

Hello and welcome to the Valley. Today I am your host, Jana miko. It is Laurel Ridge Community College Day, so I'm back on the zoom today with Brandi Hawkins Boyce. Brandy is director of PR and special events for Laurel Ridge Community College.

It's good to see your face, Brandi. You've got your fall colors on. I think we're all embracing all weather these days. Yes we are. It's beautiful outside. It's already November. Not sure why or how that happened in my brain. I think it's still September, but thanks for having us here again. I brought a special guest with us today to honor our Veterans Day slash Veterans Week. We have on the zoom with us as well today, Jeff Sinclair. So Jeff, you are an Army veteran. So first, let me thank you for your service and then ask how it is that you ended up at Laurel Ridge Community College.

Once I left the military, I took time off to decompress for a little while, and I didn't really know what I wanted to do in life. The military was all I ever thought about, but once I started at Laurel Ridge, I first was a cybersecurity major and thought, hey, that just seems the way forward.

Technology. And it made sense. And I did that for, I think about a year, maybe more. And I was like, no, not for me. So I went ahead and stopped that and then switched to an associate's of science with a specialization in engineering, and just thought that at least that would give me the foundation to pursue a bachelor's in a degree that would translate into a career. I didn't want to waste my military benefits and wind up with a degree that I really could only parlay into a salary. When you were in high school, did you have any career aspirations? Did you think that the military was what you were going to do until you were in your 60 years? I have a niece. I was a horrible student in high school. Like, completely honest. In no way, shape or form did I ever see myself going to college. The military was all I ever thought I would do. And then after I retired from that, I figured I'd be like a postman or something like that. Or maybe a bus driver, I don't know, uh, definitely kind of like Benjamin Button in my life right now. Just taking it one day at a time and just let one degree lead into

another and let a plan form as I complete each segment. When you talk about doing cyber security initially, I think you're right in that that does seem like a very smart choice. How difficult was it to suddenly realize maybe this isn't the path that I should be on and then changing course? Yeah, I think the realization kind of set in when a lot of my peers, there's already a significant age difference ten, 15 years, and I could tell that they had already been exposed to it throughout their education, just in high school, even maybe even middle school. And a lot of it was intuitive for them. Whereas me, I was like, I feel this is the keyboard. I got that it's so I just felt like I was quickly in deep water and I was like, I am not comfortable here. This doesn't make sense. I had taken a few math classes and that kind of seemed to make sense. It was not easy, but it made sense. One plus one equals two. You learn that and you can move on to the more difficult stuff from there. And so that's why I went the direction with the engineering specialization. Do you feel like you've really found your niche? Yeah, I do like

the Stem categories more. I found after getting my associates, I went on to get my undergrad in chemistry with a minor in biology. In between there, I was a chemical engineering major at the University of North Dakota, and I switched to Shadow University here in Winchester, and they don't have a chemical engineering program. And so I had to switch my major again. Chemistry fit the bill at that point. And I just really had a wonderful chemistry professor, Doctor Sam Dillinger, there at Laurel Ridge Community College. And he laid the foundation for me to be interested in chemistry and then pursue that as my actual major. I've had a lot of conversations over the years with students, and a lot of them talk about their relationships with their professors and how that really has shaped, how they moved forward, and how they chose what their career paths were going to be. It sounds like you had very much the same type of experience. Yeah, absolutely. He was very personable for the way he broke down the curriculum. He did a reverse classroom as well, and so it allowed me to come in with questions

already posed to be taught there on moment and go home and then struggle with the content. I could struggle with the content before class and then come in, and then he was able to point me in the right direction, and then no point in time did I really feel overwhelmed because I knew that if I had questions, he would be there. And he was always prompt in all of his responses and just getting back. And so it didn't really leave me well in left field, so to speak, by myself, trying to figure things out. Or most of your classes.

Traditional, I say using air quotes like in person.

