

W&L After class

With Guest Megan Hess

Episode Transcript

Ruth Candler

Welcome to W&L After Class: The Lifelong Learning podcast. I'm your host, Ruth Candler. We're about to have another engaging conversation with one of Washington and Lee's expert faculty. Please join me as we continue our journey of lifelong learning. Today's guest is Megan Hess, associate professor of accounting. Megan is a 1997 graduate of W&L who has been teaching in the Williams School of Commerce, Economics and Politics since 2011. She teaches courses in accounting, ethics, and corporate sustainability. Megan spent 12 years in industry before beginning doctoral studies, including six years as a financial fraud investigator at Deloitte. Megan's research lands squarely at the intersection of ethics and accounting. And her course, Anatomy of a Fraud, is a highly sought-after Spring Term class offered in the Williams School. Thanks for joining us, Megan.

Megan Hess

Glad to be here.

Ruth Candler

So, this is the first podcast that we have done in person in a very long time, and it feels good. It feels good to be with you and have this conversation instead of, you know, having to look at you through a screen, so thanks for inviting me to your office today.

Megan Hess

Appreciate it.

Ruth Candler

To begin our conversation today, I'd like to flashback just a moment to when you were a politics major at W&L you took only one accounting class during your undergraduate years and I know that it did exactly light a fire. So how is it that as an MBA student at Texas A&M you fell in love with accounting? I'm curious as to your change of heart.

Megan Hess

Oh, yeah, absolutely. Well, I definitely came to accounting the long way around. When I graduated from W&L, I did not know yet what I wanted to be when I grew up, which I think a lot of our students can relate to. And so, I took the default option, I went into banking, did not find a good fit, only lasted a year in banking. And then I went on to work in consulting for four years, primarily IT consulting and really enjoyed the work. But after a few years of doing that was ready for new pastures, wanted to move back to Texas for a while, wanted to get back into school and miss school. And so, as you mentioned, I went to Texas A&M to get my Masters in Business Administration and enrolled there both 2001. And that fall was when 9/11 happened, which definitely brought a lot of newfound appreciation for our economic

systems and how interconnected they were and how important it was for us to rebound, not just spiritually, but financially from that crisis. And then very quickly thereafter, a second crisis unfolded, which was the Enron accounting scandal. And keep in mind that at Texas A&M, my accounting professor at the time had also taught the lead audit engagement partner at Enron, David Duncan. So, we were getting secondhand, almost firsthand information from the Arthur Andersen team as they were communicating with our professor about how the implosion was happening and what the investigation was like. And that really lit a fire in me to better understand accounting and, in particular, to think about how important the role is of accountants and auditors in particular, in preserving the integrity of our financial markets. So, this massive accounting fraud on the heels of, you know, a major economic recession created a path forward for me and I like to say that, you know, at that point, focusing on corporate corruption and finding ways to fight fraud became my life's work and passion.

Ruth Candler

So, do you think it was hearing it firsthand from that professor that did it? Or was it just the experience of living through it?

Megan Hess

It was all of it, and it was also really taking accounting classes in a way that I began to appreciate what it was all about. I think a lot of us make a mistake in thinking that accounting is something that's only for people who are good at math, and that accounting is all about spreadsheets, and green shades and you know, counting beans and that kind of thing. And while there is some accounting and there is some math in accounting, it is really very basic. It's addition, subtraction, and occasionally some division. You've been doing that since second grade. That's not what makes the subject so compelling to what you learn when you when you study accounting at higher levels, is that there's so much judgment and decision making, and so many opportunities for people to lead or for people to fall behind. And so accounting choices, and in particular, financial reporting choices are really consequential. And so, understanding the decision making process and the team dynamics and the cognitive biases that play into those judgments, that's when it really got exciting and interesting.

Ruth Candler

It does sound very interesting. So, from 2003 to 2009, you were a senior manager at Deloitte, a multinational company. Your role there included forensic accounting, corporate investigation and litigation support for clients responding to allegations of fraud. What was that like?

Megan Hess

It was a great job. Great job. And I have to clarify that I did not start as a senior manager. I worked my way up. I started like we all do, at the staff level.

Ruth Candler

Okay, I should have rephrased that. [Laughs]

Megan Hess

That's okay! I'm very proud that I got that far with it. Yeah, yeah. Oh, that work was fascinating. So one of the things that I really enjoyed, especially early on, is that no one day was the same, even though I

had been working in consulting previously and knew what it was like - the satisfaction of having a project, working on it, completing it, and then moving on to the next thing. When you're working in forensics, I mean, the pace is accelerated. So, it's that intensified. And I got to work with some really interesting people. In our teams it was not just accountants, but computer forensic specialists. We occasionally would have people from law enforcement, whether it was, you know, local police or FBI or Securities Exchange Commission investigators. So, I got an appreciation for how law enforcement works and the personality that they bring into the investigation process. And then there were always lots and lots of lawyers involved, you know, getting to meet some really impressive litigators and appreciating the combination of disciplines that it takes in order to not just investigate, but ultimately prosecute a fraud was one of the cool parts of the job.

