

Samantha Korecki

And welcome to JayTalk, the official podcast of Muskegon Community College, where we talk all things Jayhawks, bringing you inspiring stories from students, faculty, and alumni who are making an impact. I'm your host, Samantha Korecki

Daniel Boothe

And I'm Daniel Booth.

Samantha Korecki

And today we have a truly special guest, a student whose journey at MCC is nothing short of remarkable, Rachel Blackmore, in the hot seat today.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah, really excited about this one, Samantha, getting to talk to Rachel Finley Blackmore, an associate of science and arts student who will be graduating this spring after a journey that has spanned 20 years, if you can believe that, from her early days as a dual-enrolled high school student to overcoming personal challenges and returning to Muskegon Community College determined to finish her degree.

Samantha Korecki

Rachel's story is one of perseverance, resilience, and transformation. As the editor-in-chief of the Bay Window, she led the revival of MCC's student newspaper after a four-year hiatus, ensuring students have a platform to share their voices. Meanwhile, she has balanced academics, family life, and entrepreneurship, all while maintaining a strong GPA. Now she's preparing to take the next step at Michigan State University to study pre-law.

Daniel Boothe

That's right, and today we'll dive into her journey, the lessons she's learned, and we are happy to break some news here on JTALK. Happy to announce that she has been selected as one of our two commencement speakers at graduation this May. Ms. Rachel Blackmore, welcome to JD Talk, and thanks so much for being on the show today.

Rachel

Thank you so much for having me. I always, when I am on any shows or listen to the bio, I think if we just all announced each other, we would feel so good about, like, if we just came around and be like, when you hear it laid out, you're like, you know what? You know what? I think I'm going to be okay in life.

Daniel Boothe

Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Lady Rachel Ward. Yes, very good. All right, let's start here at the beginning, Rachel, your journey to Muskegon Community College. You know, your journey at MCC started 20 years ago as a dual enrolled high school student. Can you take us back to the time and share what led you to return? And to complete your degree after all these years?

Rachel

Yeah, absolutely. So, as a dual-enrolled student, I went to Ravenna High School and found that I wanted I thought I wanted to major in psychology. I actually was going to go to... to work with SeaWorld to be an orca trainer. And they prefer that you have a psychology degree because it's behavior modification outside of any kind of biology degree. And so I worked for the last two years of high school to kind of check all of the boxes to be able to do a swim test at SeaWorld as soon as I left. And one of those things was some sort of psychology degree. So I came and I did that and I transferred to from Muskegon Community College to San Antonio to do the swim test and then found like that my three and four level psychology courses thought this is not at all what I want to do. This is not this is not relevant in any way for me. It has been over the years, thankfully, but But so then I switched out into, I thought, no, I want some sort of criminal justice. So I switched out into criminal justice, came back to Michigan, ended up getting married very, very young. And then kind of climbed the corporate ladder, moved around, tried some things. And I've come back to MCC now. This is my fourth time in 20 two years or so that I've come back and finished. Yeah. And so I was just talking to somebody yesterday at the Fab Lab, or no, it was Saturday at the Fab Lab, and he, the manager there, Gabriel, he said something about the kids at MCC. And I say, you know what? I now have to stop myself from saying that because it sounds so condescending. It's students at MCC and as well as I am one.

Daniel Boothe

Correct. I get corrected all the time. Like it's our students. Yeah, I know.

Rachel

I'm like, it's not a condescending thing. I'm just old now and I'm still here with you.

Daniel Boothe

Well, and like you and like me, you have kids. Yes, exactly.

Rachel

So different perspective coming in 22 years from, you know, 22 years ago. But really feel like I'm, I have come full circle. I'm just, I can't say enough good things about MCC and I'm so thankful to be able to like, have my, make my mark at MCC and just say like, this is, every time I came back, they welcomed me with open arms. Everybody was fantastic. And I finally climbed the mountain and got the degree.

Samantha Korecki

Absolutely. And that's just so awesome to hear. You mentioned that the theme of our brand new marketing campaign that just debuted this spring, Bring It Out, really does a good job of reflecting what your journey has been like here at MCC. Can you expand and just kind of like what Bring It Out means to you and how it applies to your story here?

Rachel

Yes, you know, one of the things that I really, that has just been a theme of the last, year or so of my life is there's more than one way up the mountain. And I, that is, that resonates with the bring it out to me. The theme of the last couple years of my life was I will stand in the sun unashamed. And that is the same, that is also, you know, just like, I'm going to stand here. I'm going to bring it out. I'm going to move forward and let's meet at the top of the mountain together, however you make it there. And I think MCC is such a beautiful melting pot of so many stories. I mean, it's been such a pleasure to work with the Bay Window and hear stories, hear writers, hear journeys. So many of the times I get stories in and I just think, this is amazing. April 7th, this next edition coming out, the front page is a student here who you guys may have talked to already, if not, absolutely should. But she is from an Amish background and her story is that she has had left that lifestyle and is now raising funds to study abroad. But she's here at MCC and just to be able to put her story on the front page and just say like, look at this, is incredible and it's right here in the student body is just such a privilege. I think so many students are bringing it out and

Daniel Boothe

No, we couldn't say it better ourselves. And that's kind of what this podcast is about, not to talk about ourselves. But as a former journalist myself, I know exactly what you mean. And it's just you're giving a voice to people who don't have a voice. And so I really commend you for that. That's really fantastic. Because I know here's the deal, too. I want to talk a little bit. I want to get back to the Bay Window here in a second. But I want to talk a little bit about your Your own challenges. It's been a journey. You know, you've raised a family, you've navigated hardships, you've overcome an abusive relationship. You know, when you look back on that all, what motivated you? Can you talk a little bit about standing in the sun unashamed and what has motivated you to keep your head down and get the work done?

