

Music

Introduction

Aisaiah (0:12)

Welcome to episode one of our podcast, your guide to unlocking resources and opportunities in East Central Illinois. I'm Aisaiah and alongside me is Harshitha, your hosts on this journey.

First off, we'll show you some cool things happening in our community. Think of it as a bunch of resources, programs, and projects that can make a real difference in your life. Then we've got some amazing stories to share. Real people just like you and me who have had their lives changed by these programs we're talking about. And don't worry, we're not going to leave you hanging. We will also give you some tips on how you can get in on these opportunities and make them work for you.

Today, Jessica Black is part of the main focus. She's here to help us tell a bigger story to show you what's possible for anyone in our community. In addition, she's a graduate of the Odyssey Project at the University of Illinois, a program we'll dive deeper into this episode, so get ready for her journey with us.

We're here to connect you with exciting opportunities, share stories for people just like you, and give you the information necessary to show you how you can be a part of it all. So, let's dive in.

Harshitha (1:16)

Hello Jessica, it's so nice to have you with us today.

Jessica Black (1:20)

Hi, Harshitha. How are you? Thank you for having me. I'm really excited to be here.

Harshitha (1:24)

I'm great. This past Tuesday was Halloween, so did you have any costumes, any plans?

Jessica Black (1:31)

Yeah, so Tuesday, I handed out candy to trick or treaters—all five of them in total. It was very cold so . . .

But on Saturday we had our Halloween party, and I dressed up as a witch. My husband dressed up as a plague doctor. It was a really good time. We love the spooky season. And yeah, it was fantastic.

Harshitha (1:51)

Awesome, that's so great to hear. We're really happy to have you with us today. And now, could you share a bit more about yourself?

Jessica Black (1:58)

I absolutely can. Thank you so much! So, as you've said, my name is Jessica Black. I am an East Central Illinois native. I went K through 12 at the same school here in Mahomet and then moved away to Grand Rapids for about 8 years and came back. I am a graduate of Parkland College with

my associates from there, and I am also currently enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Work program here at UIUC (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign).

I am formerly a case manager with both Cunningham Township and Planned Parenthood, as you said. So, I've worked with education and employment, and also gender affirming care rights through Planned Parenthood. I have a background in community organizing and activism and just have a general interest in bringing people together, especially for social justice driven things like community building, as well.

Aisaiah (2:52)

Oh wow. Thank you for your insights. I just wanted to follow up and ask if you could share any resources that local members of the community can tap into.

Jessica Black (3:03)

Yeah, no, that's fantastic. So, Cunningham Township's education and employment track of their general assistance [program] basically helps folks get workforce readiness through volunteer hours at the Salt & Light in Urbana. And they also have an education track, which is the one that I created. You can do regular Parkland Classes, or Parkland SWFT Classes, which I will definitely talk a little bit more about here in a second. But it's a really good way to get paid while you go to school, like a little stipend every month just to kind of help. And people that, like, maybe they want to go, like, get a different career. [Maybe] they're experiencing like unhousedness right now. You know, they can be on that [program] and actually get paid to go to school. So, that part is really cool.

Some other programs in the Champaign-Urbana area [and] Champaign County area that I would recommend: I mentioned Parkland SWFT. They have workforce training initiatives, and they're such a cool program. They also have a stipend, which is a lot more than Cunningham Township pays, and they have CDL training, they have CNA training, [and] they have forklift certification.

One of my participants at Township was one of my—I affectionately refer to them as my grumpy old men. And one of my absolute favorite clients, he went through the SWFT forklift program and ended up getting his certification. And I think for him, it was not only did he learn a new skill, but he had a sense of community because he was kind of, like, not as social of a person. So, he got out and he met people and that, like myself with us, was a really wonderful benefit of that program for him. So, I have seen people personally go through that [program] that have had like really great success with it. The Parkland team is really passionate about outreach—about, like, workforce training—because right now we don't have enough like people going into nontraditional education routes and learning skills and trades and different things like that.

A couple of other ones that I would recommend: Parkland has a CNA course, in addition to Urbana Adult Ed having a CNA course in their, I think, like one-semester programs. I might be wrong about that, let me just flag that. But I think they're one-semester programs, so it's relatively quick turnaround for a higher paying job. And then, also from that CNA, you can springboard at Parkland to like LPN or even RN programs. So that's really fantastic, as well, and I really love those programs.

