

Kara Snyder 0:00

Hello and welcome to the podcast a podcast produced by the College of Applied Science and Technology at Illinois State University. I'm your host Kara Snyder and I serve as the assistant dean of marketing communications and constituent relations for the College. Each episode we're sitting down with an alum of the College and today we have a chance to talk to Michelle Letcher. Michelle is an alum of the Department of military science and recently retired from the United States Army at the rank of brigadier general. Welcome and thank you for being here.

Michelle Letcher 0:29

Thanks, Kara. It's an honor to be part of this broadcast.

Kara Snyder 0:32

Well, let's start at the beginning. Why did you choose ISU?

Michelle Letcher 0:36

So I chose ISU really based on his reputation. I had only had three years of high school I decided I wanted to start college early. I was interested in being a teacher, Illinois State had a phenomenal still does phenomenal reputation as a teaching school. And so for me, it seemed like an easy choice to apply and then attend college.

Kara Snyder 0:56

So then tell us you come to campus, you want to be a teacher, what made you interested in joining the army? Why did you become a cadet?

Michelle Letcher 1:04

So I don't think I realized that at the time when I became a cadet. My initial draw is I was walking around campus for an orientation day was the ROTC, the Reserve Officer Training Corps table, you know, kind of booth and recruiting. And they had like a repel tower, I believe, and I thought it looked interesting. But as I kind of reflect back on it, I think the real draw came earlier in my life. When I was in middle school, I was part of speech. And my dad was a Vietnam veteran, although he served before I was born. So I wasn't exposed to his service when I was younger. But I was doing speech in the first year, I'd written a speech and tornados and won some awards. And then the next year, I was trying to decide what to write a speech on. And my dad suggested maybe POWs prisoner of wars in the Senate action from the Vietnam War. And he and I were working on it a little bit together, and he was running for Alderman at the time. And his time commitment to helping me wasn't as much as it was a year before. And I think I had lost some self confidence and how well the speech was going to be. So about a week before I was supposed to present the speech at the school for the first round of competition, I pulled out of it, because in the competition, you had to stand in front of the entire school and from memory as a seventh, seventh or eighth grade, you had to give this speech, and I didn't think I could do it. And the day of the competition, I was sitting in the gym with the entire school, and I thought I could do this. So I walk up to the front, I grabbed the teacher, I'm like, I want to compete. So she let me get the speech in front of the entire school. And I did very well, scoring wise, except one teacher who said, because I had quit previously, that she wasn't gonna score

me in a way that would allow me to move on to further competitions. And I was pretty devastated by it. And somewhere in that process, my dad suggested that we go, and it's even Vietnam, Veterans of America and association that was in a suburb nearby. And we went there, and they kind of just took me in, and I started speaking at rallies, and they put me on the radio. And there was just this sense of, you know, kind of belonging and being part of a team that I think really resonated with me. And I think later on, I ended up getting to college, there was a part of that that kind of stuck with me. And so when people asked, you know, why join, I really think it was an experience in middle school. And that exposure on campus kind of coming together. And then through my college years, I went to Illinois State elect Illinois State. And then I came back a constant through all of that was joining ROTC, there was just something about that, that felt like family. And so wherever I was, I found myself drawn to that organization.

Kara Snyder 3:32

That's an incredible story of courage from a seventh grader, which I think a lot of people listening would say, Gosh, that was a tough time. Where did you find that within yourself at such a young age, that perseverance, that courage? Where did that come from?

Michelle Letcher 3:49

You know, I think from my father and my mother, I come from three girls. And so I think, you know, and families were maybe at that time people put their energy and things like that towards sons, I think my father had been all girls, they just really gave us a sense of empowerment, self esteem, self confidence, you know, I always grew up, you can kind of grow up to be anything you want to be, there was really nothing holding me back. And so I think taking a risk, then I didn't feel like it was really anything to lose. I mean, except for the nerves that I think any person would have standing in front of an audience like that. But I think the confidence came from home.

Kara Snyder 4:23

Well, and what a valuable life skill for you to have at such an early age. I think that's really great. So tell us what do you miss the most about your time on campus, being here as a red bird studying to become a teacher being part of Army ROTC, what stands out to you?