Rachel

Yeah, you know, some days it is, it's not easy. Healing isn't linear. A lot of people, I thought, When I got out of, I was married for, I was with, who was my husband for 23 years, married for 19. And I was 14, he was 18 when I met him. And we were in this very My dad was a pastor and we were in this very much like small community of you don't date unless you're going to marry the person kind of a thing. And so it was a natural progression to go from here's this person, I feel a connection, I'm going to marry them as soon as I get out and move on with all the other things in life. And I think that there, I think that a lot of environments of of religion and some of those practices foster isolation, which makes it very difficult to even understand that you're in the situation that you are until things are like, for me, it was until if I don't get out of here, I won't be able to raise my children. I won't be here if I don't get out. And so for me, it was survival based more than anything that I, but the interesting thing is once you get out of a relationship like that, so many times I just thought surviving is going to be the thing that kills me. This is like, this is so hard. And so I think that, I think on those, the struggles and the difficult days, what I have learned is that healing process isn't linear and giving yourself the grace of like, today is one of those days where I don't have it in me, or I can't, or I won't, or I need to take care of myself in some other way. And then you have those other superpower days where you're just like, I'm gonna do this. I'm gonna step out there. I'm gonna try this. I'm gonna, you know, and Those are the days that you cling to. Those are the days that are in the bio, right? The days that you're just like, yeah, that's right. I did do that. And I think I'll be okay.

Daniel Boothe

It's got to feel good when you hear your bio and you're like, wow, you know, that's not too shabby.

Samantha Korecki

A lot of good days.

Rachel

you just build on that and you find community is so important. I had, I would not have been able to get out and survive the survival without every woman's place here in Muskegon. They're incredible people and so supportive and so wonderful. And I know that there's a lot of like the Is it called the J-Hub? Yes, the J-Hub, yeah, the J-Hub here, the J-Hawk Hub. Yeah, they're just fantastic. Emily, I've interviewed her and talked with her so much, and they work with every woman's place and things too, for any students that need. the support and it's an excellent resource.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah, we love our shout outs. I'm sorry.

Samantha Korecki

Yeah, no, just for clarification, that's Emily Merton, our Jayhawk Hub manager. And yes, she's incredible.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah, you read my mind.

Samantha Korecki

We love to talk about her.

Daniel Boothe

Yeah, she was on our podcast just before this one and talk about a servant's heart, man. I mean, she's got it and she loves what she does. And also great shout out to one of our partners, Every Woman's Place. I did a Number of articles about them, but I mean, you talk about standing in the gap for these women. So that's remarkable. So great.

Samantha Korecki

That's incredible. So now to bring us back to what you're doing here at MCC and with the Bay Window as the editor-in-chief, which is just so incredible. It was gone for so long. So now to have it back is just so exciting. You've played a crucial role in bringing the student newspaper back to life. And tell me about what your experience has been like and how you think that's been impacting the student body since it's been back.

Rachel

Oh, it has. It is such a fun. First of all, let me just say that the pretty much the entire staff of the Bay Window is graduating and like wiped out. So anybody listening who is interested in getting involved, whether it's, yes, it's graphic design, editor, Yeah, even freelancing, writing, and things like that. please do. Dave is the contact person, and then there's also Connor, who is faculty here at MCC. And both of them kind of have been working in the background to help support all of the student body who is getting out there and finding the stories and producing them.

Samantha Korecki

That's Dave Yonkman and Connor Roddy, correct?

Rachel

Yes, thank you. Yes, and so, yeah, it's been it's been really fun. I took journalism and broadcasting, oh, a year or so ago. I think it was maybe fall semester of last year. And going in, just knowing like I was super excited that I wanted to learn the journalistic style of writing and what does that even mean and how does that play into life today. And had no idea walking in there that I would meet such amazing people, but then also I was out one day. In fact, I was out at a at a court hearing about custody for my kids, that I wasn't able to make it to class, to come back to class with the weight of having been through that. And they say, Dave says, you were unanimously voted in as the editor-in-chief. Will you take the position? Surprise! I was like, what?

Daniel Boothe

Just a side note, real quick, I'm curious as to where that talent came from, because As a former journalist myself, quote unquote, barf, and sorry to name drop, but as a former journalist myself, your writing was so impressive to me that it seemed, I told you in an email, I thought that it belongs in any newsroom in West Michigan. It was just that professional and packaged and ready to go. So where did that talent come from? Is that just from a love of news or is that or just practice. I mean, I know that writing is a muscle. Believe me, I do it every day. But where did it come from?