And then, the last program that I will also touch on that isn't going to be for, like, necessarily everyone, but for folks that need it: Parkland does have the Read Program. They meet at the library,

and they teach not only ESL, but also literacy to adults. And I actually had another participant at Township who had been incarcerated multiple times. He never learned to read. This aggravated his ability to get a job, because he wasn't necessarily at the same skill set as everyone else. And he went to the Parkland Read program and the UFL—the Urbana Free Library—is right across the street from Township. And he would come to me every Monday afterwards and show me the words that he had learned to write and the words that he had learned to read. And I also knew his mom. His mom was really proud of what he was doing there. And he was really proud of what he's doing there. And he has stayed out of incarceration for a year now.

I think like having things like the Parkland Read program to go to, again, you have that sense of community, and you also have that sense of accomplishment. And I'm not sure when the last time he felt a sense of accomplishment from education was, but you could see the impact on his face, on his mom's face, and the smiles that were on them. And I will always take the time to highlight that program if I can, because it's fantastic.

Aisaiah (7:18)

Wow, I just want to say that was a very heartwarming story. You know that must be really amazing to just, like, see the process of people within the community get into these programs and come out and see a lot of the growth. But talking about a similar program, I understand that you are a graduate of the Parkland Pathways program. Do you mind giving some background to that and your experience?

Jessica Black (7:45)

Yeah, so the Pathways Program is a dual enrollment program. I actually found out about it through the Odyssey Project. They came and talked to us in one of our classes and, like I said, its dual enrollment, so you receive credits from U of I and Parkland at the same time. There are certain tracks that you have to go on. Initially, I was going to be an urban planning major, so I was taking classes in the urban planning department—which I definitely don't regret. It was a really fun experience.

I will say it can be a lot to be dual enrolled at like two universities, and there's lots to navigate, but it was a really cool program, I think, because it does give you the opportunity to see like, “Oh, do I like these classes?” while I'm working on my associates, so I don't go in and declare a major and then have to change it up. And for me, it wasn't because I didn't like the classes, it was because they didn't have accessible class times. But I figured that out through that dual enrollment process instead of like, I don't want to say “wasting,” but spending more time than necessary sort of, like, trying to figure out those classes and everything like that. So, I also really recommend the Parkland Pathways program for anybody that knows that they're going to go from Parkland to U of I and has a track available to them.

Harshitha (9:00)

Today's episode theme is about education. Could you tell us a bit about your educational background?

Jessica Black (9:04)

Yeah! So, when I moved back to East Central Illinois, I was actually sitting in a doctor's office, believe it or not, and I saw a flyer for the Odyssey Project. It said "Free college courses through the University of Illinois." And I was like, "Wow! Really? That's kind of cool."

I hadn't tried the traditional college experience; I grew up in a really low-income household and thought that college was just, like, never going to be in the cards for me. But coming back as an adult who honestly, at the time, wasn't really doing anything with my life, I was like, "You know, let's give it a shot."

The classes are two nights a week: Mondays & Wednesdays from 5:30 to 8:30pm. They focus on humanities education. So, we did art history, we did literature, we did some U.S. history, some poetry—really well-rounded and fun courses with amazing instructors and a really excellent opportunity to dip your toes into the college experience. If you're somebody like me, who is reentering as a traditional adult learner or honestly, like, even to just get those last credits towards your bachelor's degree, it's a really fantastic option. And beyond the educational value of the Odyssey Project, I really made lasting friendships. They're very small cohorts, so, it's very intimate. You get to know your classmates, and you kind of have your own built in support system that is a little more close-knit than your traditional U of I class or even Parkland class would be. So, that's what I would say is that it's an added value to being an Odyssey alum and Odyssey member.

Harshitha (10:43)

Yeah, that's great. I can tell by your enthusiasm that this must have been a transformative experience for you. And I was wondering if you could share with us, maybe, a particular memory or a particular connection you've made or created while you were in the program.