Ruth Candler

Oh, that's interesting. So sometimes you hear of cases taking years and years.

Megan Hess

Oh, they did.

Ruth Candler

Were you able to see any cases from beginning to end?

Megan Hess

Well, you know, each case was very unique. I will say that the initial investigation was where things were very intense and rather short-lived. Cases that went on to be prosecuted, or where the company had to do a complete restatement of those financials, that's where it would drag on for many years. And I actually can't think of one that I was personally involved in from beginning to end that was like that. I don't have statistics on this, but a surprisingly large number of cases settle out of court. They don't fully get prosecuted. Most fraudsters don't actually go to jail, sadly. So the number of as you can imagine, like from investigation to victory, and the criminals behind bars, like those cases are actually pretty rare. It's also pretty rare because rarely are these acts being committed by just one single person when one bad guy that's the impression that we have about how fraud happens is that there's some criminal mastermind that's pulling the strings and getting away with it and while that does happen, on occasion, those cases are pretty rare. It's usually a situation where multiple people are complicit in committing a financial crime. And they each have what they feel to be good reasons for doing so the rationalization process that people go through to justify to themselves how they're going to do this bad thing. And yet, it's really not that bad. The idea of unnecessary evil or being caught between a rock and a hard place and so making the best choice among available options. That that kind of rationalization that's really what the main driver of fraud is. So, I teach my students a lot about the psychology of good people making bad choices. and how important it is to build corporate cultures that celebrate open discussion of problems and addressing things before you end up in a rock and a hard place kind of situation where it feels like there's no way out.

Ruth Candler

That's a great lesson for anyone, regardless of what they're going to go into.

Megan Hess

Yeah.

Ruth Candler

I remember you saying once that a criminal doesn't look like a criminal whenever I was a fraud, you know, someone who looks like your next-door neighbor, or the person you sit next to in church, and yeah, you know, it's it starts small and ends up big. That's exactly right. So, we talked about fraud. And in our conversation prior to the podcast, I use the term whistleblower. And you didn't like that term?

Megan Hess

Yes, yes. Why don't I like the term? Well, first, I should background that with my obsession with whistleblowers. So, my dissertation from University of Virginia was all about whistleblowing. And it looked at how social networks affect people's propensity to blow the whistle and explored what alternatives employees use when they don't feel like they could blow the whistle on someone because they're in a network with them. They're part of their trust circle. So, you know, I've had this long-standing fascination with whistleblowing, I consider myself to be a failed whistleblower, I did have a work-related incident that I chose to deal with myself without going through formal compliance channels. And that's probably my biggest ethical failing in my career.

So... and what you'll find amongst a lot of academics is that we tend to study those things that are most personal. It's not research, it's me-search. So spending, gosh, how many years have I've been studying whistleblowers? You know, a decade, at least, in that field has been really useful in me understanding my own challenges with that topic, but also figuring out how everybody could be better empowered to be a whistleblower. And that the first thing that came true to me is that the label of whistleblower is one of the primary barriers, because a whistleblower for most of us is synonymous with a backstabber, or a rat, or someone who it has a negative...It's someone who betrays rather than someone who is saves. And I want us to instead think about if you're an employee who, through no fault of your own, comes upon information about some kind of corporate misdeed that's happening, and hopefully, it will never happen to you. But if it does, think about yourself as a problem-solver instead. And I learned through this research how important it is to not try and problem-solve alone, but to have a support team to have other people work through that process with you. Not only does it give you more confidence that you're on the right path and a little bit more cover for the inevitable blowback that bad news always seems to bring with it, but it can also help you tackle the problem more effectively. We solve problems better as a team rather than as an individual.

Now, of course, that can be ever so more difficult if we're talking about someone who's done bad things that's in your line of chain of command or as the direct report or the consequences are very severe. Fortunately, my personal situation, the consequences were not very severe. But if, you know, I'm thinking about like the tobacco whistleblowers, right, I mean, there were lives at stake. So, at any rate, that's where my hesitancy around the word whistleblower... it's just not a very effective word. And I'm a very pragmatic person. And if we can come up with a better word for what we're up to, and a label, yeah, that we can say. And yeah, that identity works for me. And so, I think problem-solver. Yeah, I like that has a much more positive connotation. Yeah, and again, it strikes me that these are great life lessons, just not about accounting. It's great life lessons. Oh, well thank you. Yeah. Accounting is living

too. I often in the class, though, do strive for the "even if you never practice as an accountant a day in your life, this this is a really good life skill to have."

