Jen Walsh: From the American School Counselor Association, this is, I Hear You Say, a podcast for school counselors and other leaders in education. I'm Jen Walsh, director of education and training here at ASCA. ASCA's School Counselor of the Year award honors professionals who devote their careers to advocating for the nations' students and addressing their academic and social emotional development and college and career readiness needs. Today we sit down with one of the 2021 School Counselor of the Year finalists Vanessa Barnes. Vanessa is the dean of students, counseling and student services at Millbrook Magnet High School in Raleigh, North Carolina, where she leads a team of six school counselors serving the urban schools' 2,375 students grades 9 through 12. Congratulations and welcome, Vanessa.

Jen Walsh: All right. So I believe that I heard that you wanted to be a journalist. So how did you end up as a school counselor?

Vanessa Goodman...: Well, when I was in college, of course, I was looking into political science and also becoming a journalist and journeys and pathways did tend to change. And I ended up having my path redirected. And one of my former... I used to work in the admissions office as a... It was my work study when I was in college, and she asked me to do some freelance work for the office of admissions. And so I did. And while I was doing that, I would take off vacation days sometimes and do some of the programs in different areas of the state as an admissions officer and I remember distinctly when I was in another state, I was doing a college fair, and I'm the type of person that if I see students not engaged or not picking up material, I'll go and talk to them.

And a young man, I asked him, I said, "You've got all of these great schools and programs and military, all of these people are here. Why are we not picking up any information?" And he looked at me and said, "Well, it really doesn't matter. I don't really have a plan. And more than likely, I probably won't live to see age 21." And I just remember being kind of stunned by that answer. At that time, I was much younger than I am now, but that stuck out to me. And as I began to continue doing college admissions work, I started seeing more and more, some students didn't have all of the coursework they needed, or they may have been missing some components to make them an eligible applicant to the institution, and that's when I began to get the yearning to go back to school and pursue a degree so I could become a school counselor because I wanted to see students have opportunities among many to inform what they did once they graduated.

And so that particular story kind of stands out because I didn't want to see another student not think that they have options, and that particularly not living long as an option, but I felt like if I can be an effective counselor and get them connected to something, whether it's a trade, the military or a four year college or institution, then that would be good work to be doing. And that's how I ended up going back to school and becoming a school counselor.

Jen Walsh: Wow. We hear that a lot that it's those stories that really impact you to either become a school counselor or to start a particular program in your school. So, that truly is so impactful. So just knowing how you transferred from thinking about being a journalist to now being a school counselor, how does that help you relate to students or advise students when their considering post-secondary opportunities?

Vanessa Goodman...: The one thing I'll go back to the journalism, I think one of the things in being an effective counselor is being a good communicator. And the skills that I learned from the journalism classes that I took helped me because everywhere you are as a school counselor, you've got to be able to reach out to parents and students and make sure that that language reaches them so that impacts what they need and what they do. I think also developing relationships and I think one of the things I saw working as a journalist, I knew that I was meant to be a helping individual because I began to see if I was sent out to cover a tragedy or someone who had loss of life, I'd probably being right in there crying along with them. It would not be a good career for me to ask them, how did they feel as a journalist, but particularly with school counseling I am able to develop relationships with students and families and find options for them as they are seeking to navigate post-secondary opportunities.

So in looking at our comprehensive school counseling program, we look at each year looking at data where students are excelling, where students are not excelling, what gaps that are there and what can we do as a school and as a community to fulfill those gaps so that everybody has access to learn and to feel supported. And I think that has helped me along my career journey to be able to look at that in a different way. What we have to look at a lot, we look at the data, but then we also look at the needs of our students and our faculty to make sure that we are developing a comprehensive school program that meets everyone where they are and that everyone has an opportunity to learn and to feel supported in their school environment and to feel safe too.

Jen Walsh: I think that's a good point. Obviously, the model says that school counselors are here for all students and your story that you shared about helping that one individual who felt like he didn't have any options. That's such a great example of reaching out and making sure that you're meeting everyone where they are, even if they don't see much help for themselves, you're providing that hope and providing those opportunities for them.