Jessica Black (10:57)

Yeah! That's a great question; there's so many to choose from. I would say—so, I actually got my job at Cunningham Township through networking from Odyssey Project. One of the professors—shout out to Valerie O'Brien, she's fantastic—she knew somebody who worked at Township and was like, "Hey, there. They're hiring for interns. So, why don't you go and apply?" And it ended up being a three-year job for me that truly spring-boarded my career. And yeah, I still stay in touch with Valerie, we still have coffee every once in a while. I think really like the big memories are just the people, just the dinners. They give you dinner every night that you're there. You go and have dinner as a community and get to know your classmates. It's just a really—it made me feel like I was a part of something, and I think that that was part of what made the experience really beautiful.

Harshitha (11:55)

Yeah, I think that sense of belonging is something that can be overlooked, especially in an educational standpoint. Throughout your experience in the Odyssey Project, did you feel like your definition of education changed?

Jessica Black (12:10)

Yeah! One hundred percent. I mean, I was somebody who, like, frankly didn't try in high school. And I found out what a nerd I was when I went to Odyssey. I mean, I love learning and I think that learning is exciting. And that was the biggest reframe for me: education and schooling doesn't have to be

something that's a chore. It doesn't have to be something like, "Oh I have to go to class, I have to do this." That's obviously not going to be the experience, like, for every single class [or] for every single person, but I think especially with Odyssey, you look forward to going to class and you look forward to learning. I liked writing papers, which is the most random thing.

But, yeah, I think it just really reframed education from something that, I mean, we do as a society. We see this as, like, really necessary and you have to do this. But even if you have a sort of extenuating circumstance that makes you feel like you have to do it, it also can be something that you want to do. It can be something fun, and it can be something empowering that can change your life. And that reframe was really helpful.

Harshitha (13:21)

Yeah, that's great! I really loved how you worded that. And something you said that stood out to me was how your educational background, and specifically the Odyssey Project, really spring-boarded your career. So, could you tell us a bit about how your experience with the program informed your work today, and specifically your involvement with the Community Data Clinic?

Jessica Black (13:41)

Yeah, no, that's a fantastic question! Honestly, almost in every way, truly. A lot of the organizing and activism that was awakened in me was awakened through Odyssey Project, through subsequent things, and being in that community. Being a nontraditional student and coming back. I think nontraditional students can feel, like they don't have a lot of support and [it] can be really isolating. And that motivated me through my work at Cunningham Township as the education and employment case manager. I understood what these folks were going through, understood where they were, their lived experiences, and the challenges that they were facing.

And beyond that, I think, my Odyssey year was right in the middle of the pandemic. So, our second semester we went home for spring break, and we never came back. And I saw like, I was still living in a rural area at the time. Trying to do Zoom classes online and trying to do homework online was insane with that connection. And I'd already been working with the Data Clinic through Cunningham Township, doing laptop distributions and the ACP (Affordable Connectivity Program) enrollments. And I was just like, you know, we have to do something about this. We have to make sure that there's equity for people in technology, especially during the pandemic. The reality was there before the pandemic, the challenges were there before the pandemic, but it really shone a light on it. And, yeah, just being in school myself during that was hugely informative of how I interact with the community, what I'm passionate about, and where my values really ending up landing.

Harshitha (15:40)

So, something I really valued in our conversation today was how much you emphasize a sense of community and a sense of belonging, and how much of the influence that has on education. So, specifically for the Odyssey Program, can you give us any examples or tell us a little bit more about what specifically made this program so inclusive?

Jessica Black (16:02)

Oh my gosh, yes! So, with Odyssey, literally, first of all, it is inclusive by nature. You're sitting in a room of, let's say, twenty folks who are different ages, different backgrounds, different races, different everything than you, different lived experiences. I think our oldest student was in their fifties, I think our youngest student was, like, nineteen. And, so, I think just by nature, having a wide variety of people in a room, it leads to inclusivity as it is. But they're also very intentional, you know. I mentioned the dinners that you have every single night. Those are provided by the University of Illinois; they walk across the street to go have food. And, they provide transportation assistance in the form of bus tokens and different things like that. So, I think that the curriculum and the structure of the program has been very intentionally tailored to remove as many barriers as possible, because they understand that the folks in Odyssey are likely not traditional students. And they understand the unique barriers and challenges that come with being an adult learner: whether you have a full-time job, so it's outside of regular work hours, or you have children, so it's in the evening hours where you can, you know, find a babysitter or a family member for the child to be with.