Ruth Candler

Yeah, yeah it is. It's important. So, Megan, I'd like to shift gears here a little bit and talk more about your teaching and research. When we met to discuss the podcast, you told me, and I quote-I know I'm putting you on the spot here, so I apologize-but you told me, "I still feel every day like I'm the luckiest girl in the world. Teaching makes me feel decades younger." And I have to tell you that afternoon, I kept thinking about that comment. So, to have found a profession that you are so obviously passionate about and energized by-it's a wonderful thing. What is it about teaching and W&L students that you find so fulfilling?

Megan Hess

Oh yeah, yeah. So, I think when we find our passion, and it intersects with something that we're good at, and then someone's willing to pay us to do that for a living that that's magic, right? That's why I say I'm so lucky, because I can't... I don't know that many people that get to find that. It's especially wonderful to be here at Washington and Lee doing it because this is a rare place and the fact that we are a liberal arts institution that also values teaching towards the professions like accounting, or business or law or journalism. And so, I get to bring all of the wonderful aspects of appreciating the humanities and engaging in pedagogical approaches that are foundational to being in a liberal arts institution, like the Socratic method, and I get to apply those in an accounting class. And I don't know if any of my colleagues at other schools that get to do that, I mean it! To not have to lecture and not have to give multiple choice exams and not have to stick to a textbook is such a gift, such a gift. And I think there's a lot to say for that freedom in how I teach. That is really helping the students learn better as well, because they're learning as much from each other as they are from me. We do lots of group discussions and we do lots of applied work in the classroom. I'm a big fan of the case teaching method. We do lots of cases where I let the real world explain the importance of the subject and then they just get to practice the whatever the technique that the application for the lesson for the day.

As far as like how it also makes me feel younger or so energized, something that I think I didn't appreciate when I was a student here is just how rewarding it is to be in a place where intellectual curiosity is fostered and rewarded and thriving, and I tell my students all the time and my advisees, as well: Make sure that you don't double and triple major and tie yourself down too much because this place is an intellectual candy store, and you want to go take all these fun classes, from all these great professors with all these cool titles, and do all the things because you'll never get another chance even if you stay in school and go on to get a graduate degree. It only gets more and more focused and narrow, and your options get more and more limited. So, the ability to explore is so wonderful and we've got so many ways that students can do that here. I mean, there's been a lot mentioned recently and our strategic plan supports it that we've moved towards more interdisciplinary studies, where we're not even confined by the boundaries of our department or the school that we sit in and can explore topics from multidisciplinary perspectives, and I teach two different courses that are part of an interdisciplinary program and would love to teach more. Oh, the students, too. I have to talk about the quality of the students because that is also a gift of this place. We can never forget how important it is that the students that show up for our classes are really engaged. And we get to take that for granted

here because our students are so bright, and they're so conscientious and, by and large, they're really happy to be here and very respectful of the learning opportunities that they're given. And they really do lean into them. And again, other universities where you've got two or 300 students in a class and everyone's a number and learning means showing up and passing the exam. It's just a completely different kind of teaching and learning experience. So, I have often reflected about what...how would I describe W&L students to people who've never been here and haven't had the pleasure of interacting with them and knowing just how wonderful they are. And I, when I was a student here, the the phrase that was always applied to us-well, you know, they work hard, and they play hard. And I think that's still very true, our students probably work even harder, and maybe play even harder than ever, you know. Maybe not during the pandemic but now for sure. But they also have developed this really wonderful quality where they are so supportive of one another here, and I don't know how to match that up with the "work hard-play hard," but here's the contrast that I want to draw.

So, when I was at UVA and got to interact with what on paper would seem to be the exact same student population...You know, they recruit from the same places and if you look at their school demographically, it looks almost identical to ours. But the students there are so competitive with one another. They're ambitious in a way that our students are, but rather than that ambition being directed towards a common goal, which is what I see here-that students from W&L thrive and they graduate into a network where they continue to be each other's colleagues and to support each other for life-at UVA, it was who's going to get the better placement, who's going to get the better internship, who's going to get the better ranked grade? And that intensity trickled down into students' experience and I think, you know, that wouldn't be true of every UVA student but the contrast between the tenor-what my son would say is the "vibe" of the place-is just very different. And I think, I mean, how to unpack how that happens here? I think being a smaller campus is part of it, having an honor code, and really rewarding students for being trusting and showing each other a lot of trust. That's part of it. It may even be the speaking tradition. I don't know what the magic is, but they somehow managed to even with other students that they're not best friends with they're still incredibly kind and generous towards one another. And that's a wonderful, collegial, collaborative environment in which to work.