Or did you do some online classes? What did your schedule look like? It started off the traditional route. Everything was in person and then Covid happened and then everything got moved online. So, uh, kind of a mix of both. Did you find one to be easier than the other? I guess ignorance is bliss.

And so I didn't really know anything about the other one, because all I had experienced up until that point was the in person. But I will say, silver lining of the Covid pandemic was that it set me up for distance learning. And so once I

continued on from my associates to my undergrad, I was still living here in Winchester, Virginia, and I was going to the University of North Dakota. And so they had multiple routes. Whether they recorded the lectures, I could join the lectures live. I could look at past lectures and use that to help shape my studies and prepare myself for exams and get all the assignments done. Had I not been forced through Covid to figure out how to teach myself and where the online resources were, I don't think I could have done it. One definitely set me up for the next. Randy, we've had a lot of those conversations with students about the flexibility of being able to do online, to be able to start at Laurel Ridge and then transfer into ODU to other colleges and finish up those degrees without necessarily having to leave the Shenandoah Valley. Yeah, absolutely. There's so many different options and different paths that can really fit any individuals and needs. Like you just said, you listed all of them. And with our transfer agreements and so many online options now, it makes a lot of great opportunities available.

Jeff, were you a Winchester resident before you enlisted? How did you know about Laurel Ridge Community College to begin with? Uh, I grew up in southern rural Iowa, out in the middle of nowhere.

I'm a transplant. And then once I left the military, my kids lived out here. So that's what brought me to the area. And then once I took some time off after the military and thought that I should probably figure out another career, Laurel Ridge fit the bill. Whose? It was a proximity thing. So that's what drew me into Law Ridge there.

I'm curious about your first experience at Laurel Ridge. When you decide, okay, this is the path that I'm going to explore. Did you go to the college, walk in the door and say, hey, I'd like to talk to somebody about potentially getting a degree. What was that process like? It's been a little while. At this point. I don't remember exactly what I did. I believe that I started off online just researching it. I do think that I came in and talked to different faculty and staff there at Laurel Ridge. But primarily I remember talking to the veterans coordinator and, uh, I believe she

still works there. And this painter, Sharon Painter. And I have got to say, she was phenomenal. She was a one stop shop for me. She seemed like she could do everything. Whereas follow on at both the University of North Dakota and now, uh, Shenandoah University, there's a veterans coordinator or student advisor and everything, and she was everything for me. And she's like, these are the classes you need to take. This is your schedule. I'm submitting everything as your veterans coordinator. I'm also doing your benefits submissions and everything. And so I thought that's how it was going to be moving forward, that I'd always have just one point of contact that just did everything for me. So she just really made everything smooth and set the bar pretty high and spoiled me. It sounds like she totally spoiled you right out of the gate. Absolutely. As someone who has left the military, how does that work? Are you given a packet of here or what your benefits are? And if you want to continue your education, this is what you need to do or do. They just say, hey, you can go to this website and check it out.

And then you have to find someone like Mrs. Painter to be able to walk you through it. Yes, by and large, if you meet certain criteria, then you're entitled to educational benefits as a veteran. And then the vast majority of schools accept the GI Bill. So once I realized that I wanted to go to Law Ridge, I reached out to the veterans coordinator's there again, Miss Painter. And then she took the ball and ran with it and then just said, hey, do this, do that. And I said, yes, ma'am. Brandi, we've talked in the past about how those advisors that you have there, whether it's for just your traditional student or someone who specializes working with veterans to continue their educational journey, they really are invaluable and offers such specific information and guidance. Yeah. Our Veterans Center, where Sharon Painter works with japa, just talked about along with Jean Marie. They're specifically there to support our veterans, students and their families because they can get a little complicated, can't add up all the paperwork, all the benefits that are out there. And so we just really need

those expert individuals to help guide us through that, because coming to school, to college, no matter what level is, is intimidating in itself.

