

Bluum Together: Episode 5- Creating Connection and Belonging with Kelly Gonser

Intro:

Welcome to *Bluum Together* – the podcast where we cultivate education leadership, innovation, and impact one conversation at a time. Join us as we learn from visionary leaders, share inspiring stories, and uncover strategies that drive meaningful change in K-12 education.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Greetings and good day once again podcast listeners. We're right back here at Timberline High School. Kind of like part two of the Wolf Connection program – had a great conversation with students. Now we get to talk to the master of the Wolf Connection Program, Mr. Kelly Gonser. Kelly, thanks for joining us for this episode of *Bluum Together* and our podcast series on supporting mental health in schools. Share a little bit about your background; Kelly and I go way back, but I'll let him share a little bit about himself and the program and we'll try to avoid our conversations from going into fly-fishing, which is our mutual passion.

KELLY GONSER:

[laughing]

MIKE CALDWELL:

Kelly, thanks for joining me.

KELLY GONSER:

Absolutely. Thank you, Mike. I really appreciate you asking me. My name is Kelly Gonser and I've been an educator in the Boise School District for 29 years. I started my career as a Junior High teacher for six years that rolled into being a Guidance Counselor for seven, and then mostly because of the Wolf Connection Program, but also just really missing the classroom, I then went from counseling back to teaching. Which I know for some, they might think that that's a little weird you would go back to teaching, but I just always found that where I belong to be. It's a passion of mine.

MIKE CALDWELL:

That's why we get into it. It's the passion and being around kids. I certainly miss that. It was always a treat to have the opportunity to interview those kids, it was great – Mason, Olivia, and Rian. Great, great kids. They talked a little bit about Wolf Connection from their perspective and how the program goes, and what the program is, and they just spoke so highly about you

and the program. They were great. Let's see how aligned you are. Tell us about the Wolf Connection Program and maybe a little history on where it came from.

KELLY GONSER:

[chuckles] So, this program started in 2002 and it was a byproduct of a program called Challenge Day that was at the time being instrumented into the Boise School District specifically at the secondary level. Just to kind of give a nuts and bolts of what that was about, we kind of were, definitely at least early on in my counseling career, was definitely realizing that counselors, teachers, and administrators, are very limited in having an impact with regard to some of the negative things in school – bullying, drugs, and, alcohol and mental health issues in general. Very early on in my counseling career, I wanted to look for some opportunities for mentoring. I know that there are a lot of great kids that come through the high school system and many of those great kids are often not identified or we see the potential for them to have an impact. They themselves don't realize the impact that they can have on their peers. We started up the program in 2002, a few years later, as many things in education kind of come and go, the Challenge Day Program was no longer, but we were seeing so much value in the Wolf Connection Program with the mentoring that we were doing, specifically with my leadership kids and the incoming sophomores. We were also seeing an opportunity for some leadership in the community. We never stopped. The Challenge Day Program went away - it's still around today - but it's not within our district. I wanted to keep this a part of our school, it was something that had a deeper level of meaning than anything I had ever experienced in my teaching career, or counseling career for that matter. With that said, we ran the program all the way up until 2007. It was at that point that we qualified as an Elective class and I really wanted to be part of this. You combine me missing the classroom and then having something that was my baby and I wanted to be a part of it. I stepped back into teaching in 2008 and it was exactly the right decision. It just felt so good to be with these kids not just once a week or at the retreat, I was with them everyday. I just found that that was such an important piece to me being able to help give them the tools to be effective as leaders and also mentors.

MIKE CALDWELL:

What does your program do? What does it look like today? I know it's probably had its evolution. Side note: Kelly and I met in I think it was 2005-6 somewhere in there. Early 2000s, probably just after you started the Wolf Connection Program, I was an Assistant Principal at the time and we were struggling with kind of the same thing that all high schools and all schools struggle with in terms of bullying and kids just not feeling connected and all those types of things. I learned about your program, met with you, and we ended up adopting a very similar program with Bishop Kelly that we ran for 20 or so years, for a long time. It's had its different

evolutions but I'm a big fan of the program but it evolved over time. I'm curious on where you're at today and what it looks like.

KELLY GONSER:

21 years – it's amazing to reflect back on all the different things we've tried and some have stuck some haven't. Now, at this particular point, one thing that was always consistent from year one is we sat down and created a motto, a goals and visions of what we wanted the program to be. Our motto is 'Challenge Yourself, Change Your World,' and that motto was kind of a byproduct of 'Be the Change You Wish to See in the World.' I had asked the kids if they had just wanted to use Ghandi's quote but they said 'No, we want our own,'. That's what they came up with. The way the program works is it's very, very introspective of the leaders themselves. I tell the kids that their number one and most important leadership project of the year is themselves. I want them to look at what their strengths are, their weaknesses, and then how can we work on not only the weaknesses, but increase the strengths. We do a lot of things in the first quarter that are really built around their own development and growth.