Ruth Candler

You use the word magic, and that rings so true and moving even after graduation when, you know, the alumni population and helping each other and, you know, somebody knows somebody and, you know, that just continues.

Megan Hess

Oh, yeah. Oh yeah, it's a support network for life.

Ruth Candler

That it is. Given this industry experience, it's no surprise that you have been teaching a Spring Term class called Anatomy of a Fraud. Since you first joined the W&L faculty as an adjunct professor in 2011. I understand that the concept of that class is loosely based on the medical metaphor that corporate fraud is like a disease. Would you explain that to us? And tell us a little bit about the class?

Megan Hess

Yeah, so I was invited to develop a Spring Term course while I was still finishing my doctoral student studies at University of Virginia and the advice that I was given was that the best Spring Term courses have really clever title. So, whatever you do, it has to have a great title. So, we quickly figured out that just calling it forensic accounting wasn't gonna be a clever, exciting title that would grab students, especially as a new course. And so, I don't know that I even came up with Anatomy of a Fraud as the working title. I think, actually, Elizabeth Oliver was the one who suggested that, but the metaphor does work. So, I do believe that fraud is a disease of cancer on our markets. It, you know, not only is stealing value away from investors and other stakeholders, but it it undermines our trust in financial reporting. And think about how difficult it is to buy stock in companies or buy their bonds or lend them money and help them build and grow and come up with new inventions and new drugs that will save us during a pandemic and all those sorts of things. If we can't believe the information that they're sharing with us, I mean, that trust in the information has to be there in order for the markets to work effectively. So, we talk in the class about fraud as a disease and how an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. So, a large portion of that class is about how to build strong corporate cultures around ethics, how to be an ethical leader, and so forth. And then we but we also talk about diagnosis. So, what are some techniques that accountants can use to identify when it companies at risk of financial fraud? And what are some of those sorts of vital signs, if you will? So, the metaphor kind of works? It really does. And so, we get to explore all aspects of the diagnosing it, why does it happen? How to detect it? And then finally, hopefully, how to prevent it.

Ruth Candler

Every summer you have a few summer research scholars who assist you with research projects. Why is student research conducted during the summer so important to you? And how does it benefit students?

Megan Hess

Well, for me, the interaction with students outside of the normal classroom, particularly on these research projects, is really rewarding because I get to benefit personally from their creativity, which is an area that I think I am-it's not one of my personal strengths, right? Again, like I said, I'm a very pragmatic, analytical type a person and so thinking outside the box is not something that comes very naturally to me, but our students, both because of their own personalities and because they're so new to the research process, so sort of their innocence or their naivete allows them to ask really great questions about whatever phenomenon I'm obsessing over at the moment and studying intensely at the moment. It's not whistleblowing sustainability. And their questions help me take the research in new directions and develop really interesting research projects. So, I'll give you an example of something that I've been working on in cooperation with Professor Cullen Reed, which is the development of a database that captures the sustainability reporting activities for sample of US companies over the last eight years. And what we have been doing in the construction of this database that has been largely driven by student effort to do the coding necessary to create the database is they're reading these sustainability reports. And they're coding the kinds of goals that companies are setting for themselves when it comes to sustainability and the progress, or the lack thereof, that they're making. So, for instance, a company might say that they want to decrease their emissions by 20%. And so, for five to 10 years, they're gonna keep working towards that goal. And each year, they'll give an update. Okay,

we've managed to reduce emissions by 1%, or another 2%. Or here's how we're going to plan to make even more progress in this area in the next year. And our theory is that this goal setting and performance towards goals is going to help companies make real progress and that we should be factoring in that company's disclosure about their goal setting and their progress into our evaluations of their performance, and perhaps even into our evaluations of the price for their stock, right? We think this is really consequential information that the markets need to embrace. And so, my students is we've been working on this project for quite a while my students have asked some really interesting questions that are also about sustainability disclosure. So, in this last fall term, I had an independent study students and some of my students work with me during the main term, not just during the summer. And she was a former auditing student going on to work in the field of assurance, and she wanted to know well, what impact is the assurance process having on all of this? And I was like, great question. We can study that. Right. So, we're in the process of actually writing up a paper right now that shows that there is indeed actually a significant positive effect of having external assurance on the ESG ratings that these third party evaluators are giving to these publicly traded companies. So, turns out external assurance matters not just when it comes to fraud, but also when it comes to our evaluations of the sustainability of a company.

Ruth Candler

I love how that one question by the student led to a whole new area of research.

