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>> That was Maria Bracalenti. This is the Extra Mile Podcast. And I'm your host Elyse Pipitone.

[ Music ]

A few years ago, Maria voluntarily launched a Coffee Club for students at Mohawk College. Today, the club is still going strong with Maria bringing together people who simply want to connect and to make this big world feel a little smaller. And I also found out the first rule of Coffee Club, don't eat the jelly beans.

>> I started it as a mature student Coffee Club when I was the first generation project lead and it was— I focus on having mature students come. Then after that position, I changed positions, a lot of the mature students come with a lot of the same issues that international students come. They're new to the environment. A lot of them had been out of school for years. They come alone. They don't come in groups from high school. They have sort of fears of success. They, you know—

>> And there's a lot of social isolation there—

>> Exactly.

>> — being a mature student.

>> So I thought, you know what, if that works for mature students, why don't we try it for international? And I wasn't even working in international at the time. So, that's when I was able to approach Erica Fagan and Keith Monroe and say, would you mind if I set this up? I'll volunteer my time and I'll provide the snacks and the drinks. And they were cool with it and that's how it started.

>> So there's something about international students that made you want to help?

>> Vulnerability. My biggest thing in life is I hate to feel vulnerable and I find international students often feel very vulnerable.

>> Yeah.

>> And I just wanted to sit around and say, you know what, this is a cool place to be. We can make you feel valued.

>> Are there— You've mentioned the domestic students as well as international students join, I think, for international students who have come here without home base or without a social network. If we— I can see why I can make that connections, and usually you have domestic students join. Why do the domestic students join Coffee Club?

>> So, sometimes domestic students come— where the gentleman come, he was going into a massage therapy. And he came from a very small northern town in Canada. And he had never been exposed to different cultures. So he really— And he was very shy and introverted and now he's going out to be a massage therapist. So he really wanted an opportunity to meet a diverse population and feel comfortable talking to them and socializing and getting to know them. And ironically, he thought the group had a [inaudible] and—

>> Did he give people massages?

>> Yeah. Well, we did a little bit of that. We also have in group and— But he also was a bodybuilder, so he got all the boys on some kind of protein program to build muscles. So, it worked out very well.

>> So they were tracking each other's workout?

>> Yup. And he came for this whole year like until he graduated. And he's— he met me actually a couple months ago and he said how valuable he found Coffee Club.

>> Are there other domestic students—

>> Yup. We have a lot of domestic students that popped by to see what's going on. And I think some of them have studied abroad or would like to study abroad. So they come to meet new people from countries that they may be interested in visiting.

>> So making connections that they then use for their coach later on?

>> Yes, probably. That's a good thing. Come to Coffee Club and get networking.

>> So I also know that staff used this as an opportunity to connect with students, we don't necessarily [inaudible] in other staff.

>> Yeah.

>> We don't necessarily have a lot of time to socialize and have [inaudible] with someone that we like at work or students that we connect with.

>> Yeah. We have a lot of international staff, some of the accounting staff that popped in, to visit in to Coffee Club just to see what it's about, make them feel connected to the students. So yeah, it attracts a whole group of different demographics.

>> Can you speak a little bit where I think some of the issues that international students face? If you are a Canadian, you really do not know or understand the baggage that students arrive with.

>> Right.

>> Some of them arrive on their doorstep with their literal suitcase with nowhere to stay.

>> Yup.

>> So what are some of the issues that you want to make that people aware of?

>> Exactly. So we have had students that come right off the plane with their whole life in a suitcase and arrive here at 7:30 in the morning with no place to live. So, we have to go into action and provide them with mentors that often— we have student mentors that will put them up and— until we can find them housing and we do have homestay housing for that. But a lot of the students arriving, their parent have spent a lot of money. I don't think Canadian population understands the cost for an international student to come to Canada.

>> What is the cost compared to a domestic student?

>> So, our average for one semester school only, your tuition is anywhere between 7,700 and 8,000—

>> Per semester?

>> — per semester compared to about 22, 25 for a domestic student. But when—

>> And then there is this preconception sometimes that, you know, these students are coming from rich royalty, which sometimes is the case but it— I know that it ranges for students as it would for domestic students.

>> Exactly. There's a lot of students. There are some wealthy students that it isn't an issue but many of our students come from, you know, families that have pulled their money— aunts, uncles, brothers, sisters together to send them here. And they have to show the Canadian government they can support themselves with their tuition plus years of living expenses.