Vanessa Goodman...: Yes, and I think one of the things that is good too, when look at our comprehensive program, say we're doing a junior parent night or junior program, we're not just looking at having selective colleges and universities, we're always going to build in a community college, we're always going to have a representative from the military, and sometimes if there's an organization that is looking at employment or apprenticeship opportunities, we want to have all of those things on the panel. So we don't want anyone to come away from the conversation or the program saying, "Well, that wasn't for me. I can't see myself in any of those scenarios."

I'm not going to be able to go to that selective university, but I might be able to start at the community college or based on my family income being first generation, the military, and the educational support that they have may be a pathway for me to get there. So just making sure that we have other things that we can show that all students can feel supported and included. But we always try to look at how do we build a program that's going to resonate with all of those students that we have, and there still may be some gaps, but I think if you're intentional about trying to have many options that students can see themselves in, then that will make for a successful program where all students feel like they can fit in.

Jen Walsh: Speaking of programs, I read a little bit about FUTURO.

Vanessa Goodman...: Yeah, we call it... It was FUTURO [inaudible 00:08:11] and that particular program... Several years back there was a lot of upheaval as everyone knows in terms of the dreamers and everyone was concerned about DACA and how bad it's going to impact them. And we had students that were thinking that they may be going back to their countries and there was just so much uncertainty about what they could do and how they could access education. And I mean, we literally had students in our offices crying and upset, and I remember getting together with the intervention coordinator, we had also just hired a school social worker who was bilingual. We sat down and we talked about what could we do to educate about what DACA really met and what needed to happen and talk to our administration about having, because we normally have time earlier in the year when we set a calendar and so this wasn't on our calendar, it wasn't, at first, a part of our comprehensive program, but we were being responsive to what our students needed at that time.

So we put together what we called The Future Summit. We had people from the community also on campus and other state agencies that we were able to get together so that we could pool a lot of our students for the day with juniors and seniors at first year, to talk to them about scholarships that didn't matter if you were documented or undocumented. We worked with CFNC, The College Foundation of North Carolina, they have a Spanish services interpreter. So we had that person come and talk, and she was bilingual. We reached out and got translators from a district office to come out and translate to parents, because I think in some areas where there's a language barrier, sometimes it's hard to reach the parents and make sure that they know that there's trust here, there's support here. And so we had people to come from the central office to translate so that they could understand what was being shared with the children.

And then we had what was called a FUTURO Fair and then that fair, [inaudible 00:10:21] lead to what I had mentioned earlier. We tried to have something that would appeal to everybody. We had military representatives and a regular recruiter reached out and ask another recruiter who was also bilingual to come and talk to the students about how the military informed their future and that was really appealing to our students as well. And then we had different employers here, who worked with us to do some onsite interviews so that some of our students who needed jobs, because that's an important piece of them to support the family, we were able to connect them with jobs. And we also had a local community college to come in and also be a part of this. And that was helpful because they talked to students about how they could get their associates degree, like if they did Career & College Promise program, where students are involved in taking community college coursework while they're in high school that's free and that enables them to begin to get those college courses. So we had them there.

And then we had a couple of other institutions that we knew worked well with students who were documented and undocumented to make sure... Like with some of the private colleges, for example, they have more endowment money that could work with a student that was looking towards getting their education. So we also had people from the justice center and from churches and other people that were able to come and support our students. So, that was tremendously helpful to our students who were participating and their families. And then in the afternoon, we had work sessions, like with the seniors, we helped them to do college applications that worked on scholarships. And in North Carolina, we had a thing called Residency Determination Services, so we help them to migrate that whole process depending on what their status was, and then we worked with the juniors on college planning.

And as a part of this whole day, we also reached out to a couple of other schools in the area and they brought their students over, their Latin X students. So this year is a little different because we're doing a series because we're having to reach out to students through Google Meet because of the pandemic, but we're still doing like a series and we're going to meet with them at different times throughout the year. Looking at the data, we kind of did some pre and post assessment about what their knowledge was, how their family felt about them pursuing education, and use that data to inform more of what we do because as a result of that day and the feedback we received from students and families, like our principal sends out weekly announcements, and we make sure that those announcements are translated.