Megan Hess

Yeah... It's wonderful and I have them-the other benefit for the student...I sort of focused on what was good for me. For the students, it is an opportunity to learn about what social science research is all about. They don't usually get much exposure to what professors do when they're not teaching. So they get to see this whole other world where-how do we create new knowledge? And how do we study phenomenon? How do we ask interesting research questions? And how do we find or collect or create the data that will help us answer those questions. And I've had students that were so intrigued by doing the research that they've gone on to go to graduate school themselves and may ultimately become academics. So, I think that's really exciting. And I've had others that sort of-Wow, I didn't know that this is what you had to do if you want to be a professor, count me out! Right? So, it's kind of a useful screen and direction.

Ruth Candler

All about discovering what makes you tick, right?

Megan Hess

Exactly, exactly.

Ruth Candler

So corporate social responsibility, also known as CSR, is a term that we are hearing more and more in the business world. Since your field and academia covers both accounting and ethics, I think our listeners would appreciate a definition of what CSR is exactly and why it's so important.

Megan Hess

Mm hmm. Well, so this definition of sustainability that I really like comes from the Brundtland Commission of the United Nations, but it's talking about creating a world where the next generation is going to thrive. So, it's being not unmindful of the future, as far as I think about it. And what's kind of fascinating, because I've been doing research in the area of Corporate Social Responsibility since 2016, and then if you go back to my doctoral studies, I mean, just studying ethics, well, really, I've been studying ethics since I was a politics major. Now, right? Long time. The vocabulary is shifting. So, if we go way back, we used to talk about businesses being ethical and doing good things in their community as citizenship. It was corporate citizenship, and it was largely focused on the charitable contributions and the foundations that wealthy companies and their owners would set up to help share some of that wealth. And there's a long tradition of that.

Ruth Candler

Keep going, it's the life of a professor.

Megan Hess

I know! I never get phone calls on that phone! There's a long tradition of that. I mean, I'm thinking back to, say, the Hershey Corporation in Pennsylvania and how they founded a school for orphans, right? So, this is long tradition especially in America and, you know, somewhere in the late 80s, early 90s, we started talking about corporate social responsibility. And we started getting much more focused on environmental impacts and pollution and talking about carbon taxes and all these kinds of things. So it went from being largely about citizenship and charity to then being more about social impacts in environmental impacts. And so, organizations not just being charitable, because it was a nice thing to do, but corporations cleaning up their messes, because that was the responsible thing to do. Well, now, just in the last two years, we've evolved again, and we're talking about ESG. Yeah, all the time. So now it's all about environmental social governance metrics. So, we've taken a turn towards the quantitative, although the qualitative is still very, very important, and we'll always be there thinking about the kinds of programs that companies are running in these areas, and really making more fine grained assessments of their impacts on a quantitative basis. And ultimately, where we're headed is to having standards for making those disclosures very similar to what we have to do for financial reporting. The Securities Exchange Commission announced in 2020, that there will be a standard for ESG reporting. We don't know yet what it is and what it's going to look like but it's it's a major area of corporate compliance. That is just ballooning.

Ruth Candler

Yeah. Yeah. I could imagine there would be a lot of gray area in there that...

Megan Hess

Oh, yeah.

Ruth Candler

It's not always black and white, which is a great lead into my next question for you. You helped one student with a CSR project involving a phenomenon known as greenwashing.

Megan Hess

Yes.

Ruth Candler

What is greenwashing? And what work have your students done in that realm?

Megan Hess

Yeah. So greenwashing is a phrase that has come up and I don't know if an academic invented it, or if it was a journalist. It's a great phrase, but what it refers to is corporations making claims about their efforts and their progress with regard to protecting the environment that have no teeth. So, they are saying that they're doing good things, but they're not actually making any improvements. So rather than white washing, which is kind of the old term, we're now calling it greenwashing because they're making claims of their good citizen behavior in the...with regard to the environment, when in reality, they're not making much progress, hence the metrics that are needed, hence those metrics. Yes, yes.

Ruth Candler

So, Megan, before we wrap up our conversation today, I'd like to talk about your life outside of the classroom just a little bit. So actually, before I talk outside of the classroom, I love being here in your office. And I'm sitting here looking around and it's so homey, but it also used to be a very special place on campus. Could you describe exactly where your office is...

Megan Hess

Exactly where my office is?

Ruth Candler

...and what it used to be?