MIKE CALDWELL:

[buzzing sound] Is that your bell?

KELLY GONSER:

That's my bell.

BOTH:

[both laughing]

MIKE CALDWELL:

I was like oh, that's a different type of bell. We're in between classes here.

KELLY GONSER:

The first quarter is all about us taking a look at their strengths, their weaknesses. We go to ropes courses over at CSI, which is the biggest ropes course outside of the Mississippi River. Kids are put into a lot of situations where they have to step out of their comfort zone. The analogy that we tell them is that we don't want them to be in the Panic Zone, but we don't want them to be in the Comfort Zone. We want them in what we call the Growth Zone. The ropes course is a great example of that. We then go on a two and a half day retreat where the kids really get to know one another more on a personal level, but we also realize something at the end of that retreat. That is a very important that we try to spread that back into our school and that is that every single person walking this earth is going through something and we don't

stop to take that into consideration because we see somebody and we look at them from the outside and we see maybe what grades they do, what sports they play, and we just kind of assume they got it all together. That's kind of the montage for a lot of high school kids is you just act like you got it all together. The reality is everybody's got some type of struggle. They realize that within their first quarter together and then they take that knowledge then into the different projects that they do. We've got lunch buddies next door with White Pine third graders. Every other Wednesday, you'll find them out eating lunch with third graders and then going out. I call it *Mentoring On the Go* because they are literally on the go playing with the kids but also trying to teach them some social skills cause as well all know, third graders don't always play nice and share. It's a great way for them to let their little kid out because high school kids are under so much stress. They don't realize it at first but I actually tell them they are going to learn just as much from these little third graders as they will from you. Another project that we take on directly within our school is our Fortified Mentoring Program and that is bringing on board roughly about 30 more other sophomores and I'll assign two or three of my leadership kids to two or three of the sophomores and they kind of have that big brother, big sister role model that they can talk about some of the realities of high school. Also, with the idea of Fortified being to strengthen themselves so they do a lot of introspective things that they do with the kids throughout the first quarter. They do that throughout the year. Our Fortified kids are also *Our Sources of Strength* peer leaders. *Sources of Strength Program*, many schools in Idaho have adopted just looking at what are different sources of strength that you can turn to in times of need when maybe mental health issues are kinda start to kick in or they're just feeling really down. What are some things that we can turn into? The sophomores that are involved in that, they are then trained up to be peer leaders for that. I guess the Fortified Program is a Junior Wolf Connection, if you would. Many of the kids that participate in Fortified will then try to get in next year for Wolf Connection. Our other big project that we do would be our community projects. That is, every since 2005, we have been going out to various retirement centers and nursing homes. Primarily, the last few years, we just focused on Boise Senior Center, and we call the program *Adopt a High School Student*. Starting in November, I will send my kids to the Boise Senior Center, they then will be grouped up with three or four seniors, and then I'll have four to five of my kids that meet all together and they just talk about what are some of the differences in generations? What are some of the words of wisdom that seniors have for them? Then my kids bestow a lot of wisdom on them as well. The seniors just love it. It's definitely one of the highlights of their year. For my kids, they love, love each time they go to the Boise Senior Center. We do that for roughly about three months and then as a celebration of the entire experience, we throw what we call a Senior Citizen Prom. We have an average of 88 to 100 senior citizens that are out there just busting a move the best they can and we have people that are sometimes in walkers. We've had some nursing homes that will bring some of the people out in wheelchairs and we'll get them out on the dance floor. I always

forewarn my leadership kids, 'Hey let's be careful of the people in the wheelchair.' The goal is to have a good time, not send them to the hospital. [laughing]

MIKE CALDWELL:

How is that received from the participants of the senior citizen home and what do they say about that?

