



LOWELL SCHOOLS FUND

Interview with Katerynne Patino

Tiana: Can You Introduce Yourself And Tell Me A Bit About Who You Are Today?

Katerynne: My name is Katerynne Patino and I am the Director of Operations at Project LEARN.

Tiana: How did your years as a student at Lowell High School help shape the person you are today, both in your personal life and your professional career?

Katerynne: I would say learning to advocate for myself as a student is the foundation of my personality and my career. At the time, I thought it was normal to advocate. I didn't even realize it was doing it. That is what gave me the motivation to change my career when I was at the top of the banking world. I started as a teller and made it all the way to Operations Manager and Branch Manager, but I felt I was not doing enough for the world at that time. That's why I switched to education work without even knowing that it was my real thing – my real passion.

Tiana: What Was Your Experience Like As A Newcomer To Lowell And To Lowell High School? Did You Feel Like You Had The Support And Community You Needed?

Katerynne: Yes and no. It was very, very hard. English was my second language – I didn't know any words in English, just "Hi" and "Bye." That's it. I feel that even after 23 years, students still feel the same way when they walk into Lowell High School for the first time. They feel very lost, but there is always one person – one teacher or one classmate, who wants to help you.



In my time, I didn't have a lot of support, but there were a few people you could always connect with. Somebody in a specific role who helped you, supported you, guided you, and mentored you.

Tiana: Yeah. I Feel Like I Had The Same Support In My Biology Class Senior Year. Was There A Specific Class, Mentor, Or Experience From Your Time At Lowell High That Really Stuck With You And Influenced Your Path?

Katerynne: Yes! I always say this everywhere, it was Doctor Maria Vejar. She was a Spanish teacher. I think she was the only one who spoke Spanish at that time, and I used to go to her all the time. Nowadays, we work together and put on events together. We attend the same community events and the relationship with her has been similar to the one I have with a few people at Lowell High School. There is also a specific person who works at Central Office who helped me at that time and now I have the opportunity to work with her, too. These people not only helped me when I was a newcomer, they still help me today, and will always look up to them.

Tiana: What Does "Success" Look Like To You Today, And How Did Your Time In The Lowell Public Schools Help Define That View?

Katerynne: I think success is not getting stuck. In life, there are always going to be barriers. You always have barriers and excuses not to succeed. Success is different for everybody. For someone, it can be having a career or having a house. For myself, success is not being in the same place where you started. For example, I came with nothing and knew zero English, and now after 23 years, I'm having a conversation with you. For me, that's success. It's the little steps that you take all along the way.

Tiana: What Initially Drew You To Project Learn & And How Does Your Role There Connect Back To Your Own Experiences As A Lowell Student?

Katerynne: When I decided to quit banking, It was because I thought, "Okay, I love this career and I'm at a very good moment of my career, but I'm not helping the world." I was helping people with credit cards to learn about financial literacy, but then when I started at the Stocklosa and got the opportunity to work part-time at Project LEARN, it was about advocating for families.

My first role at Project LEARN was to help to connect schools and parents to put their voices together and make change in the city. Again, this takes me back to me advocating for myself without knowing it. Now I have the opportunity to do it on a bigger scale. That's when I opened my eyes to the fact that what I was doing is called advocacy. When you think something is not the right thing, it is okay for you to have a voice. So that's how I started with Project LEARN. If Project LEARN had existed at that time, my classmates might have had a different path because there would have been more opportunities that we didn't even know existed.

Tiana: From Your Perspective Now, Why Do Strong Public Schools Matter So Much To The Lowell Community, And How Does An Initiative Like The Lowell Schools Fund Help To Meet Needs That You Remember Having As A Student?

Katerynne: I think the Lowell Schools Fund project gives more opportunities not only to students, but also to teachers, parents, staff, and administration. Teachers are always worried about budget cuts. This week everybody is talking about the new school budget and how it's going to be cut because of everything going on. I think having private funds opens more doors and more opportunities not only for students but for teachers and staff. It's like having a little peace of mind in this crazy world – having a little something that you know can help in Lowell Public Schools.

Tiana: What Excites You Most About The Future Of Lowell's Schools And The Work You Are Leading At Project Learn To Support The Next Generation Of Students?

Katerynne: It inspires me every single day. I know Project LEARN is special, not just because I work here, but because I see firsthand the opportunities that we give to students to experience real jobs. It might give them the chance to say early on, "No, I don't want to study that," or "I don't want to go into this career path." It's because they already tried it and confirmed it at an earlier stage.

Tiana: What Advice Would You Give To Current Lowell High Students As They Think About Their Own Futures And The Impact They Want To Make After Graduation?

Katerynne: As I said earlier, there are always going to be barriers. There is always going to be something going on or something unfair. But I think if you really want to be successful, you just need to make sure you keep going.