Megan Hess

Yes, so, for students who graduated, I guess before the mid-aughts, the building that I sit in, which is now known as Holecamp Hall, used to be called the co-op. And it housed a diner where you could get quick-service food, and the bookstore where you could buy books, but you could also buy all your life supplies, which was important. It could all be charged home, so it was a safe harbor for lots of reasons but not a particularly beautiful building in any respects. Well, sometime in the mid-2000s, we renovated this building to provide more office space for professors in the Williams school. And so, I mean, it's this gorgeous, of course, red-bricks-with-white-column building that still maintains the footprint of the old bookstore and co-op and the same entrances and exits. But on the inside, we've got an art gallery. So, the McCarthy art gallery is downstairs. So, there's different art installations, which I think is so important that here we are a business school that has art galleries, and all of our academic buildings. And it's about some great spaces for students to study and to meet and so forth. And my office happens to be what used to be the atrium of the bookstore. So, the bookstore was it had a two-story atrium, and they took the upper level and made it a true second story. And there's about, oh, I don't know, six or seven offices on this floor. So, my office has this weird quirk that the window is like a Harry Potter view to the outside. It starts on the floor and goes up about three feet. And when my children were little, it was their favorite place on campus. It's got this little ledge next to it, and they would, they would just, you know,

settle down right there and work on puzzles or color do their Legos or whatever they were into at the moment.

Ruth Candler

All right, I'm gonna... I'm gonna take a picture of that and post it on our episode notes.

Megan Hess

It still has puzzles and all kinds of fun things. Yeah.

Ruth Candler

I think that may resonate with some with alums from that period of time when they used to come in here and buy their little cans of potato chips or something.

Megan Hess

Exactly. Yeah. Yeah. It's a great, a great spot.

Ruth Candler

And I'm noticing this fabulous bulletin board with lots of notes pinned to it. What is that?

Megan Hess

Yes, yeah. So, I had actually one of my college roommates visited a couple years back, and she walked in, and she's like, Wow, you got a lot of bling. I have a lot of color in my office...

Ruth Candler

It's beautiful, it's fun.

Megan Hess

...and a lot of very personal things on the wall. I maybe this is a reaction to having spent so many years in accounting and consulting, where all we had were cubicles. And so, I've been just waiting for the moment to decorate. But one of the things that really inspires me and helps me remember why I do this job. And when we have to make sacrifices or when it gets tough to help remind me to keep going is I've gotten so many wonderful thank-you notes from students over the years. So, I finally, rather than keeping them in a drawer, put a bulletin board up and just started sticking them up there. And it's kind of a mess now because it's overflowing. But there's some really good ones and they're nice to go back and read it's even nicer when students come back and visit or they call me and I want to tell me about their most recent success or they want to call me and talk over some, you know, ethics problem that they're having at work and in what my advice, and it's wonderful. I say when they graduate, I'm your professor for life. Don't ever hesitate to reach out to me and it's really nice when they do it sounds very rewarding.

Ruth Candler

Oh, it's the best. It's absolutely the best. So, when you're not at work, I know that you'd love to volunteer in the Lexington community for organizations such as Habitat for Humanity and Grace Episcopal Church. You also devote a lot of time to a nonprofit called Hoofbeats. And while everybody is

probably familiar with Habitat or church volunteerism, they may not have heard of therapeutic riding before. Would you share with us what type of organization Hoofbeats is and why it's so important to you?

Megan Hess

Sure, sure. So Hoofbeats Therapeutic Riding, that I hope will also put a little blurb in the footnotes to the podcast...

Ruth Candler

We'll put a link into the website...

Megan Hess

...is this really sweet small organization that's been in Rockbridge County, gosh, since like 1993. I mean, long time member of the community. And the goal is to help people with physical or mental or emotional challenges to feel safe and whole again, and it is amazing how a relationship with a horse or really any animal but especially a horse can help people do that. And so, the kinds of transformations that I've seen for people that come to Hoofbeats and I help them with everything from the horse care to helping with the lessons to-I even do their books, I do all their accounting work, too. Volunteer of the year for life, right?

But, you know, thinking about one little girl who was coming who was physically disabled and bound in a wheelchair, but could do therapeutic riding and, with the right equipment, with the right saddle, and how the motion of riding a horse helped to build her trunk strength and also helped to rebuild neural pathways in her brain, how the locomotion of a horse went for someone who can no longer walk is reminding the body of what that movement is like and is just absolutely transformational to their physical progress, that the emotional progress that people make as well. Horses, unlike dogs and cats, are especially sensitive creatures, and they do not tolerate outbursts and they do not tolerate anger. And they are very large and can either put you in a bad spot. So, you know, you really do have to be on your best behavior around an animal like a horse. And so, you know, kids that have had a hard time with that, whether they're being referred to us from social services, or they've, you know, had a lot of turnover and turmoil in their home lives where they haven't felt seen, they haven't felt understood and they haven't been in a situation where being quiet and calm and gentle is not just necessary, but is rewarded, where the animal then wants to come to you and spend time with you and is better with you because of how you've behaved. That too is a really transformational experience for our participants.