Michelle Letcher 5:00

So I think when I go back, there's a feeling on campus right as you walk across campus, especially in the fall, which is in my favorite time of year, I think a little deeper than that. Illinois State but just in general, I consider myself a lifelong learner. And in the military, I was really blessed by an education system, it's part of the pillars of being in service is to continually educate yourself. And so when you're in an academic setting, you have this great opportunity to really explore your ideas, things that interest you. I missed that. I'm part of a book club here in Austin, and we were having a discussion about the Barbie movie. And somebody was talking about the feminist theories. And I was thinking to myself that it'd been really a long time since I'd been in the classroom, and really updated on how some of those have evolved. And so when I think about what I miss about it, what do I say that was the opportunity to be in a classroom, which is really a safe environment to explore what you're thinking, what you're feeling, what

you're learning. And I've actually thought about maybe taking a class or two, because I really miss that part of my growth as a person.

Kara Snyder 5:47

Yes, I agree, continuing to challenge yourself to grow and evolve. That's so important. And it probably speaks to your interest in going into education in the first place and becoming a teacher. So tell us what it was like when you have this degree. And you also have commissioned into the army tell us what it was like to transition from your time on campus to being an officer in the army and what making that choice was like for you.

Michelle Letcher 6:15

So the choice wasn't probably as direct as maybe I would hope it would be. As I was getting ready to graduate from school, and I was trying to decide, you know, what I wanted to do in the army, the professor of military science in the ROTC program kind of encouraged me to go active duty, it was harder to get he thought it would be great for me, I would be a good fit. I just kind of went along with that. I don't think I really understood the magnitude of what I would call a really phenomenal opportunity. Although I don't think I understood that at the time. I was just kind of immaturely going through this process, I would say I was an average student, I was an below average cadet, I think I was the last person on the order of merit list. And I needed two waivers to actually get commissioned. And I don't think I thought I would stay very long and service. My goals, I think very similar to a lot of my peers at the time was, I wanted to get married, I wanted to have children, the career was not the number one thing on my list, it was a means to an end, which if things would have worked out differently would kind of been sad, because I mean, I love being a mom and I love being a wife. But service has just been this phenomenal opportunity to not just get back to a community or a county or state but globally be part of something. But I had to get two waivers to get commission. And then I went into my officer basic course. And I really didn't do that well in there either. They actually held a board to decide, should she stay in service. One I don't think my heart was in it. I was academically challenged in the field they had put me in, but they decided to let me go ahead and I moved on to my first assignment, which was in South Korea. And when I was there, I was Air Defense Artillery on the Patriot system. And we had to table certify the Patriot system. And I did a record certification within I think two weeks I tabled for which then like a month I tabled ah, I mean, these are things that usually took people three months, six months, almost a year to do. And I was moving through this that I remember somebody saying to me, who are you like this is natural. You were, you know, the past six months in school. And it was in that transition that I really found the importance of leadership. And leadership isn't just about the grades you get on paper. And Leadership isn't about how fast you run. It's about your ability to connect with people and help them and as you get more senior, I think most leaders learn with leadership comes resources. And with those resources, you get to help people more and tying back to this social work degree that I got from Illinois State. It was such a great fit for what I had built in my foundation at ISU, and then what I've been given as an opportunity as a career in the world.

Kara Snyder 8:56

Well, and this is so interesting, because for those of our listeners that know you they probably are aware that your career history is lengthy and it is impressive. And so to hear you say that you started out as somewhat of an underdog honestly is really a source of inspiration for people. I think they don't exactly know what they want to do or maybe aren't super confident in their leadership skills. Right now. I like to hear that you went from you know, a cadet who needed a second review to see if this was even something you could do to an end up an inductee the College Hall of Fame. Wow, what a transition. Your career included a variety of army assignments. And you mentioned the first one was in South Korea. When you think back on that what was your favorite assignment throughout this lengthy list and storied career what comes to mind?

