

Hello and welcome to the Valley. Today I am your host, Janet Michael. It is Laurel Ridge Community College Day. We are back on the scene with Brandi Hawkins Boyce. She won the arm wrestling tournament this month. She is director of PR and special events for Lower Oak Ridge. Brandi, I do have to tell you that last month, Guy Curtis said that he thinks that there should be a different kind of contest. I think he's losing to you too much in the arm wrestling. Is that what's happening? Yeah, he probably wants to make it golf because he's much better at golf. But that's not going to happen. I am going to go on record as saying either one of you can do every single show, as long as you bring Doctor Kim Blosser as your guest. How about that? Done. I have her here today, so I already won. I am excited to have Kim on the show with us. So Kim is president at Laurel Ridge Community College, and fun fact she is only the fifth president of Laurel Ridge Community College, which to me, Kim seems shocking because Laurel Ridge has been around for a really, really long time, right? Since 1970. And you know what's even

more interesting? That I am the third female president. We are the only community college in Virginia that has had more female presidents than male presidents. That's why you're so successful. You said it. That's right. You said it, Jana. We agree. So we're going to do something a little different with the show today. So typically, what we do every month is we highlight a program where we talk to an instructor or something along those lines. But I think this is a good opportunity. Kim, since you're here to do the 40,000 foot level of Laurel Ridge Community College, a lot has changed. Most anybody now on the planet, regardless of their skill set or their education level, can take some sort, of course, at Laurel Ridge, whether it's to further their career or learn a new skill, start a hobby, any of those things. And I feel like people don't still understand what you do at Laurel Ridge Community College. So when somebody says to you, oh, you're the president at Laurel Ridge, what's Laurel Ridge? What do you tell them? For starters, I do always explain that the president is the president at all three locations.

So I still get the question all the time. Oh, are you the president at Luray, too? And I say, yes, it's Middletown and Lorain and Warrenton. We have three locations. One college. So I do usually try to explain that, but I always talk about the fact that we are a comprehensive community college.

When Virginia set up the community college system, they set us up as comprehensive community colleges.

So back in the day, there used to be what people called junior colleges, which were mainly just transfer right into a four year, and then you would have technical or vocational colleges was another option that you could have in other states.

Virginia wanted those things to be together. They wanted us to serve our communities in whatever way we needed to serve them. So, for example, when people say, what do you do? We say, we have opportunities for students who don't have a high school diploma or need to learn English language, because we have adult basic education available for students in our communities. If you are looking to just take a course like Project Management, maybe you already have a degree. We

have an entire workforce unit that has professional development, more career training opportunities that you can just take a course.

What most people know us for is we have associate degree programs. You can start those when you're in high school. We have a very strong the strongest in Virginia, a dual enrollment program with our K through 12 partners that allows students to start taking college credits in high school, bring them in, earn their associate's degree, and then have guaranteed admission into almost all of our public four years and many of our private four years in Virginia. You can also get a degree and go right to work, and you can also do a short term career program. So if you want to get your commercial driver's license and be a truck driver, you can come in as few as three weeks and earn that. You've always wanted to be a nurse. You can come and go through our nursing program, go right to work. So we have a comprehensive set of programs, everything from the short term training, career focused to getting you into that. If you always wanted to transfer,

you've always wanted to be a four year student.

And what I guess sometimes people ask, we use the word transfer, and a lot of times students are like, what in the world does that even mean? And so if you think I've always wanted to earn my bachelor's degree, there are four years in your bachelor's degree. It really, right. You're a freshman, then you're a sophomore and you're junior, then you're a senior. The community college does the freshman and sophomore year. We do those first two years. And then you can move on to UVA, to JMU, to George Mason, to Shenandoah University, wherever you want to go and finish your junior and senior year. And so that's what we mean when we talk about transfer. And we have what we call guaranteed admission agreements that allows a student, if you have a certain GPA, you took the classes that are in the program, you are guaranteed admission to get into one of those four year schools. And we always say when you graduate from there, they will never ask, were you here for two years or were you here for four years? You are officially a JMU graduate, and those transfers are

so incredibly valuable because sometimes students can't get in. So it's not even just that they have all of these perks. Two smaller classes, a smaller investment to get through that freshman and sophomore year. They may not even be able to get into one of those schools initially. So this checks a lot of boxes. It does. It helps them.