My district has also done a good job with translating, like enrollment paperwork, anything that we can do to make sure that on even parent teacher conferences, if there's someone in the family, like a lot of some of the students are able to speak the language but the parent needs more support, making sure that we're reaching out and having a translator there so that they can be partners with their children's education. So that particular program, it gave us a lot of information that we can use to continue pushing our students onto success. And definitely thinking about one of our students this year who's Gates Scholar and she's at Yale, and her family has only been in the country for about five years, and for her to end up being at the top of her class, being able to be a Gates Scholar. It's tremendous, the power of education and what that can do. So that's kind of a long story, but it's been an impactful program that we feel like we have.

Jen Walsh: Wow. That is just so incredible.

And really sounds like a major undertaking.

I really want to hear more about this program, but first, a quick word from one of our sponsors, the Student Success Agency. For the past eight years, the Student Success Agency has worked side-by-side with school counselors, teachers, and principals to build the student Winbox, which is your one stop shop to capture student moments throughout the busy school day, collaborate with staff to turn moments into momentum and celebrate school wins. What makes the Winbox unique is that your counseling teams can increase support for students anywhere, anytime through a network of mentors who assist in exposing your students to the social capital and opportunities that already exist for them in your local community. To activate your school's Winbox, go to studentsuccessagency.com and click on the talk to an expert button in the upper right-hand corner of their website. From there, they will walk you through how to utilize the Winbox to elevate, mobilize, and include school staff in strengthening all students' academic and emotional wellbeing. We're now back with Vanessa. Vanessa, I would love to hear more about how you were able to get so many community partners to participate in this program.

Vanessa Goodman...: [inaudible 00:15:41] Some of our parents, like there was one church, that they have done a lot of work with us in terms of when we had AP testing and IB testing, we were using in their facility, and then you just kind of get to know some of the programs that they have and they were always reaching out to be partners. And College Foundation of North Carolina, we just reached out to them. And in other districts, I had worked with that particular Spanish services manager at College Foundation of North Carolina, and so I knew about her. And so just having those connections through those agencies helped us out a lot. The military, they're always at the buildings working with students, and when we asked them they were too eager to help. I'm always looking at ways, because of course they don't give us a lot of money to do programs, but we definitely want to have good student outcomes, so we just asked.

There's some people in our office that are a part of a community organization, and they were able to reach out to the Hispanic Family Center, the North Carolina Justice Center, and other places to be able to get them to be a part of the fair. And it has grown over the years. Last year when we were in person, we had an organization called El Pueblo and they came out. So, normally each year I have an intern as well, and so we would have them to then help us to reach out and to kind of create a database of people that we just wanted to invite that we thought would be helpful in helping our parents and our students with things that they might need, whether it be from a social services standpoint to help the family, or from an educational standpoint, and then of course legal as well.

We just would share with them the resources. We can't tell them what to do, but we thought that there was value in making sure that these things were available for them to access. And that's what it's all about. Just the access, because sometimes people want to do things and they want to support their children, but if they don't know what to do if the language is barrier, they just don't know. And I think for years in education, sometimes we have not thought about those who may be disenfranchised, just because of the language. They definitely have the ability, just thinking about this student who came to us [inaudible 00:18:05] from Colombia and now she's at Yale. I mean, how great is that? And so it was just amazing. And so there's no telling what she may do and how she may be able to not only inspire the Latin X community, but this whole world.

So education is the key and that's what we try to do to make it where students can have that access. And they may choose to go a different path, but at least we're making it available for them. I think that's the role of school counselors, to just make sure not that we're guiding them here and there, but we're providing access. And with the current pandemic, we've learned lots of things about how to communicate. So we're putting information everywhere we can to make sure that students don't miss out.

Jen Walsh: It sounds like collaboration, and just building relationships like with those community partners, collaborating with social workers, and forming that relationship of trust with your Latin X parents is a critical piece of this.