Michelle Letcher 9:47

On the cursory I would just share that my favorite assignments overall were the ones where I thought I had the most impact to our national security. I think the overall favorite assignment for me would be my time serving in Europe. I did my battalion command in Europe. And when I was there we high five, because we sent all the tanks home because, you know, Russia was no longer a threat. And I went to Afghanistan. And then I came back, I actually went to senior service college at the University of Texas at Austin. And then I came back for brigade command within two years, and the entire world had changed. Putin had annex Crimea, we were spending a lot of time in Eastern Europe. As a matter of fact, those two years of command I spent about 180 days each year in Eastern Europe, and the ability to work with our allies to deter Russian aggression to work with NATO. I mean, it was such an honor to be part of that team. I would say that was my favorite assignment. My dad's family of four, his grandparents emigrated from Poland. So I think from a personal level, I felt a little bit connected on that part of the world, getting to kind of immerse myself in it on a service level, getting to train soldiers in Eastern Europe, developing junior leaders, it was just wonderful on all accounts. And then, like I said, working with our allies getting to learn about all these countries are extremely different. They have varying levels of you know, maturity, when it comes to their armies. Some are, you know, really growing, some are really investing, some are transitioning, and so getting to be part of that I found to be the most rewarding assignment. And then on the flip side, I have to ask what was your most challenging assignment. So my last assignment, I think, was the most challenging, which I found to be really ironic, because you know, it wasn't in combat, I have three combat tours, I would have thought that one of those would be the most challenging. I think the more senior I got, the more challenging service became. And as a matter of fact, when you transition out of service, we do a lot of medical reviews, one of the people you sit down with is a psychologist or psychiatrist, but I was doing my Behavioral Health Review. And I said to her, I don't understand these last two years have been the hardest for me. And I'm not even in combat, right? Like, why is this so hard. And I remember her looking at me, she looked me right in the eye. And she said, because when you crash through a glass ceiling, you get cut and bruised. And I remember walking away from that appointment and reflecting on the last few years in my career. And it resonated with me a lot that sometimes we think things get easier when rank or position or authority gets added on. But with that responsibility, and you know, a maturing work environment, sometimes there's a lot more challenges than we recognize.

Kara Snyder 12:31

Speaking of glass ceilings, that leads right into my next question for you tell us what it was like to be a woman and what is historically a male dominated organization.

Michelle Letcher 12:41

So I've actually done a lot of reflecting on, you know, as I've gotten a little older, also, I'm raising three sons. So you know, I think I look at things you know, as an Army officer, as a mother, my husband is a phenomenal partner, I could not be where I am today without such a progressive husband, who helped me through the years kind of recognize this might be a great place to push back or not push back, I think the hardest part through all of it, and it's something I had to wrestle with through the years. It's the assimilation, one makes into a male culture, when they're in a male dominated culture, this need to fit in by acting, behaving, tolerating cultures, that may not be the best for the entire organization. And so I would say, that's been the challenge throughout the years. And then as I get more senior, I have found that it was harder to speak up, because you had become part of this club through time.

Kara Snyder 13:36

And so you mentioned you know, you'd have those conversations with your husband, and in essence, trying to pick which battles to fight. So how did you decide when to fight those battles? How were you an effective advocate for yourself in that environment?

Michelle Letcher 13:52

I think when I was younger, I wasn't necessarily a great advocate, advocate for women that advocate herself. As an advocate for SEL, for me, I kind of kept my head down and went with the flow so that I would be invited to the table, because what I had noticed is when people push back, they no longer were invited to the table. And so in my mind, as long as I continued getting to the table, I could continue driving change in a silent way, right by just being present. And maybe in the future, having more women invited to the table. That worked for me, obviously, because I was able to stay close to 30 years. I don't know how I could have done that differently. I think about that a lot. I watch women who kind of assimilate and then I watch women who are very loud advocates, and I don't know if either really make it further race, I don't know, which is the better of the two. But as I got older, I realized I had more of a responsibility to speak up and as I, you know, became more senior. I tried to do that more often. And then there's an art to that as well. To my point earlier, being able to be invited back to the table, I think, as I watched in the army, younger women have such a great opportunity to speak up. I think, as I watch these environments, there's more acceptance for younger women to speak up in those environments. So I encourage women to do that young women to do that. I also encourage young women to flood these markets that are historically men. Outside of the military, I think stem environments are another opportunity. I'm always coaching women, if you are good at science or technology, engineering, math, don't hold back on getting into those fields, the real change in the future is going to come from women stepping up now into those fields. One of my master's degrees, I worked on a paper about the influence of women in Iran. And one of the things I walked away with is to truly change a culture. The women have to do that. They're the educators, they're the mothers, you know, they have such a role in being part of that. And so I wish I would have had

more females, you know, on my left and right kind of in this fight, but we're starting to see more and more involvement, those percentages go up, I think, as I was leaving service, we had 22%, were women serving, I think around 18%, were officers, even less than that at the more senior ranks, but we've got to get more women 50% would be optimal, higher than that, obviously, would be ideal, but getting women in those spaces to help drive that sort of change in those fields.