KELLY GONSER:

I'll tell a quick story and it shows the evolution of how far this has come. The first year we did the prom, the kids did a great job but they didn't know a whole lot about the advertising and marketing scheme. Plus, our visits were pretty limited, I should say. At our actual first senior citizenship prom, we only had 35 seniors show up and the kids were devastated. They wanted the big numbers that they were hoping for. I told the kids the next day when we came back, you guys did a really great thing and they're just like 'Oh, not near as many seniors showed up,' and I was like 'Let me tell you guys a story.' This lady that I had met and seen earlier in some of the visits, her name was Ruth, she came up to me and sat down and was like 'I don't understand what is this?' and I was like 'Excuse me,' and she's like 'What are you guys doing? Why are you guys doing this for us?' and I was like, "This was the idea of the kids.' And it really was organic. Jerry Hendershot, the teacher of the class at the time, had kind of thrown out some possible ideas and the kids were like, 'We want senior visits. We want to throw a prom.' She looked at me and she said, 'You know, I have not been on a dance floor since my husband passed. This is probably one of my most favorite memories since my husband passed. Another thing that you need to tell your kids is that my last prom was with my husband who I met in high school.' And she's like 'This experience made all the difference in the world. Also tell the young man that I danced with that I swore to my husband that I'd never dance with another man and he got another dance.' When I told that story, of course I'm telling the story with tears in my eyes as I tell that to the kids, it kind of dawned on them that 'Ok, maybe it wasn't about the 35 people. Maybe it was about the impact that we had.' We often come back to that idea, if we can get a full house that's awesome. Ever since year one, we've averaged between 80 to 100 seniors. We always get the numbers, but it's the stories that we remember. The letters of gratitude that I might get from the Activities Director saying 'You have no idea how this touched the lives of our seniors,' and then sharing that back with the kids and realizing this idea of impact that they're having.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Yeah, that's awesome. You don't normally hear something like that as a program element of what's happening in high school. I think that's pretty unique. I'm curious – why do you think that matters? Why is that? How do you think that impacts the kids that you're working with?

KELLY GONSER:

I think it really comes back to, and it's part of the name of our program. I am a firm believer that one of the biggest solutions to any and all ailments in the world is connection and being able to offer the opportunity up, whether it be to a third grader or to a 69 year old or whoever. It kind of starts first with the group of kids. I share with them the idea that they are first going to connect with one another. They are going to get to know one another really, really well. We use the analogy of 'This is going to be a family for you.' You're going to have a bunch of adopted brothers and sisters. Then, once we connect with one another, I'm going to ask you to do the same with your third graders at Pine, with your senior citizens, with your sophomores in Fortified, and we just always come back to the idea that the problem in the world is not a lack of people. We have so many, we have billions of people in this world, but the problem in this world is a lack of connection.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Well said. When I was talking to the students earlier, we talked about the program, and I said I want you to be real with me and I said have you guys heard of the Iceberg Analogy? And they said, 'Oh, yeah. I see the poster behind you.' And I was like 'Of course they have.' A big part of that is the opportunity to be real and authentic and to build those connections and relationships. Is to be in an environment that fosters or supports students being able to kind of drop that waterline of who they really are as opposed to 'Oh, I'm in the newspaper or I'm on the track team or the basketball team.' No, who are you really? That kind of builds that connection. So much of what we are talking about is that sense of belonging that we all strive for. It's not unique to adolescents or kids. We all as human beings want to feel wherever we're at we have that sense of belonging. It sounds like this program that you have here is really starting first within your classes that they really do that. How important is it today in allowing or giving students that sense of belonging and how do you think about that in terms of your approach with the kids that you work with.

KELLY GONSER:

I think it's a human need that like you said – everybody wants it, everybody needs it. I think that we turn to a lot of different things in search of it. If you look at the current state of technology, we're looking to this particular device to have connection. You've actually heard certain companies use that as this is the way to connect to the world; this is the way to connect to your loved ones. There's nothing wrong with technology. If anyone in the school system today is seeing a major shift in that being there is a device in their hands that's much more interesting than what the teacher may have to offer in front of the room. It doesn't change the need. The kids are just as in need of love and affirmation and connection as you and I were in high school