Just like you said, their dream may have been to go to UVA or Virginia Tech or wherever, and they just didn't get it and they got waitlisted. This is your path. Your guaranteed path in the other is sometimes it's just hard for people to travel.

They may think, okay, I can go to college, but how am I going to live there? How am I going to afford to pay room and board? Or I've got obligations at home that I still can't do. And so let's you start here, and then if you do end up traveling and you drive to JMU or you drive to Shenandoah, we have this great new Co enrollment program with Shenandoah University that's going to allow students to get started with us and then go there.

And that's especially for folks that are local that just really don't have the opportunity to go

away to school. And that's a lot of our students.

Occasionally people ask, what are the things that keep you up at night? And I know this doesn't keep me up, but it just it bothers me is that a lot of students want to earn a bachelor's degree. If you ask them, you surveyed them. You ask them to ask.

Yes, they want to earn a bachelor's degree, but the number that really end up earning a bachelor's degree is very low. And so, for example, 80% of students will say they want to earn a bachelor's degree. Even those who transfer who start and maybe transfer or they start in did so in high school. It's really only about 30% that ever end up earning a bachelor's degree. Wow. And it's life that gets in the way. You're talking about four years and a lot of our students, it's financial.

They didn't know exactly what they wanted to do when they transferred. When we do our new student welcome, I always ask students, so how many of you are not really sure what you want to do with the rest of your life? And it's a lot of them. And then I always say, all of you that are the parents and the supporters that are in the room, how many

of you had no idea what you wanted when you were 18? And half of them still don't know what they want to do now? It's just normal when you're that age that you're not really sure. And so they're spending more time. And then the debt sometimes for them is adding up. And so it just a lot of things happen and not as many finish. And so we're working really hard to have some real strong pathways with our regional colleges, because we just know most of our students aren't going that far. They're going to stay somewhere pretty close, and we want to give them a lot of extra hand-holding and a lot of extra support to get there and get that part finished for them. I think one of the big misconceptions, too, is that the bulk of your students are those kids that are dual enrolled in high school, they graduate high school, and then they come to the community college. But you've got a really large chunk of 30 somethings, 40 somethings, even 60 somethings that are deciding, you know what? I didn't get that degree when I graduated high school because I had to go do this or I started having babies, or my life

just took a different turn. You've got a really good mix of people, so I could imagine even some 30 something and 40 somethings sitting in that crowd going, I still don't know what I want to do, but I am here to start that journey one way or the other. Two years ago, our graduating class and I don't have the stats from this past year. But so two years ago, a graduating class was from age 17 to 73. Wow. And so that's the joy. I mean, honest to goodness, that's the pleasure of working at a community college, because you do have such diversity when it comes to ages. You have veterans that have come back that are now coming in and earning a degree or a certificate or taking a workforce training program, and it's so good for the students that are in class with the variety of students, because they learn so much from those. I know some of our adults will be nervous. About the technology and whether or not they can keep up with these 17, 18, 19 year olds in the technology. But they learn a lot. We have good students. They help one another. But you're right, there's a lot of opportunity and we get quite a few adults that

come back. I was helping one at our campus at New Student. Welcome. My job is to walk around. I tell them if anyone asks me a financial aid question or something real specific about your schedule, I will find you the people that can help you. But if you need to find your room and where your classes are, I'm your person. I will walk you around and find all of those. And so that's what I do. So I met a lady, she has her master's degree, and she's coming back to take our artificial intelligence certificate or one of our new certificates that we have in machine learning. And she's really interested in that. She was in some finance field, but that's what she's interested in. And so she's back with us. And she said, I want to be a student, but I feel like I'm too old. She looked very young, but she said, I'm going to do some of the student activities. And I said, you should get involved. Absolutely set up. You never know. We've had a lot of those on this show over the years. Sidney Patton comes to mind as someone who had that mindset. I really want to go back, but I am too old to go back. And she really integrated herself.

