

Marcus Campbell (12:46):

Yeah, start strong. I like that. Gabby?

Gabby Burnett (12:49):

Get your safe space and get it quick. I have a few safe spaces in the school where I know that if I really cannot or if I'm not comfortable going to a social worker or if I need some help sitting down and talking to the teachers or the staff, I have that place. The entire Hub staff, I feel like they're part of my safe space. I feel like if I really had a problem, I could come and find them. A bunch of my teachers, we all know Ms. Sangha, Mr. Brown, Dr. Hill, all of them. They are a safe space that I've built myself and that's a relationship that I built with them. But without it, you're going to feel so lonely in the school. You're going to feel like it's only you. You're going to feel like you have nobody. The teachers are just teachers to you. And that's another thing. Teachers aren't just teachers. A teacher just feels like a teacher to you instead of a whole nother person that can guide you in different ways. That isn't just education. You need to find that person quick and make sure that you are okay being there. Because when you have that safe space, man, school is less lonely.

Marcus Campbell (13:52):

Good. That's good. So as we wrap up, do you all feel prepared for the next place? Where you going?

Romel Rojas-Leon (14:02):

I do. I feel like there's a lot of things here at ETHS that have helped me feel prepared for that. So I'm just excited what life has to throw at me.

Marcus Campbell (14:12):

Oh, great. Yeah. Gabby, what about you? You feel prepared?

Gabby Burnett (14:16):

I do. Nothing that my experiences here or any other place haven't given me that I won't be able to walk through something with a little bit more confidence.

Marcus Campbell (14:25):

Yeah. Well, I wish the best of luck to both of you. Well, not luck. I didn't want to say it like that. I wish you the best and sending you good vibes and good energy and all of that because both of you and your contributions to the school and just being who you are have been amazing and you've made an impact either in ways that you realize it or not. So thank you for being who you are and you for talking to me and being so honest and transparent here in this conversation. I know you might've been a little bit nervous, but thank you and congratulations on your senior year and go Kits! Thank you everybody.

Announcer (15:07):

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