Vanessa Goodman...: I'd definitely give our social worker some credit with that too, because with her being bilingual, she's able to if we have students that are on our list, but they're not engaging because of attendance or academics then she's been able to help us with those critical conversations with them. We've also collaborated with the North Carolina Society of Hispanic Professionals, and they have a program for some of our Latin X students in schools throughout the district that's called Gradúate, and they work with students to make sure they're meeting graduation goals as well. So additional collaboration, we've also done... We now have Twitter, we have an Instagram, trying to keep up with where the kids are, and also sending whether it's text messages from our district messenger program, or phone calls if we need to, just doing those different things, to make sure that we're staying connected.

In the past we've also had a Senior Success program. Like if we had seniors who needed to have all of their credits in order to graduate or something like that, we would involve them in that program as well so that we were keeping up with them each quarter to let them know their progress. And so we were able to get translation for that as well. We don't have it down to a science yet, we're still getting at our SMART goals and what we do to make sure that we are working effectively to reduce the number of dropouts and making sure that our offerings work with them in where they are and what they need. But I feel like we have started a good dialogue and conversation where the students know that we do care for them. We've also had in our department, a first generation group where we're pushing out information to everybody, but also have that first gen group where the students have been pulled out so that they can have additional time to work on tasks.

And that has been helpful too, because they are able to see that there are other people going through the same thing, and that's been very helpful. Just being open to whatever we can do and keeping on top of what's available so that we can make sure our students have access. And I think the College Access community has been very helpful, like last week we received information from a university in North Carolina and they were having a program speaking directly to a Latin X population and everything was going to be in Spanish. And so that those students get that information so that their families, because sometimes I know when we talk about things, some people tend to think that high school students don't need parental support, but they need it just as much, if not more. And the more that we can get parents tapped in and involved, the better off that we can be in terms of making sure that they're successful in graduating.

Jen Walsh: You talked a lot about how you collect data. How did this data that you collected through this program, how did that drive your activities throughout the rest of the year, and then in following years?

Vanessa Goodman...: We'll look at the dropout data and looking at different sub groups and seeing where that was and then we found that Latin X population higher in that dropout rate. That was something that sought to look at and we developed our goals, we always kind of look at the data from the district and also in that overall state trends, because when we try to develop our goals, a district always has a goal of trying to get 95% graduation rate. And so as a school, we wanted to be aligned not only with our school in terms of that goal, but also for our department so that there's that alignment. So that everybody's kind of working towards the same thing, we can have more energy towards that.

The other thing we did is we looked at having... We did a pre and post assessment to kind of see what was important to students in terms of how did they feel about doing well in school? Was that important to them? Did they feel like their parents wanted them to do well? And how did they value success? And then we also ask deeper questions about did they feel like their teachers treated them with respect and that they had opportunities to feel like they belonged and that they were comfortable in the school because those are the things that we wanted to make sure that we looked at as a department and also, where appropriate, pass that onto our overall schools so that we could make those improvements. And so that's why some of the questions on there were list items that would be more successful for them in school. And some of them wrote down about having access to the internet, having access to employment, but we're kind of excited this year to try to do it in a series because one of the things we know that, one day Summit is not going to take care of everything and we want be able to have things throughout the year.

So our first series this year it was to talk, just to kind of welcome students back and do a pulse check on how they're feeling in the midst of the pandemic. And then we had someone from, because North Carolina as a Countdown to College application week, where different schools get fee waivers for that. And so we made sure that students knew about that. And so our next thing, we will kind of have some of these community groups to talk to students and so that each time we're building on, and we were also talking to them about time management and study skills and things. So we're hoping that having the series over the whole year will be valuable to them as well. I have the opportunity, which is one of my favorite things at my current school, we have what's called a National Achievers Society, and the majority of students that are in it are students who are students of color. And they have the opportunity in their 10th grade year to be inducted, and they have to have like a 3.0 GPA.

And what has come of that is some students who, we have them write an essay, and a lot of the students shared with us too, that they didn't feel like they had a way to be recognized for what they were trying to do on campus. And so what we do is challenge them through this club to pursue more rigorous coursework. If they've just been taking academic level work, we challenge them to pursue honors or AP, or even for the International Baccalaureate program and students have done that. And other students have come back from college to talk to them about the importance of pursuing rigor. And that has helped us to close some gaps too, in terms of some of our students of color pursuing rigorous coursework. So a lot of these different things have come out of just being intentional about working with different student populations.