And didn't we speak Brandy to a veteran who already had all of his degrees, and he was going to switch careers and do he wanted to take an art class. And then that art class ended up turning into a whole nother career for him. That really does happen. I love it happens all the time. The stories are endless. That's the great thing about working in PR and marketing is endless content, endless stories. We will never run out of content and that's what I treasure also about working here over 20 years. It's made me realize very quickly that everybody's path is different. There's no set time on when you will have to find your place. Your journey paths can change, journeys change, and it's all great and it's all okay. And that's what we're here for. And yeah, we always have these stories that are amazing. Let's take a break. When we come back. Kim, can we look behind the curtain, so to speak? I feel like another misconception out there is that people assume that their tuition pays for everything to run the college, and that's not the case. You need funding from outside sources. You have a foundation. There

are a ton of things that happen behind the scenes that people may not be aware of. Can we talk a little bit about that in the next segment? Would be glad to. We are on the zooms for Laurel Ridge Community College Day. Brandi Hawkins Boyce is joining me. She is director of public relations and special events. Her guest today is Doctor Kim Blosser. Kim is the president at Laurel Ridge Community College, all three campuses. Just in case you were wondering, we're going to come back and talk more with both of them in just a couple of minutes. Hello, nonprofits have a project that's been sitting on the back burner. United way NSV Day of Caring returns on September 19th, and your nonprofit can be a part of it. This is the region's largest single day volunteer event, with over 900 volunteers ready to help. Whether it's painting, landscaping, organizing, or repairs. Day of Caring gives your organization hands on support and saves thousands in maintenance costs. It's simple. Submit your project that United Way match you with the team. Focus more of your budget on what matters most your mission. Learn more at

United Way [nsv.org/day of caring](https://www.nsv.org/day-of-caring) or reach out to Day of Caring at [United Way nsv.org](https://www.nsv.org). Let us send helping hands your way.

Welcome back to the Valley today. I am your host, Janet Michael. It is Laurel Ridge Community College Day, so we are back on the zoom with Brandi Hawkins Boyce. She is director of public relations and special events for the college. Her guest today is Doctor Kim Blosser. Kim is president at Laurel Ridge Community College and tour guide. If you're ever on campus and your room, as we learned in the first segment, Kim can get you to where you need to go. How long did it take you, Kim, to figure out where everything was yourself? You do a lot of walking around as president, so it's not as hard as you might think. I try to make sure I wander around and say hi to folks, and so you learn pretty quickly where rooms are at our various campuses. We were joking during the break that I couldn't imagine how a student had you show them where room was, and then weeks or months later saw you in something, and then found out that you were actually the president of

the college. But that also goes hand in hand with the fact that you are a Peach County girl. You graduated from Peach County High School. You are from the Shenandoah Valley. That's right. I have loved this area my whole life, and I told them when I applied for the position that they would have a variety of people to choose from, and they would all have different strengths, but they would never find anybody that loved this area any more than, I love this area. I have chosen to stay here. I chose to live here. I chose for my kids to be raised here and I love it. I think we have a phenomenal area that probably unless you go away for a little while, you don't appreciate quite as much, especially when you're young, you don't appreciate it. But people are collaborative. We all work together. We all are looking for what's best for people in our communities. And so I feel really fortunate, really lucky to be able to work here. And I've loved it. I love it now. I wouldn't change it for anything. I think having someone who loves this area and has graduated from one of the local high schools really brings something extra

to the table when you're talking about the community college experience. Because we talked a lot in the first segment about the education portion of it, but there are a lot of barriers that keep people from even getting to the point where they're going to research whether or not they can get a certification or get a degree or take that first class. And because you know this area so well, it's a lot easier for you to say, this is a problem in this community. And here's something we can do to overcome that. You're very open to bringing in other programs into lowering those barriers for students. Yeah, I mean, we know that for most students, it's not that they're not smart enough. I mentioned earlier the sort of stats that keep me up. What we know is that you can have two students who graduate from high school, same GPA, took the same course, and a student who's in the lower income quartile will have about a 25% less chance of going on to higher ed than those in the higher income quartile. It just is what it is. And so they have other challenges that make it harder. And so our goal I