>> Wow.

>> So that makes it really difficult.

>> A lot of pressure for someone—

>> Absolutely.

>> — at that age, especially.

>> Absolutely, yup. And to get here, knowing that you're the one from home that's going to the new world to, you know, to make a start and a living, it is a lot of pressure. And it's all new to a lot of them.

>> It's the expectation for a lot of students that they will be the first one there and then they'll make room for their family?

>> Yup. We find a lot of students that very hope to get permanent residency in Canada and eventually, you know, bring their families over. But there's a lot of students now that are coming that want to get educated and bring their experiences back to make their home countries better. Because they're coming

from places that are underdeveloped or that they feel they want to go back and give back to their own country. So, there's definitely a mix.

>> So, why do you go the extra mile for students?

>> I think because I want students to feel that they're being supported, that they're engaged. I get such pride of watching a student come with barriers, come with their fears and their insecurities. They come to Coffee Club or they come and meet me as an adviser and I'm able to give them a sense of security and to help support them so that they meet their goals.

>> So, is there coffee at Coffee Club?

>> That's always the major question. Yes and no. If you request coffee, I'll make it for you. However, I find that most of the participants either bring their own coffee because they prefer a Starbucks or a Tim Hortons that I cannot provide, or a lot of them actually really like juice. We drink a lot of juice. Sometimes we drink pop. We do have a coffee maker and we can make tea if students want it. But, as I said, most of our students like juice.

>> And you guys- so you have stacks-

>> Yup.

>> - things to bond over in terms of what juice and tea and coffee that people drink, what activities do you run? I know you have many games.

>> Oh, we run all sorts of games. So, every time you come to Coffee Club, it's a different experience. If there's five people, we my just sit and literally just talk to each other and enjoy each other's company. We learnt about our home lives. We learnt about our concerns. We just laugh and giggle and tell stories about the different foods we make. If it's a larger group, oftentimes we'll play fun games like Pin the Tail on the Donkey or we play board games or we makeup games. One game they love, the students that come to Coffee Club, is BeanBoozled. So, that's where it's the jelly bean that can either be a good flavour or a not nice flavour, the students love BeanBoozled. So often we play that at every Coffee Club because they ask for it.

>> So, we played BeanBoozled? I've played this game before and I got really angry at you for inviting me.

>> Yeah.

>> Tell us about the beans and why do people like eating gross thing, which is like boogers?

>> I don't know. It's a nasty game because you can't tell what you're going to get. And I think that the students want me to play all the time because I always get the yucky one and it's-

>> What's the grossest bean you've had?

>> Oh, vomit. Vomit lives with you. It's-

>> Does it get worse?

>> Yeah. Well, vomit and stinky socks are a toss up but it lives with you, like it's- The students, they have the napkin in one hand and the drink in the other for anybody that gets a bite of the gross one because they are gross.

>> Human suffering is something that we can all relate to, I guess.

>> Exactly. But what it leads to is conversations about foods from other countries. So, you know, we had a whole thing about how they- in certain parts of Africa- eat some sort of white ant. So then we start to Google foods of different countries. So it really opens up a dialogue on what kind of foods people eat in their own countries. So-

>> I bet you've learnt a lot.

>> Oh, huge, huge.

>> From students.

>> And I really try and give them- I made a five cup salad with marshmallow and- Because I love that growing up. So, I try and introduce things that are- not that that's healthy but it's fun- things that we would maybe eat in Canada that they don't eat in their country.

>> Right, right, right.

>> Yeah.

>> What is- What are students' understanding of, you know, the classic Thanksgiving dinner and Christmas in Canada?

>> Well, I really try to educate. So, the Thanksgiving, the American Thanksgiving versus a Canadian Thanksgiving, the commercialization of the holidays compared to their religious aspects. So, when I do a Christmas theme, I tell them about the origins from the religion but I also tell them how Santa came into being, you know, and then how it's become more commercialized, to give them a real understanding of what it's all about. And Halloween, for most of them, it's like totally not knowing.

>> Really?

>> Yeah. We set up Halloween hunt for Wonderland and they usually love Wonderland, they wouldn't go. It took a couple of years to- for older students to stay.

>> Were they scared or they just didn't understand-

>> They didn't understand what it was.