Rachel

Yes. So shout out again to Dave Yonkman, because when I went in, we had so many somewhat heated discussions about what goes into journalism versus what doesn't, because I come from a ghost writing and copywriting background. And so I started 10 years ago or so, trying to figure out how to make enough money to buy groceries for my family to write as a writer. And so the thing that continued to come up was just write every day, write every day, write every day. And so I did, and this was, again, 10 years ago or so, and I would set the timer for 30 minutes And even if I'm just typing, I don't know what to write today. I have nothing to write. It's just the like actual muscle memory of I'm connecting my brain to my fingers and I'm going to put something down on paper. And eventually that turned into finding different ways to, I was making less than a penny a word, but I was like so excited when I could cash out my \$20 that because somebody wanted my writing, you know, and I would ghost for different magazines and different things. And so I think that both the copywriting and the ghostwriting background, along with really this is where the psychology came in, because the psychology of really knowing your audience and knowing who you're talking to and how to connect with them has been instrumental in my writing. So when I came in, I had a lot of background in in writing and marketing and none in

journalism. And so it was so hard to keep myself out of it, to keep not using enthusiastic words.

Daniel Boothe

Yes, all of the things.

Rachel

And to not have call to actions and to not, all of these different things that I so wanted to put in there. And so it's been a real journey of refining the skill of writing with journalistic integrity. And I just shout out to MCC for refining that with me. Yep, awesome.

Samantha Korecki

Absolutely. Yeah, so obviously I think we've established that you've worn many hats. Student leader, entrepreneur, parent. editor-in-chief, all kinds of crazy stuff. So how do you manage to keep all those responsibilities just going and doing so well at all of them and also maintaining such a strong GPA? You're like doing it all. How do you do it?

Rachel

You know, I think that I think the trick is don't stop or you'll realize how tired you are. Do not stop, just keep going. But honestly, it really does come from the place of knowing that I don't know if you're familiar with the musical Hamilton. I love Hamilton so much. You're talking to me.

Daniel Boothe

Theater.

Rachel

Oh my gosh, so much. And you know, this year with my kids, for the first time, I made vision. We made vision boards for the new year. And both my son and myself had Hamilton on there. And I was so excited. We got tickets for when they're coming to Grand Rapids. I get to bring my son to go. Oh, and what month is that?

Daniel Boothe

It's August, isn't it? It's the summer.

Rachel

the end of July, the showing that we're going to do.

Daniel Boothe

Is it sold out already? I told my wife I was going to take it.

Rachel

I don't know, but look, because yeah, I just, I had been watching the one in Detroit and then it was like so incredibly expensive and I thought somehow I'm going to make this happen. And then as soon as they dropped in Grand Rapids, I got tickets to it. And so I'm so excited. But one of the things that I love so much about that musical is it talks about like Hamilton's writing like he's running out of time. he's like going, going, going.

Daniel Boothe

I immediately thought you were going to say it's work, work, or, you know, or it was watching it burn in one of those. So anyway, but I'm sorry to, I digress.

Rachel

So many, so many amazing moments in that musical. But I think that the connection between like getting all of the things done, because you just know I'm starting 22 years later than these other students. that I will be graduating with. And I'm saying, although I have used the 22 years to continue to morph and to grow and to heal, I'm 22 years out of time. I'm 22 years set back in some ways. And so I have this, like, this desire to, let's just do this second half, let's just do the second two-thirds, as like with as much gusto as I can. And when that means tonight I need to just sit and play Mario Kart for 30 minutes because my brain needs to just relax, that's what I do. And sometimes it's like when I just need to write because that's cathartic, then it turns into something, you know, something usable.

Daniel Boothe

So congratulations, you have been officially announced that you are going to be one of two speakers to get up in front of the graduating student body and share your story at commencement. That's going to be this May. I promise you I'm not going to cry. And I promise you that I am going to cry. Right. I'm for sure going to cry. So, but as you look at that speech as you're formulating that message, What is the message and what kind of message of hope do you want to give to your fellow graduates? And have you started formulating what you want to say?

Rachel

Yeah, I did. When I did the application, I really thought about, do I have something to say that, you know, this is such an important day for so many students and it's just, it's a huge accomplishment. It is something to be proud of and one of those sort of milestone markers when you look back at in life, you'll remember this day. And I didn't want to stand up there

if I didn't have anything worth for them to hear. I just thought, sure, I'll be excited, but I'll just be excited by myself. But I thought, I want, I desperately want everyone to know the value that they hold and that regardless of how life takes you from this moment forward, if your next 22 years is filled with setback after setback after setback, that again, there is more than one way up the mountain. You're still climbing that mountain and we're going to meet each other at the top and we're going to be there and we're going to celebrate with each other. And this is a plateau. This is a space that we all made it to and we're celebrating today. But tomorrow we start climbing again. And no matter how hard that climb is for you, I'm going to meet you at the top and I'm going to cheer you on. And I just want them to know that.

Daniel Boothe

Rachel, let's go. Thanks so much for being on the show today.

Rachel

Thank you so much for having me.