and our parents were before us. That has not changed and will not change. What has changed is the game. The technology that's out there is giving kids the idea that if they can just find this perfect search on Google or make this perfect post on social media or whatever. I tell my kids kind of like this – I look at kids that are on their phone all the time. It's almost like as their sitting there doing whatever their doing, texting or making a post, it's almost like this imaginary image of a cloud pops above their head and to me and it's like instead of what they're doing, what they don't realize is their sitting there and going 'I am desperately trying to connect in some way, fashion. I wish I knew what I was doing but I can't find it and I'm going to keep searching,' and they'll never find it on their phone. Human interaction, just having a conversation, just telling somebody about their day and interactions. I tell my kids as they walk in and drop off the phone in the phone caddy, I want you to sit down and whoever you're sitting next to, engage with them. Talk to them. Ask them how they're feeling, how they're doing because it's like we've been so trained through technology to not do that anymore. Those little nuances of maybe we have one minute before the bell rings, or five minutes before this conference starts, that we miss the opportunity to have these great conversations that once we jump in, we're all about it.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Yesterday we had a conversation with Dr. Megan Smith at Boise State who does a lot of research and data gathering for us on behalf of schools to identify and pinpointing where are some issues around the mental health focus. She said across the board the two main things that often come up the most are social isolation and high stress, specifically with adolescents. I asked your students, why is that? Without prompting a split second later, one of the students really jumped on that technology is a huge barrier for that social connection and it creates more isolation. They also recognized specifically in your class and one or two others that they have that those teachers that really make it a priority to put those phones away and force them to have that engagement, is for them some of the most enjoyable classes because it gives them a break from that and forces them to have those connections. We find ourselves oftentimes as educators fighting against that. I haven't been in the classroom for a while but I know that that is a challenge for educators. It's a fight but what I hear at the same time from the students is that they actually hunger for it. They're going to fight for it but at the same time, they really recognize that they need that, so kudos to you. Belonging is really important and obviously this program is a huge part of that to make those connections. It's not easy. What are some of the challenges you find in doing this and helping to build those connections through your program or even just observations as an educator? What are some of the biggest challenges that you face to create that sense of belonging with your students?

KELLY GONSER:

It really kind of boils back to, I am going to go beyond technology, to just look at societal expectations. We are kind of growing up under but also ones that we're witnessing. There are quite a few contractions that I think society tells us that I'm trying to actually say no. That's actually not. Growing up in high school, I was very competitive and I used sports as a motivator for lots of aspects of my life. I think we have gotten in our society, we've gotten into this very competitive nature with ideas of like 'No, my idea is correct. Yours is wrong.' And there's no gray. There is no dialogue, there's no healthy conflict or debate type of thing. That is kind of one of those many things where I really try to break down those barriers with my kids to say look, I am going to show you a different model here. It is okay to disagree, it is okay to have a different idea. If your idea that you present to the class or your team doesn't end up working out simply because you guys realize there was a better idea that was out there, that's a great thing. That means that these are skills that you definitely need to be able to have. I also tell them that as I am teaching you these skills, I'm asking you to do these skills, I realize you have a lot of models out there in the real world that we have very important people, very important positions that are not following the model of conflict that I ask from you guys and they're not following the idea of being open minded and having a paradigm shift when a paradigm shift is needed. That can be a huge barrier. Your schools are definitely a microcosm for society. Whatever is popular, whatever is kind of the fashion, or whatever is the trend, that then rolls itself out into the school system. While kids want affirmation, kids want to feel belonged, if you look at their social media posts and some of the things that are out there in the internet world, it's about you're either number one or you're a loser. You don't need affirmation, you don't need love and oftentimes the messages on social media are the exact opposite. Let's put someone down, let's put something down. The kids get trained that that is the way you do something. When you're talking with your best friend, instead of talking about how much you appreciate them or appreciate their acts of kindness or something, you do just the opposite. You sit there and put them down and degrade them because that's what friends do. It really does become a matter of whether we need to have kids in a leadership position like this model this. They are. They're modeling it on a daily basis and then their friends are sitting there watching them doing something like 'Yeah, I wanted to say that,' but they were the ones willing to step up. So it does become kind of that peer pressure in a positive way.

MIKE CALDWELL:

I think that with certain aspects of your program too, with working with your third graders and even working with the elderly, I think there is also this message of when you have an opportunity to give back and build someone else up whether it's community service, there is a lot of internal reward in that and that hopefully feeds the student's you're working with to help them realize it's not just me and I can be fed by supporting and helping other students. I feel like what you're doing in your program helps foster that as well. Very cool. Not every

school has a Kelly Gonser. Not every school has a Wolf Connection Program. There's a lot of schools that are listening to this. There's a lot of school leaders, maybe within a school or outside a school that have influence, what are some things that you feel that about any school could do today or within a reasonable short period of time to really make a difference on zeroing in on the connection, a sense of belonging? What is your advice based on your experience and working with kids that you think others should hear?