say all the time, I can't help those students write their English paper. We can't help them do their biology lab. They've got to study. They've got to do the work on the room. But everything else we can help them with and we should help them with, we should help them find resources in the community. If they're struggling with housing, all the wraparound services, we can provide food during the day through our food pantries. For the first time ever, we hired a social worker. And so we now have a social worker that's available to help students find resources, get connected in their community to others. I serve this year with another hat as the board chair for the Blue Ridge Area Food Bank, as well as being on the United Way board. And we've got to figure out how to as a community, none of us have enough resources. So how can we all work together to help members of our community? And that includes our students. So if they figured out a way to get to us, we've got to keep them and then figure out what we need to do to make sure those other barriers are met for those students. And some of that's through our

foundation. We have a very successful foundation.

We have a wonderful what we call the Helping Hands

Fund that also helps students that we used to call

the emergency fund. But they're just such good

students, and they think I probably shouldn't ask

for that because maybe it's not really an

emergency. Your tire blew out, now you can't get

somewhere. So we renamed it so people don't think

they have to have a major crisis to ask for some

funds. So it's the Helping Hands funds. And so we

do as much as we can to make sure our students can

finish with us. And succeed and either make it

into the workplace or onto a four year. We can't

overstate the impact that has on our community

overall, because these are students who are

ultimately going to become business owners. There

are people who are going to become our community

leaders. They may run for local offices like our

mayor of Stroudsburg, who is on the screen with us

today. But there are a lot of positive things to

helping students along to get them to that end

goal that the rest of us in the community are

going to benefit from. I encourage you to ask any

nurse at any doctor's office. I hope you don't have to go to the hospital, but if you are any of those, where did you get your education? And the majority will say at Laurel Ridge. And so we are the teachers that are in our school divisions. We just started a wonderful Future Educators Academy program that's going to put even more teachers into our local schools. Over 80% of our students stay in our region. They stay and live in our communities. And so that's why community college is so important in communities in our name. That's what we're doing. We're trying to give them a helping hand so they can do the work in the classroom. And then, yes, they're going to be better equipped to go out and get good paying jobs to contribute back to the community by home. And that's our goal, is to enrich our communities. A lot of the conversations that Brandi and I have, the guy Curtis and I have, revolve around the fact that it is so incredibly economical to start at Laurel Ridge Community College, that it gives you that opportunity without this massive investment or this massive debt hanging over your head. And I

think people don't often understand or realize when you talk about programs like the first funding program or we've talked about the Trio program, that those are all things that you get some outside funding for, but they don't often cover the entire cost of everything that you're then offering to the student. There is that foundation need. There is a lot of things that you have to move around in order to make it affordable for students. Yeah. So essentially the biggest pots of money are we get state funding and then that's offset. That's about usually somewhere close to 50% of the cost to operate the college comes through the state. The goal is that it should be at 60%, but we've not gotten there in many, many years. And so then we offset that with tuition. And our goal is always to keep tuition at least a third of the cost of a four year university. And so if you took a three credit class with us, it's going to cost you about \$525 this year without any financial aid. So you think for a year, \$5,200 is what it's going to cost to come here compared to what it cost to go to any

four year university? I know what I pay for Josh to go. So yes, there were more numbers in front of that comma. Yes, it's a lot more. But I do think community colleges have we have not told our story very well. We've always been very proud of and we should be that our costs are much more affordable. But full disclosure, we are not very well funded in Virginia, so we're the lowest community colleges are the lowest funded of all of higher ed and by a quite a bit. And when you compare us to all 50 states, higher education in general in Virginia is funded in about the middle of the pack. We're usually 25th, 26th, 28th in the nation as far as higher ed funding. But community colleges in particular have always been known as very frugal with our money. But the problem is we want to be able to start programs that students need. In terms of a workforce program. We're starting our power line worker program. We just had to raise that money. We've just had to try to figure out because we weren't getting money for the state from that. So we've been asking donors, we have a go for Ginia Grant, which we were very fortunate