And then adding on top of it, trying to figure out your GI Bill information and all that stuff can be really overwhelming. So. They're essential to be there and help our veteran students. And then, as you mentioned, we have advisors and our trio program that are there for different populations of our students because we all need that extra support and assistance to get us through that and all those processes. Let's take a break. Jeff, can we talk a little bit more about what your plans are for the future when we come back in the next segment? Yeah, absolutely. Sounds like a plan. We are on the zooms today with Brandi Hawkins Boyce. She is the director of PR and special events for Laurel Ridge Community College. Her guest today is Jeff Sinclair. He's a current student at Laurel Ridge Community College. We're going to learn more about his educational journey when we come back in just a couple of minutes.

Okay. I don't think Janet knows I'm recording this.

She just stepped away to get another cup of coffee.

So here's my chance. Hey, everyone, it's Andy from the United Way in the northern Shenandoah Valley.

And yes, Janet, if you're here in this surprise,

we're still celebrating the Valley. Today's 20

500th episode and its awesome community fundraiser

you came up with. Here's the deal. Between now and

the end of the year, it's Janet's goal to raise

\$2,500 to support the great work of the nonprofits

in this community. If you give just \$25 or more,

you're going to be entered into a chance to be a

guest on the show with Janet. If you give \$250 or

more, we'll make you a commercial just like this

one that will air on the Valley Today podcast. So

go to give [butter.com/the value today](https://butter.com/the-value-today). Right now,

before she realizes that I've hijacked her airtime,

she's walking back in a cup of coffee in hand.

Gotta go. Remember to donate between now and the

end of the year, and support the great work of so

many nonprofits and celebrate 2500 episodes of The

Valley today.

Come back to the valley today. I am your host,

Janet Michael. It is Laurel Ridge Community

College Day, so we are on the zoom with Brandi Hawkins Boyce. She's director of public relations and special events for Laurel Ridge Community College. Her guest today is Jeff Sinclair. Jeff is a graduate of Laurel Ridge. Has gone on now to further his career. So, Jeff, I want to come back to you for a second because when we went to break, I said, current student. And then during the break, you were telling me that you've actually finished your classes at Laurel Ridge, are now at Shenandoah University. Tell me a little bit about where you are now and where you hope to be in a year or two years from now. Yeah. So after I got my associates of science and engineering from Laurel Ridge, I then went on to get my bachelor's with a major in chemistry, minor in biology from Shenandoah University. And then past that, I was accepted into the Bernard J. Dunn School of Pharmacy at Shenandoah. So I'm working on my Doctor of Pharmacy now and their program, it's a four year program. So in 2 to 3 years, I hope I'm still in the program and I am finishing it up. Do you hope to stay in the area and be a pharmacist

in the Shenandoah Valley when you're finished? You know, that's Future Jeff's problem. I'm going to let him go ahead and talk about that. I do hope to be a pharmacist someplace, though. Maybe chase my kids. They currently live out in Boise, Idaho. Get out there and try to pursue a career in pharmacy someplace close to them. Randy. Jeff, as an Army veteran, is unique in his educational journey because you have special programs, you have an entire office dedicated to helping veterans get jump started on their education once they leave the military. How does that work? At Laurel Ridge? We have the Veterans Services Center. You can find out more information at Laurel Ridge, Dot edu slash veterans. Or you can just pop into any of our locations and say, where's the veterans office? And we'll show you where it's at. And again, it's Jean. Marie and Sharon are our advisors slash supporters and that office, and they're doing a fantastic job. We have an office here at Middletown and as well as full gear. And of course, if anybody's over near the Lorraine Center, they can serve you there as well. Is it as simple as

someone coming in saying, hey, I just retired from the military, or I'm finished with my service and don't even really know where I want to go or what I want to do next. They can literally take it from zero and help them chart that path. Absolutely.