So, it's the kind of program, I mean I'm somebody who grew up with horses, I've ridden horses my whole life. I've occasionally owned some horses, you know, I've always loved horses for myself, but the thing about hoofbeats that has really helped me be a better person is seeing how working with horses can help other people as well. So, it's not about me anymore. But what a great place. Yeah, yeah, it's a great place and a great service to the people in our community.

Ruth Candler

So, Drew, your husband, now is the Haight Associate Professor of Business Administration in the Williams school, and also a member of the W&L class of '97. What is it like teaching at the same school as your spouse?

Megan Hess

Well, there are some funny things that come up. Most notably, confusion over which Professor has someone who's talking about at any given moment, and I love what the students have come up with to work around this difficulty. So, amongst the students, I'm known as Mrs. Professor Hess, and he is known as Mr. Professor Hess. I just think is really sweet and is so perfect about thinking about how just polite, oh-so-incredibly polite, our students are. So, Mrs. Professor Hess.

Ruth Candler

So, have you alerted the registrar's office to that so they can put it in the course selection?

Megan Hess

No. [Laughs] But you know, for the for the most part, we're not on the same committees together. Our spheres of students actually overlap a lot less than you might think. So, you know, in any given year, there's maybe two or three students that have been in both our classes. And that's about it. So. So yeah, it means we have the same work schedule. And that's really nice, particularly when you're planning family vacations and so forth.

Ruth Candler

And so you and Drew met in college, right?

Megan Hess

Yes. Do you want the origin story?

Ruth Candler

I do! I do.

Megan Hess

It's so timely because we met over Fancy Dress weekend that's coming up here at W&L, and for those of you that don't know the Fancy Dress tradition, it's essentially a prom for college kids. And back when Washington and Lee was all male, this was the big opportunity for women to come to campus and stay on campus for a full extended weekend of festivities and so forth. And it's a long weekend, let's say. So, you've got the usual Wednesday night parties. There's the Thursday big concert where they bring in somebody, you know, somewhat modern and relevant. And then the actual dance is on either Friday or Saturday night. And then there's of course after parties for all of that. And it just so happened, sophomore year of college, both Drew and I were not dating anybody and had been set up with our Fancy Dress dates. And perhaps not having the best experience, right? It's really hard to be set up and basically be on a blind date for a weekend.

Ruth Candler

Yeah, that's a long time.

Megan Hess

That much togetherness, that many events. And so, by the time that the after-party rolled around, we had both ditched our dates and met at his fraternity, where they were hosting the usual after-party and it had just, you know, kind of devolved at that point where anybody was going -- people with dates, without dates. And so, I did what is normally done when we go to such after-parties. This was at the Kappa Sigma house in the basement, and I went up to the bar to get a beer. And you know, here was this guy, he wasn't just working the bar, he was actually sitting on the bar to do the serving.

Ruth Candler

Sitting on the bar handing out beer?

Megan Hess

Handing out beers, you know, something really fancy like Milwaukee's Best, we used to call it the Beast. And I struck up a conversation with him, and he was so sweet and cute and a little bit aloof, you know, especially sort of sitting up there and it was ... anyway, so sparks flew then, and I went out on the dance floor with my girlfriends and we were having a good time, and sure enough, he ... I guess the feeling was mutual because he sent a pledge out with another beer to deliver to me. I mean, talk about romantic!

Ruth Candler

The power of not only working the beer, but the power of having pledges to do some of your legwork for you.

Megan Hess

And, I mean, I would love to say the rest was history. No, it took a while for us to actually get serious, but we dated on and off from March of 1994 until today. The pledge that brought the beer is still a dear friend, Jamie Estas. We ran into him in Charlottesville years later. He's married with kids, we're married with kids. But yes, so we met at Fancy Dress and I was romanced over Milwaukee's Best. [Laughs]

Ruth Candler

That is how the best marriages are made. They-there's a term for couples who meet at W&L, date at W&L and then get married...

Megan Hess

Alum-mate.

Ruth Candler

Alum-mate.

Megan Hess

And we get the cutest postcard every Valentine's Day.

Ruth Candler

I love that. I'd like I'd be interested to know how many alum-mates there are? Do you know?

Megan Hess

I don't know. I know of a few couples that have actually married after they didn't date Well, undergrads and maybe didn't even overlap, but then met through the W&L alumni network, right, and found a kindred spirit, and that doesn't surprise me a bit because the culture of this place really does imprint on you and I think changes you in a way where you're always seeking that same quality and the people you spend time with and you take it for granted when you're here and you have such open relationships and so much trust and so much respect and intellectual curiosity and all those wonderful values that we celebrate here. And then you get out in the real world, and you find out just how rare they are. Yeah, so yeah, so that doesn't surprise me that there are many alum-mates but I don't know how many actually.