to write and to be able to get, but we're putting together every little piece of funding we can find to be able to start programs, because some of them are very expensive. Bioscience is a big focus area over at our Full Gear campus. And that whole region, with all the money that's coming into Charlottesville and coming into UVA and coming into that sector with the biotechnology and bioscience area. And so to start that program, we have to figure out how to raise funds. It's always a struggle sometimes to get additional funding from the state to be able to support some of those, especially high cost programs. Virginia is looking at it. One of the things that the state as a whole is looking. Yet how higher education is funded in Virginia. Because we're not the same as other states and some of our neighbors. You look at North Carolina, how much Tennessee is spending in community colleges, and they are spending a lot more. And it has an impact on where companies locate, because the biggest part of when a company decides where they're going to locate is, where are you going to get talent to work here? And so

that's why they've invested so much. And so we're hopeful. We ask every year when we go to the legislature that we are their ticket for economic development and to get companies to come. And we're always talking to our local folks and our local folks understand that there needs to be additional funding to support community colleges. And so that's one of the areas we're working on. But it never hurts for any of us to also reach out to our local elected officials and say, hey, I heard on the radio this crazy, weird thing about community colleges and their funding. And I really support Laurel Ridge Community College, and I think you should do that. Never hurts. That's exactly right. Especially from our business folks and those that rely on community colleges for a lot of their workforce. It does help. They know what to expect when they hear from me that I'm going to tell them in order to add these programs, we've got to have more money. But it really does help tremendously because there's no reason to be frank. There is really no reason. Community colleges are the lowest funded in the state. And

so I think if business, those that benefit from community college graduates and those that are going through our training programs can talk to the local legislators, just that's a positive win for all of us. So, Brandi, throughout this conversation, we've talked about all the opportunities at Laurel Ridge. Classes are going on now. And the other thing that's really cool about community college is it doesn't like some of your four year schools have a hard stop on when you can start and when you finish, you have classes that start throughout the year, not just in the spring and in the fall. Yeah, absolutely. Fall classes started last week, but we have some that are starting next week, our 12 week classes, and we have some other options throughout October, but also our workforce continuing education classes are continuously enrolling. So it's never a bad time to reach out to us online, give us a call, or just walk through the front doors and we can help you. We've talked a lot about that. Just come in the front door because that is the easiest. Once you get in the door, then all of your

questions can be answered and you can see it's not a scary place. It's a really cool, fun place to just come. Even if you don't want to ask anybody any questions they get, you show up and wander the halls, get a sense or get a feel and then decide they're going to ask those questions. Yeah, I will tell you. One of the stats we're always very proud of is we do a current student survey in the fall of all of our current students, and then we also do a graduate survey just of students that are graduating each year. And we ask, what was your experience like? We ask a lot of different questions, but 97% of our students last year said they would recommend Laurel Ridge to a friend or to a family member. What we hear from students is when they come to your point, walking through the doors is actually the scariest part. Once they come, we hear almost 100% of the time. I had no idea that you had all this, or I had no idea people would be so nice and people would help. And we are, without a doubt a kind, helpful, just we want to help students meet whatever their goal is. And so you will meet a smiling face. You'll meet

someone that wants to help you. And if you don't even know what you want to do, someone that's going to talk to you about what are you, what are you're interested in? What can we maybe show you that we have programs available in? And so if you're worried is just the front door, I promise you, if you just make that first step, it's going to be a very positive experience from then on. Yep. Thank you for taking the time today. It's always fun to talk with you and not the United Way stuff. This is a no switch for us. No, no, but Janet's always in charge, so I don't care for United Way. And she leads us through these interviews. So it's great to talk to you Randy. Thank you. Well done. You can come back next month and just bring him with you. How about that? Sounds great. I will be back tomorrow with another episode of The Valley today a few minutes after noon. So meet me here then.