



# Now on Teacher Voice

## Changing Careers

In this episode of *Teacher Voice: The Podcast*, we talk with teachers who have come to teaching after having a different career. What was it that drew these career changers to the teaching profession?

**Kirstin:** Wait, tell me again, what we are going to talk about?

**Rick:** Career changers! Teachers who had a career before teaching.

**Kirstin:** Right. We picked this because we are both career changers.

**Rick:** We are.

**Kirstin:** Welcome to this episode of Teacher Voice, where Rick and I talk to people about changing careers, and learn a lot about what people really think is important in their teaching.

**Rick:** Although I loved math and was a math teacher, I wasn't in the math business teaching students, I was in the student business teaching math.

**Kirstin:** Stay tuned.

(00:42) **Kirstin:** So I am Kirstin Milks and I am one of the editors-in-chief of *Kaleidoscope*. I also am a science teacher in Bloomington, Indiana.

**Rick:** I'm Rick Barlow, I'm an associate editor for *Kaleidoscope*, and I'm a math educator in California.

**Kirstin:** We've had this incredible opportunity to get to talk with people who changed careers to become teachers. And what we've found has surprised us.

**Rick:** Yeah, we laughed, we cried, multiple times.

(01:13) **Valentina:** I was missing people, it felt very lonely in the lab.

**Kirstin:** This is Valentina Bumbu, she's currently a curriculum specialist with the St. Louis public schools, but before that she was a Sigma Aldrich chemist, a PhD student at Washington University and then a chemistry and AP chemistry teacher in the St. Louis public schools.

So you also have a PhD in science?

**Valentina:** I do.

**Kirstin:** High five. [laughter]

And it was during the most productive year of her PhD that Valentina met somebody who changed her life.

**Valentina:** So what I ended up doing, I wanted to do something more than just sit in the lab, so I decided to volunteer in Restore Some Voice, which is an organization which helps anyone marginalized, orphans, refugees, poor students, helping with their homework. The student who was assigned to me was a refugee student from Somalia. And she couldn't read or write.

**Kirstin:** In English or her native language. And that experience working with that student shifted something for Valentina.

**Valentina:** It got to the point where I was like, I really never stood for anything, I never really fought for anything. What is it that I value? What is it that I would

like to do? If I wanted to leave a footprint, what would I fight for, if I had to choose something to fight for? And that was it. I was like, education. That was it.

**Rick:** Like Valentina, Kirstin was a scientist in a lab that decided to become a high school science teacher. Here she is explaining her reasoning for that career change.

(03:17) **Kirstin:** I knew that the work that I was doing and the research that I was making available to other people could be important down the road. So the work that I did on one really specific protein in cell division was the beginning of a drug target for cancer drugs, so the work was important. I wasn't able to see how my work directly impacted things that needed to change in the world.

I opened up the newspaper when I got home and I would try to square the things I was spending my time doing with what was happening in our state and in our nation and in our world, and I couldn't see a fast enough connection.

And the part that I didn't know that I learned later, is a big part of that for me was feeling like my work mattered to somebody. And so, although I didn't have the language for it at the time, I felt very socially isolated at the time and didn't realize it was happening.

(04:25) **Kirstin:** But feelings of social isolation aren't unique to scientists like Valentina and me. Next we'll hear from Diarra:

**Diarra:** My name is Diarra Gueye.

**Kirstin:** A former Wall Street banker who's currently working as a high school mathematics [teacher] in California.

You are finished with college, which is in a midwestern college town, and you land on Wall Street to be a banker. What's it like?

**Diarra:** As much as I said I wanted to be a banker my whole life, I've done internships there for two years and I thought I could fit but I didn't fit in. Most of my colleagues went to Harvard and Yale, Princeton and that's all they talked about, school, and the stuff they did together in undergrad and I couldn't relate to them. No one knew what my college was, people didn't really take me seriously just because I didn't go to a fancy school. So I felt very isolated, culturally as well. Growing up seeing what my dad did as a banker was very different from what I was doing. So, it didn't really make sense to me.

**Kirstin:** So, walk us through what a day is like in this part of your career trajectory. You wake up, you go to the office, what happens?

**Diarra:** So I wake up at 6. Have to be at the office by 7 when markets open. We have a morning meeting with the whole team, by 8 I grab breakfast, I sit down. You can't leave your desk because you have like 6 computer screens and everything is moving live, so anxiety levels are ...this is the first time I realized I had anxiety, because you can't really go anywhere, you go for 15 minutes and the market would have moved already. So you are constantly reading graphs and everything.