Ruth Candler

You know what? We'll will include that number in our episode notes. That would be fun. So, you and Drew now have two children who are teenagers and you have stated that it can't be easy to have two professors as a parents. I love what you said, though, once about it being more important that your children are happy and thriving than following in your educational and professional footsteps. How do you and Drew encourage them to follow their own paths when your own lives are immersed in academia?

Megan Hess

Yeah, yeah, well, I think it's important with our children, with the students we work with, to tackle the elephant in the room head-on. And so for the kids, the elephant in the room is, oh, well, you have to go to college or you have to get a graduate degree and you have to be an academic because that was the the path that your parents took. I actually have a brother who's a PhD as well. So, there's lots of academics in the family and... just remind them from the beginning that no, you don't have to do that. And I have those conversations with students here as well, where they, you know, there are upperclassmen that they've interacted with when investment banking and they're hearing a lot of students get investment banking jobs, and so they feel like they have to do that too. Just to remind them that no, you can choose other careers it doesn't have to be that if it is that you love that great but don't feel like you are going to box yourself in before you've even tried something.

Ruth Candler

Looking back at your time as a W&L student in the mid-90s, how does Lexington today compare to back then?

Megan Hess

Well, I get asked this a lot and this place is amazing. It's sort of like nothing changes and then everything gets better. So for students from the 90s, you know, our favorite places to hang out were the Palms and Spanky's and then our, you know, our go-to spots would have been, like, Goshen and Panther Falls and Windfall and Zollman's pavilion, and so forth, and all those places still exist. And for the most part, students still go to them even Zollman's-well, so Zollman's pavilion, now, I think is only

for private parties. And I don't know that college students are going there. So that's kind of the one question that one question mark, although I have been to a wedding rehearsal dinner there in recent memory, so they must be doing something because...but um, you know, so Spanky's is now Macado's, but that's pretty much the same? Yeah, exactly. It's...

Ruth Candler

...bulldozed. Yeah.

Megan Hess

But, um, but we've also got so many more new things here that I think make the place even more appealing. So, we've got a whole lot nicer hotel options, some of which had been written up as, like, "Best in America" hotels now. So there's a little bit more quality when it comes to those kinds of accommodations. And I would say that the restaurant scene is pretty thriving for such a small place. I think a lot of people have relocated here and taken advantage of the low rent to try some new things. And one of the things that I didn't do nearly enough of when I was an undergrad, which was to take advantage of the outdoors or to participate in outing club activities and in addition to being very close to the Appalachian Trail, which is very popular now and was back in the 90s we have a lot more trails and hiking venues and even a new edition of the outing club hiking textbook which one of my students helped to rewrite and even here just, you know, right in town, the back campus of Washington and Lee has a whole bunch of new trails that are fantastic.

Ruth Candler

It was a savior during the pandemic...

Megan Hess

...it...yeah, so has been. So, what a wonderful place that you can live well, and eat well, and have...oh, and Lime Kiln's getting- Lime Kiln's, oh my gosh, the Lime Kiln concert series is fantastic. So you can even have great music and you can live in the great outdoors. It's really a wonderful place to be that it is. I'm going to wrap up with one final question. You're a W&L alumna and also a W&L professor, so it gives you a very unique perspective. What do you know now that you wish you had known when you were a student? Well, I wish I'd done more Outing Club. I wish that I had taken advantage of Study Abroad activities. I didn't because I loved being here so much and didn't want to miss the mission of it. And I do think that being able to live and study abroad when you're young, before you get tied down with marriages and children and jobs, is such a gift and I wish I'd taken advantage of it. And I guess also to perhaps think about your time here at Washington and Lee, and just making the most of it and whether that's being more mindful about who you spend your time with, or what classes you take, and trying not to fall back on default options and being perhaps a little more courageous and a little more creative, and really taking advantage of the full experience. I'm not going to say that I didn't get the most out of it. But gosh, if I could go back and take a few more art history classes or be brave enough to be in a theater production, or...I don't, I never took a history class and I should have. So, yes, those are the small regrets that I have.

Ruth Candler

Well, hopefully, students will listen to that and take note. So, Megan, thank you so much for joining us today.

Megan Hess

Oh, thank you for having me.

Ruth Candler

To all of you who have turned in. Thanks for joining us. If you'd like to learn more about Megan's work, please visit the show notes on our website, wlu.edu/lifelong. You'll also find more information about our other W&L Lifelong Learning programs, including programs where you can join us on campus, abroad and in your very own home. Until next time, let's remain together not unmindful of the future.