And that has been a real joy to see the students, not only getting more excited about academics and seeing that Xavier or someone is doing this, then I know that I can do it too. And that has really created a lot of systemic change on our campus because now a lot of the students who are in the Honors Society have gone on because we challenged them to say, Hey, a 3.0 is just this threshold, but we want you to be in National Honor Society, we want you to be involved in the life of the campus, and they have taken that and run with it. And one of the things that the group has done is that they developed a peer tutoring program. One of our other advisors is a teacher and the student worked and has organized a collaborative with the National Honor Society and they're doing tutoring as an advisor.

We sit in and kind of observe just to make sure that nothing is being said off the wall or anything, and it was just amazing how students are saying, wow, having my peer available to work with me, explaining concepts, how it makes such a difference. And I've seen so much growth in some of the students that I was like, wow, you are a really good teacher. And that's like, I wish you were around when I was in school. And so they're reaching back and helping others. And I know some [inaudible 00:27:56] when we've had inductions they said, I know I've been encouraging such and such and they should have that 3.0 so they can get into this. And sure enough, we look and we're like, yes, they can definitely be inducted, but it has been great.

Jen Walsh: We'll hear more from Vanessa in just a moment, but for now a quick word from one of our sponsors, myOptions. As the nation's largest free college and career planning program, myOptions is thrilled to celebrate your work, shaping the future of young people. They're here to help you blaze innovative approaches to counseling. That's why myOptions has launched 21st century planning and mentoring apps at no cost for every student, parent and school counselor. Use their tools to build college lists, find scholarships, track progress, and manage applications all in one place, check them out myoptions.org. We're now back with Vanessa.

Jen Walsh: You talked a little bit about how you've had to adapt your various programs for the virtual setting.

Vanessa Goodman...: We haven't really stopped with anything that we normally would deliver. It's just the way that we're delivering it. Google Meet is our way that we can meet and that has been great source. What we've done, for example, when we had our senior parent night, really good, because sometimes people don't want to ask questions when they're face-to-face, and we were able to, because of the chat box feature, be able to get those questions in real time. And then afterwards, we always post our presentations so that people can read and view what they weren't able to listen to it in real time. One of the things we do too is, we knew that wanted access to teachers, we also did an open house. We had different Google links again, where teachers were able to have on link that parents could come in in groups and be able to have an overview and a presentation from teachers. And we do regular parent teacher conferences, but this year, because of the pandemic we put in Google group codes, so that parents could register for an appointment to meet with their teachers one-on-one.

And we received a lot of good feedback on that because normally parents are running from one classroom to the other and they can just go for one link to the other and have a face-to-face conversation with their child's teacher about how the child was doing. And so I was nervous setting all of that up, but it ended up working really well. The other thing that we have done in our office, our counseling staff, we have something called QuAC and it's called quick academic counseling. During real time, we used to sit at a table near the lunch room, so that students can come and ask anything about careers, other counseling issues, they might want to know about their GPA, or what is a GPA, anything that may come up. We would just be out there where they are. And so we were trying to mimic that during this current remote running time and what we decided to have time during what's their lunchtime, where they can still log in and be able to talk to us.

Jen Walsh: That's fantastic. Yeah. Being visible, it sounds like, is critical.

Vanessa Goodman...: Yeah, I'm just going to mention too that with the Instagram and the Twitter, those have been other ways that we have involved students because they are there and amazingly, they have responded to some more of our prompts and things through Instagram than what we've had in the past. So just trying to [inaudible 00:31:35] and put out information any way we can so that they can access and that that's been the main thing.

Jen Walsh: I always love a good fun acronym, so I'm intrigued by this QuAC program. When you were in person, was this something that you did every day?