Yeah. I don't think you have to come in with any preparation. You can start at ground zero and they'll start with the conversation. Tell me about yourself. Tell me what your goals are. I think that's the great thing, especially here at the community college, is we don't expect you to come in with the research already ready and your goals set, we can help you with that. We have all kinds of support here to just help you with that path, no matter where you're starting. Jeff, you referenced this earlier in our conversation. The fact that you have been a student at Laurel Ridge, you've been a student at University of North Dakota, you're currently a student at Shenandoah University across the gamut of those different types of educational institutions. Did you find it less daunting at Laurel Ridge Community College because it was so one on one? Yeah, absolutely.

Especially having really no experience in upper education and then applying myself wholeheartedly at high school or anything and having that age gap that would I had learned I had definitely already forgotten. Moving into there was that fear that I would quickly find myself in over my head, and that was not the case at all. I could go on and a multiple professors that I had at the time, from physics to engineering to math to chemistry, and they were all phenomenal. But every one of them was personable. Everyone had an open door policy. Everyone would take the time to break things down. Many different ways to ensure that you understood the curriculum moving forward, and it just took the stress out of everything for me. I think it also is great that you initially started thinking cybersecurity and then ultimately went into engineering and now have ended up in pharmacy at the pharmacy school at Shenandoah. Those seem like such different tracks to ultimately end up where you are. I jokingly said earlier, that's future Jeff's problem, all that and figure it out. But that's been my mantra of the whole time is one

step at a time and then just complete this and then along the way, let that kind of guide you to your next and state, if you will. So with the associates in engineering, that kind of pushed me to pursue a bachelor's in engineering. And then I decide, hey, I like chemistry, so why not chemical engineering? And then once I needed a transfer that added engineering, why not just chemistry? And because of the chemistry background moving into pharmaceuticals, then they just connected the. And then along the way, five years ago, if you would have asked me, do you see yourself being a farmer? Something like, I don't even know what a farmer, let alone wanting to be one type thing. And yet here I am. The other part of that too. And granted, you have the benefits from the GI Bill, but any other student would have spent quite a bit of money figuring out along the way that this isn't necessarily what they wanted to do. So getting that start at Laurel Ridge, where it's so much more economical probably was beneficial to you as well. Yeah, that is definitely a benefit for me. Having the military education, it doesn't

really matter where I'm going per se, as far as the cost, because the GI Bill will cover up to a certain amount per semester and everything. So as long as I'm within that, I could essentially go to Harvard. If they don't follow up that cap, but definitely going to Laurel Ridge. One thing that I liked about them is their articulation agreement that they have with other universities in the surrounding area. So could I have gone to say Virginia Tech? No, probably not, because they would have looked at my high school GPA and the fact that I'll have an actor sat and they would have laughed me out of the application. But having gone to War Ridge first and then getting a good GPA and getting my feet underneath me, then once I graduated, I could have transferred to Virginia Tech or VCU or really any university in the area that I had looked at, whether that was West Virginia University as well. So that was definitely a driving factors. Well, that they had, again, this articulation agreement that as long as I put in the work, it would ensure me a path forward. I've had conversations in the past with

different veteran organizations that make sure that the veterans in our area know what's available to them, know about resources that are available to them, and a lot of them talk about the education component of it, and that either veterans say, oh, that's not something I could do, or I didn't know that I could still be able to apply and go back to school. What kind of advice do you have for someone who is listening right now?

And maybe they're five years out of their military service, or they're just getting ready to come out of their service? What would you say to them if they're thinking even a little bit about continuing their education? Do it. Just do it. I know that it can seem daunting, especially if you are older. I'm personally 40 years old, so I'm going to school with young adults in their early 20s at Laurel Ridge. I'm sure they were in their teens and I was in my mid 30s. So it goes back to how do you meet an elephant? One bite at a time. So start small and just take it one semester at a time. I definitely am appreciative that I got my associates first. So that way if you decide to