I was focused on mortgages, and it was right after the crisis. What we were doing was there were these pools of mortgages of people who did not pay their mortgage and were being foreclosed on, or their houses were being seized, so we were buying these non-performing mortgages, we called them. My job, because my job has the lowest in the group, was to read the stories. So, it would go like, Ramon had a car accident, and lost two limbs and can't pay his mortgage anymore and blah blah blah, and we took his home, like, so this is what I read all day. And let's say that you have 100 mortgages and all these people defaulted because they have accidents or something, we were trying to buy them from the banks at the lowest price because we are trying to convince them they weren't going to get paid. And then in two weeks flip it and sell it to another bank for higher.

And you know you make millions of dollars on those flips even if you buy it for 20% and then sell it for 25%, but that is what I was doing. I was reading those things, trying to use statistics to model, like, in a pool with this many people, in this part of the world, what is the percent of people that are actually going to pay back or how do we make it look attractive, how do we bid on these pools, how do we sell them back. So a lot of things were moving, and as much information you get about the pools, the more you could make an informed decision on how much to buy them for and how much you can flip them and sell them for later.

**Kirstin:** And so you are at your desk reading about people's trauma and tragedy and struggles to try to turn a profit on them.

**Diarra:** Yeah, basically.

(07:25) **Kirstin:** And so after several life changing events, Diarra left Wall Street and found herself back home in Senegal not sure what to do next. When a chance opportunity to work as a long-term substitute teacher for the four-year-olds at a local school led her to a powerful realization.

**Diarra:** Honestly, those two months were like my rebirth. I was surrounded with kids all day, we were singing songs and painting and drawing, I don't even know how to explain it. But it was just like, I had no idea of what I was

doing, this isn't in my career plans, nothing in my resume corresponds to this but this is the happiest thing I've ever done forever. And I was feeling so free and excited, it was just fun. I was helping with art and I was helping with music. In music they are pretending to sing and play things, but they can't so I'm just there [laughter].

**Kirstin:** Oh four-year-olds!

**Diarra:** It was hilarious. They are four, you get to meet their families and their siblings. I think the thing I was really missing was a community, because in my previous jobs, I was always by myself. And for the first time I am part of a school and I know the parents and the siblings. And there are like plays and things, and there are things to do afterwards and I am like, Oh my god I have a life now and I wake up with a purpose! And I was so happy. I was very sad to hear that the person who was pregnant was coming back, now [that] she had her baby. So I went to see the principal and I was like, I don't care what you have for me I really want to stay here, even if I just come to school and ring the bell every day, I want to be part of this school every day. And he was like, "Well the kids also like you." I was tutoring high school kids in math in my free time and they went and told their parents and their professors that I really helped them. And they told me they would create a position for me as a math specialist where I would support the teachers in grades 6–12 with special needs students and he gave me a contract for the whole year. I was so happy and my whole family was because they had never seen me this happy before.

(09:18) **Kirstin:** So there's this common thread that runs through all these stories that totally and completely delights Rick and me, and it's this idea that the people really matter. We are delighted and also very surprised that this theme is emerging, but in retrospect, we should not have been. Here is Rick talking about what he thinks the most important thing is that he took from his previous career.

**Rick:** I was a young Starbucks manager, and I was at a conference in Seattle, something that we did every year. And I was listening to, not Howard Schultz, but there was another Howard who was the COO of Starbucks, and he said this thing that really struck me as powerful, at the time powerful for my Starbucks context, which was, "Starbucks is not in the coffee business serving people, they are in the people business serving coffee." And it was that idea of relationships, that the relationships we have with customers are more important than the transaction of buying a coffee. So, fast forward a couple years and I found myself as a math educator, high school math educator, and quickly realized that I wasn't in the math business teaching students, I was in the student business teaching math.

I took this Starbucks thing about relationships and translated it into my classroom experience.

**Kirstin:** And it not just translated, it became the power cell of your classroom.

**Rick:** It's my guiding star in terms of my work as a teacher. My relationships with students are as important or more important than the content I am teaching them.

**Kirstin:** So why do people change careers to become teachers? Valentina felt a lack of social connection in the lab. I wanted to see a more direct impact in my work. Diarra longed for a sense of community she wasn't getting sitting behind her computer on Wall Street. And Rick felt his calling was in the people business. We left some fairly high status, high paying career paths, and we left them because we wanted to make more human connections. Learning with and from students helped us do just that, and made us better teachers.

**Rick:** It's my guiding star in terms of my work as a teacher. My relationships with students are as important or more important than the content I am teaching them.

**Rick:** In the next edition of Teacher Voice, we'll hear more stories from career changers and about how the skills that they had in their professional settings translated into skills that they now use in the classroom.

**Kirstin:** Many many thanks to our panelists for sharing their stories and experiences.

And a special thank you goes out to Brittany Franckowiak, an associate editor here at *Kaleidoscope*, who really helped us think about sharing this story.

Thank you Brittany, you are rad.

**Transcription by Kirstin Milks**



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