KELLY GONSER:

I think anyone, from a first year teacher to a seasoned veteran of 30 years, anyone that has been in education long enough knows what is really truly meaningful and what the kids need. The teachers who are on the front line everyday, they know what the issues are in education maybe the first to say these are the problems. They'd also be the ones to tell you what the solution is and – and the solution is an opportunity for these kids to be able to be put in meaningful, tangible things that are going to make a difference in their life. There's so many things that we go through in our education system that we're not going to remember. We have a job to do as far as teaching the curriculum. It's the life skills. That's what I hear time and time again from the kids that come back to me from leadership saying 'I just so appreciate you teaching me how to communicate, have a conversation and communicate with my significant other,' or whatever that was. I think that we are at a point where we are starting to look a little bit out of the box of what is leadership. There's many opportunities, pretty much every school has some sort of leadership program. Be it student counselor, whatever. Those schools that don't are an exception. We have Student Connection and we have Wolf Connection which I believe both programs are so important. I had a teacher from Capital High School in the Boise School District come to me and she's actually looking to start up a leadership program that's more about what I'm doing here to look at school culture, to look at the community. I think Student Council is oftentimes kind of locked into history and the tradition of what they've always done. I think that Student Council's can have this type of impact. I think that schools that have some very passionate teachers that have a really good rapport with students and definitely can see the need for some of the things that kids need, I think that those teachers are the ones that could say 'Hey, why don't we start up a second leadership program?' If the student council is locked into all the history stuff and all the traditional stuff that they've always done, then there's no change for any type of impact. But if you can open it up and say 'Let's start up a second leadership program.' One of the forefront topics that is being thrown around all across the nation and all across the world is mental health. I am seeing some paradigm shifts by districts and by even legislature that we're starting to recognize – we have to do something here. One of the things that they, one of the best pieces of advice that I can give is give this back to the kids. Kids need structure. Kids are going to need a mentor and guidance, some guidance in and of themselves. It amazes me how we put so much money into research and

have experts, I'll put quotations around that word, come into our schools to say these are the problems and this is what you need to do. Our experts are sitting in the classroom. Our experts are students. Our experts, you go ask them as you did 'Hey, what are the issues that you're faced with?' They are this. And what are the solutions? And they have some really great ideas for solutions. That probably one of the biggest benefits that any school can be thinking about is offering maybe a different kind of leadership. That's the power that you have within that program is to have real impact with your students. I think that's what every school wants but they just sometimes forget that the experts are sitting right in the classrooms everyday.

MIKE CALDWELL:

And our students want to be asked those questions and that came up in a conversation recently with Dr. Smith. It came up even with the conversations with students today is they want to be asked and they're willing to share and they want to share their ideas and thoughts on this. You're right. I think if you're not bringing them to the table at some place and thinking about how to make your school a better environment for all of your students without asking your students, I think you're making a mistake. I agree with that — there's a lot of power in the student voice. While we're talking the lights went off.

KELLY GONSER:

Yeah, it's a light sensor.

MIKE CALDWELL:

We haven't been moving for a while. Well, as we wrap up, Kelly, anything else that maybe I didn't ask that I should have or anything that you would like to share before we close this out?

KELLY GOSNER:

I guess I am just going to look back on my career with all these memories of each of my leadership classes. I paint a really pretty picture of all the wonderful, amazing things that this program has done. I'm not exaggerating — it has been amazing. Not every single year is a perfect fit. We have some struggles and it's actually in some of those years where some of my kids have some conflict and they struggle with maybe a particular aspect of the leadership program, I think that's the opportunity for growth. I actually look forward to it. When things are going super easy and simple for a long time, I'm like you're just going to get stagnant. There have been some years where we've had to go through a lot of stuff, but then we got to the end of the experience. I always feel the same about these kids at the end of the year no matter what. But those particular years that we had to go through some extra struggles, they are the extra rewarding ones but it definitely does require one to be looking at education in a different

way. This is not your traditional thing that we do. Yes, anyone that's in the business would say yeah, but this is what we should be doing more of.

MIKE CALDWELL:

Yep. Absolutely. Well said and kudos to you and your school leadership and your students for doing the work that you're doing. It's not easy, it takes a lot of passion and care and compassion for what you're doing and it makes a difference. So kudos to you and thanks Kelly for being a part of this and thank you to all our listeners that are listening today. Hopefully this has been a valuable conversation to add to our overall topic of how we support student's mental health in our schools today. With that, we'll close out. Thanks and we'll see you next time.

Outro:

Thank you for joining us to explore education leadership, innovation, and impact here on Bluum Together. We encourage you to continue these dialogues in your work communities, classrooms, and organizations. Be sure to visit [Bluum.org/together](https://bluum.org/together) where you can discover more episodes. Or you can click Join the Conversation if you'd like to be a guest. Until next time, keep learning, keep bluuming, and keep making an impact one conversation at a time.