>> - why you'd walk around at night and-

>> Dress up and-

>> - I think jumps out at you.

>> Yeah. It was pretty–

>> Yes, but some of these things when you really into it it's– I don't understand.

>> No. And it's like freaky. Like, if you came from another– if you went to another country and there you see people all dressed up in costume, it'll be probably scary. It's like, what are they doing?

>> I know that Coffee Club started as a volunteer position for you because you saw the need for students to connect. So obviously, this is an initiative you're really passionate about. What do you find rewarding about running this Coffee Club?

>> I think seeing the students that come and how they just sort of relax and enjoy themselves. And sometimes they just come and at the end everybody gives everybody a hug because we've had such a great session. I find that students come with so many different expectations but Coffee Club sort of– you know, education is the equalizer and Coffee Club is sort of a place where anybody can come and be welcomed and feel valued and feel heard. So I'm there to facilitate to make sure everybody has a chance to talk, if they want to.

>> You clearly go the extra mile by running this club for our students. So, who goes the extra mile for you?

>> Over the years– because I've been at Mohawk for 12 years– I had so many people that supported me and believed in my initiatives. But if I could name one person, it would be Katie Burrows. Katie really saw the value in my initiative and has always supported me. And now that I'm in International Student Services– first of all, she's the acting director and she has been phenomenal in letting me spread my wings and develop different initiatives. And I have to put a plug-in for the Mohawk mentors because Don Pelechaty was my mentor. And you wouldn't think being in business– I've been in the college for over 25 years that I would need a mentor, but I really got a lot of benefit from Don. So, I would recommend the mentor program for our staff for sure.

>> And who else at Mohawk is going the extra mile in your opinion?

>> Well, I think our whole international student services staff and our international partnerships and recruitment staff. I think everyday– international students are very unique. All students are wonderful but international students come with very unique issues. And you have to have a certain ear to try and understand what they're really getting at. So oftentimes, if you're born in Canada, you'll come in with an issue and it's, you know, this, this, and this and it's very clear. But international students will come in, in a roundabout way trying to describe what their feeling or what their needs are. So you really have to take the time to listen and understand, are they really talking about their academic program or are they just really homesick and need someone to make them feel better?

>> I also know that sometimes students visit you just for a hug?

>> Yes. I have quite a few students that come to my desk and they'll stand and they'll sort of sway from one foot to the other foot and I'll say, "Are you OK?" And they'll say, "Yeah." I said, "Do you need anything?" "Yup." I said, "Do you need a hug?" "Yup." And so, they get a big hug. And-

>> Not on your job description-

>> No, it's not in my description. But they're adults so I think it's pretty OK. I really find that when they're meeting with you, they come with you- come to you for advice and they're scared and they're unsure, and sometimes they have big issues going on at home. So there's a lot of tragedies in their world. And these students, you know, their families are suffering and they're so many miles away. So sometimes they just want to feel that human connection. And if I can provide that with a hug, then, to me, you know, it's made me happy.

>> You are working on a something called the Global Citizen Certificate which is a project that will be launching-

>> In the New Year.

>> In the New Year. And this is a way to teach staffs, students, faculty on the- some of the things around cultural differences. Can you speak a little bit about what this project is about?

>> Sure. There will be more about it. Currently it's being rolled out for students. There's a lot of talk about globalization and being a global citizen. And oftentimes there's a lot of misconceptions about what that means. So, I initiated the project to my partner [inaudible] and I will be doing these workshops to help allow students to understand what globalization is, what being global citizen is and what it can mean for them. And it will help them what their leadership skills as well.

>> Wonderful. Thank you for everything that you do for our students.

>> Thank you for allowing me to do it. And I just- One little plug, I just want to thank Keith Monroe and Erica Fagan who gave me that permission to start Coffee Club in 2015 because it had- if it hadn't been for them Coffee Club wouldn't exist.

>> Thank you.

>> Thank you.

>> A big thanks to Maria Bracalenti for sharing her story and going above and beyond for students. [Background Music] Thank you also to my colleague Sean Kafi [assumed spelling] for recording and editing our conversation. You can find more information about the Coffee Club in the podcast show notes. And if you know someone who is going the extra mile for students, at Mohawk College, send an email to extramile@mohawkcollege.ca. If you like the show, give us a five-star rating. Thanks for listening.

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