take a break after two years, at least you have something to show for your work. You know, opposed to. If you just start off at a four year institution and you decide to take a break at two years, you don't really have anything other than to say, I went to college for a couple of years, but I don't have a degree. So start small. Get your feet wet. Use that to springboard you into something else. And then again, if you want to take that break, then you have something to show for your time and it says little things that motivate you to keep going, where four years is a long time and not to have anything to show for that, it's hard to keep the motivation up. But after two years, if you have something to hang on your wall, something and pat yourself on the back about, then it motivates you to spread your on to hopefully your four year degree. And even beyond that, if you want to do postgraduate stuff. I'm curious if whether or not being in classrooms with people who were younger than you also gave you a little bit of motivation or inspiration that, hey, I can still do this. Starting off, I definitely

kept to myself mostly and just took in my surroundings and just the situation as a whole.

And then as I got to know my classmates, my peers, I would open up more. And at no point that I really ever feel like ostracized or anything like that. It's easy during group projects to get in because everybody's working towards the same goal, and if they knew more than you, then they wouldn't be there. They already be graduated. So you're really all on the same level, regardless of age or knowledge in any other areas. And so that kind of society's brandy, as people are listening on the radio this week is Veterans Appreciation Week. Do I have that right at Laurel Ridge Community College? Yeah, absolutely. We're celebrating Veterans Day, which was on Tuesday, November 11th.

And so the whole week, our student life office has put together several events that have been taking place. We have think of veteran card stations set up where we have been writing cards to veterans. There's a beautiful veterans memorabilia display in the lobby here at Cornerstone Hall. And then there's an appreciation luncheon for our veterans

took place on November 11th. And then today, a trivia game, a military movie trivia game. It probably really makes it less intimidating. I think when you have just regular, normal events, Jeff, that people can show up for. And it's not that, oh my gosh, first day of school kind of thing. Do you think that makes it easier for people to just walk in the door when it's an event that they're going to first? Yeah, absolutely. You know, it gives you a chance to connect with your peers beforehand, and maybe you might find some upperclassmen that are there that can say, hey, these are things that I wish I would have done differently. These are were concerns of mine that I should not waste any time or ever or energy concerning myself with. It just again lays the foundation in a way forward for you to just feel more comfortable even beginning classes as a whole.

Randy, is registration open now? If someone is listening, veteran or otherwise, and they're like, you know what? This is it. I am finally going to make that step. Can they do that right now? Yeah, absolutely. We are open for spring registration

right now. So you can go to Laurel Ridge Study  
Boogieing roll. And I love Jeff, what you were  
saying. I love how you refer to future Jeff, I  
need to I think I'm to start doing that with  
myself. Future Brandi, because it's so true that a  
lot of times we think we have to know the answer,  
right? We have to think we know the path or we  
have to know what that outcome is. It's okay not  
to know. And you're the perfect example of going  
one path and then it leads to another. And you  
said one step at a time. And so that's what it's  
about. And all of us do that. And we don't need to  
know the answer as long as we're just taking the  
step. Right. So great job. Very inspiring Jeff.  
Thanks. Sure hope I don't let anybody down. But  
yeah. Well, and I think you make a good point,  
Brandi, because so many times we don't know where  
we want to be. So we don't know how to start. And  
the how to start part is really the easiest ever,  
because you just have to walk in the door or get  
on line, and then everything else just unfolds as  
you go. Yep. Just start. You don't have to. Just  
one step at a time. Just like Jeff from

cybersecurity to pharmacy that I still that is just the coolest thing ever. Brandi, thank you for taking the time and for introducing me to Jeff today. I appreciate it. Thanks, Jeff, for your time. Thank you for your service and Happy Veterans Week. There's my pleasure. Thank you for inviting me on the show. Jana and Brandi, thank you for thinking of me again and reaching out, and I'm happy to be here. I can't wait in a couple of years that maybe you stay here. Jeff and I walk into the pharmacy to refill a prescription for one of my dogs, and I'll be like, I know you all right? I hope so as well. I will be back tomorrow with a brand new episode of The Valley today, a few minutes after noon. So meet me here then.