I just think that, again, the intentionality of the design of the program leads to inclusivity. Also one thing I guess I didn't mention: they give you your notebooks, your pens, your folders. I mean, they're asking the students to do nothing but learn. So, again, just removing as many barriers as they possibly can, and fostering an environment where there's no—I know everyone says, “There's no there's no stupid questions, there's no anything.” And I think a lot of people don't mean that. But they're so happy to explore anyone's ideas on anything and to go with those trains of thoughts. And I know the instructors like to say that they learn just as much from the students as the students do from them. And I think that it's a testament to the inclusivity and to the nature and the structure of the program.

Harshitha (18:24)

I really liked what you said about the idea that people say there are no stupid questions, but sometimes, more traditional classes can feel so structured to the point where you're like, “Am I really learning or am I just listening to this person speak to me?” So, can you tell us a little bit about the structure of the classes or the curriculum, and what particularly made it feel that way, where you were actually interacting with the information rather than just receiving it?

Jessica Black (18:52)

That's fantastic. No, so, I think that you're completely right. Sitting in a traditional college class, you're like, “This professor is talking at me, and I am not intaking this.” Sometimes, that's not always the experience. So, I will say with Odyssey, so they break it into two semesters, and each night has a different class. So, you would, say, do art history and literature: art history on Monday, literature on Wednesday. And then you would do creative writing the back half of every class. So, one, there's a lot of variety; you're not sitting on the same subject too long. So, I think it gives your brain like that sort of like room to flow around and not get stuck on just one topic too long. The other thing is, all the classes are discussion based. So, you have your material, you read it, the instructor would maybe give, obviously, a little bit of information, a little bit of feedback, and ask leading questions. But, largely, these classes are going to be comprised of people that are just having conversations about the material.

I think that there's something to be said when you can just speak what's on your mind and just sort of work through your thoughts out loud with other people in the room. The way that that allows you to grasp material is completely different than in a lecture hall where the professor is talking at you and might have some slides, right?

Yeah, the nature of how the program is structured is really set up to make you think and to make you, not only a better communicator and more thoughtful, but also able to hear, receive, and bounce ideas off of other people and help them talk it out as well. So, I think like, while you're getting a humanities education, you're also getting an education in, "How do I be a student? How do I be a better collaborator? How do I have better conversations? How do I work with people who are different than me?" So, it's really comprehensive. And I think some of those things are in the curriculum intentionally and other things come out by the nature of what the program is.

Harshitha (21:02)

Awesome. Thank you so much for sharing. So, during your time in the program, could you tell us about a particular project or assignment that you really resonated?

Jessica Black (21:12)

Yes! So, I have one that clearly stands out in my mind as my favorite. So, we were already at home, already remote with our final project, and it was a--an oral history. So, we had to find an individual and interview them about different things that were different topics that you could have talked about, like civil rights, women's rights, anything that related back to our coursework for that semester. And I chose to interview somebody who I had met doing campaign work for the Bernie Sanders campaign. And she was a woman who was born pre-ERA (Equal Rights Amendment), so she remembered when women couldn't have credit lines separate from their husband and shared some personal stories with that. But getting to know her through that and writing that was such a cool experience. I think especially, again, because of the pandemic and because we were all feeling so isolated, I was making this connection with this person and talking about their life. It was a really beautiful experience for me.

I sent it to her when I was done, and she sent it to her family and her family all really loved it. She was like, "You made me out to be so much more than I am." And I was like, "No ma'am, I did you exactly the right amount of justice."

So, it was really fun because I think the human connection aspect of it was so needed when I did that assignment.

Music

Conclusion

Aisaiah (22:50)

And that's a wrap for today's episode of the ConnectED podcast, cosponsored by the Community Data Clinic. We want to extend our deepest gratitude to all of those who have made this episode possible. We sincerely appreciate the invaluable support received from the state of Illinois Broadband Ready program, led by the Illinois department of commerce and economic opportunity;

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