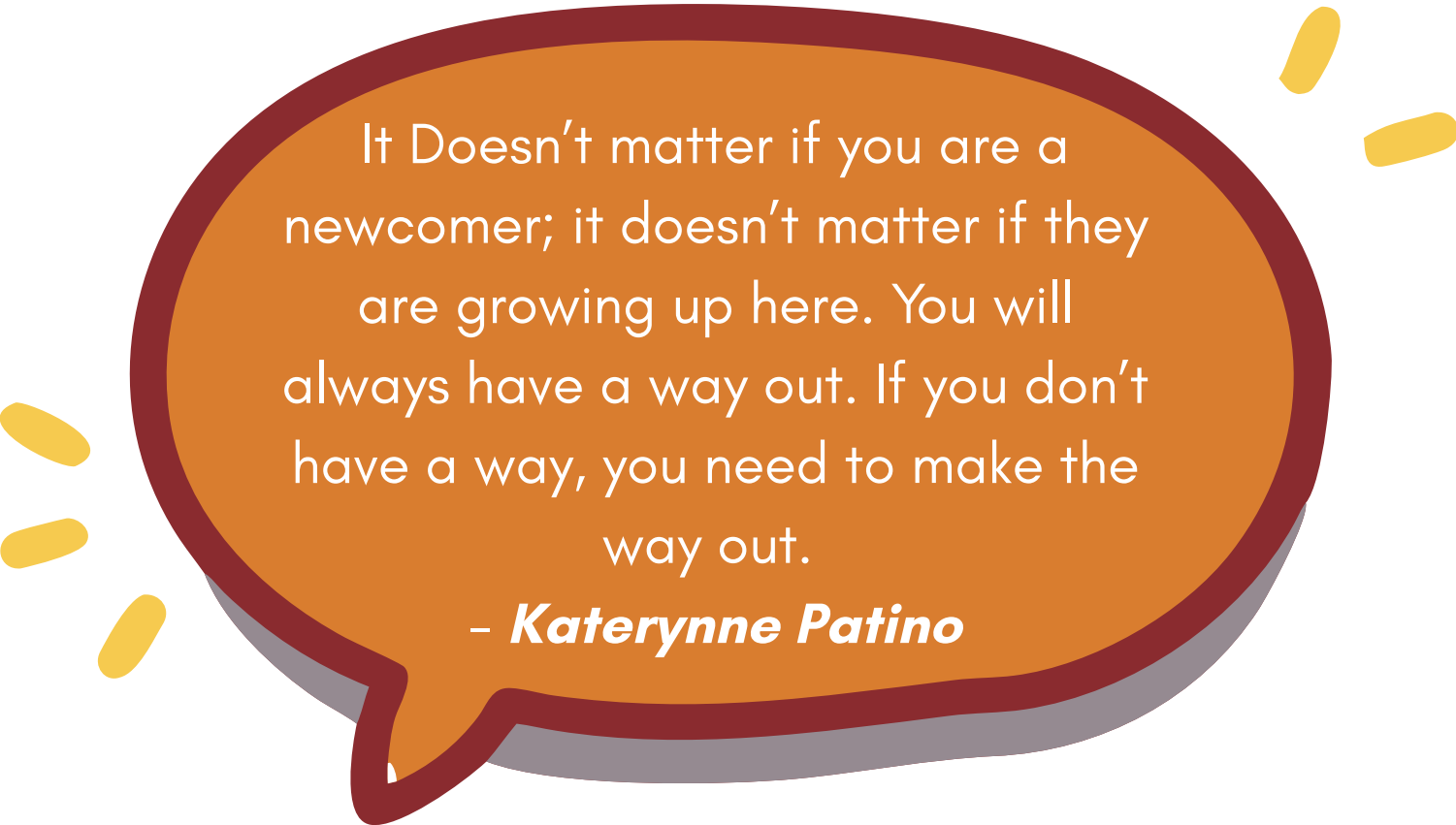
I always tell this to people. It's like if you have a river, and the river is full of rocks. You can complain about every single rock or enjoy jumping across the rocks to go to the other side of the river. There is always going to be something in life, it could be sickness or it could be a lot of other things. But if you live in the present moment and take advantage of all opportunities and enjoy doing it, there are no excuses not to be whatever you want to be.

Tiana: Using Your Metaphor, What Was One Rock You Had To Walk Over To Get Past Something You Were Struggling With?

Katerynne: When you learn English as a second language, you always hear people say, "I'm scared to talk" or "I'm scared to do this." I love to study and go to college but when I graduated, I didn't know a lot of English. So, I needed to finish English as a second language.

Tiana: So, would you say that students should go and do something that they might be afraid of because they don't know about the outcome?

Katerynne: Correct!



It Doesn't matter if you are a newcomer; it doesn't matter if they are growing up here. You will always have a way out. If you don't have a way, you need to make the way out.

- Katerynne Patino