Vanessa Goodman...: Yeah. Every day during lunch we have different racks of what they need, SAT prep, or they need information ACAA, or information about registration and anything that might be a hot topic. We have that information where we can hand that to them, during that time period. Sometimes seniors want to know if their class rank and GPA has been updated. It would be really cute because sometimes students will sit down with us at the table and talk about different things that they might even have going on and if it's something that comes up that needs a little bit more attention, we would've then lead them to the office, but if it's just what they're thinking about for their career or what they want to take next year for their classes, it was a great opportunity to be visible. And that's something that I try to do a lot that students know that we're here to help them to have an impact and be there for them.

Jen Walsh: Yeah. And form that relationship, I think it sounds like that's such a great opportunity to do that. You just are doing such amazing stuff. Can you share a story of you impacting a student or a student impacting you that's really stuck with you throughout the years?

Vanessa Goodman...: He was one of those students, at first, when I met him I'm like, my goodness, can you talk about something else besides sports? He was a really good student, but for some reason he didn't do well on a particular subject and ended up having to not play his desired sport that particular year because he had to make up time in a class in order to be promoted. And at first, he was devastated. And I said, we've got to definitely make some lemonade out of this. And he got his credit for the class that he had missed, and then he went on to get a scholarship, believe it or not, and he was accepted to all of the schools because we wrote a letter about where he was and that he recaptured that credit and he didn't end up, like I said, playing the sport that he loved, but he ended up getting a scholarship. And now he's an administrator, and he ended up going back to school at first for counseling too, but he ended up going into higher ed.

But to know that he is still doing counseling on some level, really impacted me a great deal. And he's doing a lot of work to help other students and that sort of like paying it forward. And I'm just really proud of his success. It's hard to tell in a story in just a few minutes, of what he went through, but you can imagine when someone has a passion and that passion is taken from them, it could have gone either way. He could have lost total interest in school, but hate to use a cliche, but he really made good out of that experience. It just made you realize, I'm just thankful that this career found me because it's definitely the toughest job that I've ever loved because there's so many students that you have to sit down with. That's the great dynamic of what we do in schools. And it's not just me, there's counselors all over that are doing really great things just like that.

Jen Walsh: I love what you said about taking lemons and making lemonade because really that's what school counselors do on a daily basis. So what gives you hope today?

Vanessa Goodman...: I mean, the students are my inspiration. Particularly as hard as this pandemic has been, I have seen students who have so much resilience. And it may sound frivolous, but they didn't get a prom last year, or they're not here on campus with their friends and in front of their teachers as they would want to be. But like I mentioned, the peer tutoring program, how they're looking out not only for themselves, but each other, how they're coming to the faculty and administration and saying, "Hey, we need to have some opportunities to have some type of expression," because some of the things that they're experiencing.

I have hope in terms of how they're not just looking at themselves, but they're looking at the greater community and I'm like, if that can be a ripple effect coming out of this pandemic, that the young people are looking more so at how they can make an impact, not just for themselves, but for the whole community, that gives them the hope that our world is going to definitely be in a better place with the leadership, I see the efforts towards social justice and equity that students are learning how to have a voice and have that more effectively than they have in the past. That gives me a lot of hope that when this career is done, that these students will continue to take up the mantle, continue to make our world a better place. It's not a lost generation.

I have a lot of hope for the future based on what I'm seeing students doing. I know what my students are doing here, but I see it in the community where I live and where I work, and also across the country, we're seeing different things on the news about what young people are doing and the causes that they're taking up. It gives me a lot of hope for the future. And that's why I love this profession because of the young people. They keep us inspired, they keep us on our toes, and they keep us forever changing, and making sure that we're keeping an open mind and being able to respond to their ever-changing moods and what they want.

Jen Walsh: Thank you so much, Vanessa, for joining us today and thank you all for listening. This has been, I Hear You Say, a podcast from the American School Counselor Association. We hope to have you back for our next episode, but until then be sure to check out our website, schoolcounselor.org for school counseling resources. Also, we'd love to engage with you on all of our social media platforms. Find us on Facebook at the American School Counselor Association, Twitter at ASCAtweets and Instagram at WeAreASCA. Thanks and hear from you soon. I'm Jen Walsh. And this has been, I Hear You Say.