Kara Snyder 16:22

Very well said. And I think, you know, it is hard to kind of be an advocate for yourself or for women as you're navigating that. But I think the important thing to do is do it in a way that feels true to who you are and true to your values. And along those lines. I'm curious, I know you've held a variety of leadership roles throughout your career, how would you describe your leadership style.

Michelle Letcher 16:44

I think that has also changed over time, because you're adapting to the environment. So the leadership style, the environment you're in, has to be tailored, I think when I was younger, I was definitely more direct, I was more, this is going to be done, maybe more authoritative in nature as I got older. And I think life experience is really important when it comes to leadership, but probably more empathetic, more understanding of what individuals need and how that helps the organization where I think when I was younger, it was fit in or get out. Now it's how can we use your talents to make this organization better. And I think the world's kind of evolved in that way. And the military is such a great learning organization as well. I've watched us move from drill sergeants that were doing the knife hand to drill sergeants taking off their hats, systemically tied to you know, authority and power and saying, How can I help you? And so I think that my leadership evolved with that as well.

Kara Snyder 17:46

And I imagine that you were also in positions where you saw a variety of leadership styles from others. What is one quality that you've seen in a leader that you admired?

Michelle Letcher 17:58

I think one of the leadership lessons or styles that I took away, I was probably around the 15 or 16 year mark, but I saw a leader something bad happened, like a soldier had died, or something really horrible had happened. And I had seen leaders in the past to don't handle stress well, and they kind of get upset, like how could that happen? You know, the best leadership style I've seen and I adapted it, once I saw that is when somebody calls you with something really bad. The first response should be how can I help you? And so I think when you're a leader and the first thing you say to somebody who's following you is What can I do for you? Not you know this, putting them down arguing adding more stress to an already stressful or crisis situation, I think is a phenomenal leadership technique.

Kara Snyder 18:43

What can I do for you? I love that that's definitely something for our listeners to remember. Well, Michelle, we are going to finish with a speed round. So just go with your first instinct on these questions. What is the most important part of your morning routine?

Michelle Letcher 18:57  
Coffee.

Kara Snyder 18:58  
How do you take it?

Michelle Letcher 19:00  
I'm a coffee kind of snob I will pretty much only drink like Starbucks or something like that. So I like a venti Caramel Macchiato with nonfat milk. And if it's a Monday, I usually have a quad shot.

Kara Snyder 19:12  
I'm with you. It just doesn't taste the same when you make it at home.

Michelle Letcher 19:16  
That's right.

Kara Snyder 19:17  
Texting or talking?

Michelle Letcher 19:19  
Depends. When I talk to somebody I want to have like an hour long conversation. So if I have time I prefer to talk but if I don't have time, then texting is just fine as well.

Kara Snyder 19:30  
What is your favorite holiday tradition?

Michelle Letcher 19:33  
Probably the Christmas tree I like to decorate it around where we're living since we moved so much. So now that we're in Texas, there's always a Stetson atop the tree with like lasso rope and then when we were at Rock Island in Illinois, we put like a weather vane and made like a farm tree. When we were in Germany, we made like a Christmas market tree so I like to alter the tree to match the community we're in.

Kara Snyder 19:57  
Oh, that's super fun. Do you do real or artificial

Michelle Letcher 20:00  
I do artificial.

Kara Snyder 20:02

I get that. Less clean up. What are you reading or listening to right now?

Michelle Letcher 20:08

I'm reading a book called Ellis Island. It's written by a Polish author and it was just translated. I don't know what it was translated into English. I am fascinated with genealogy. And so this summer I love to travel this summer I had taken a trip back to Europe and I went to the ancestral villages, my dad's grandparents except for one that I don't have the results on, that we went over to Bremerhaven and Homburg the ports that they left from and then I visited Ellis Island in May, and I visited again two weeks ago. Immigration is something I'm finding to be an interest item of mine because of my family's past. And so, this book, Ellis Island has laid out a really interesting history about how immigration worked in the late 1800s, early 1900s. And I find a lot of challenges that are parallel to what we're having right now as a nation when it comes to immigration.

Kara Snyder 21:00

Oh my gosh, that's so special that you were able to take the time to dive into that and visit those places that must have been so meaningful.

Michelle Letcher 21:08

It was it was really, it was really special. About a month before we took the trip, we had actually found ancestors, my dad's mom, she had two siblings, she had five but to pass away, she had two remaining siblings. She had emigrated, they stayed in Poland, we were able to bring grandchildren from all three of those individuals together in her ancestral home where she was born. We found that the last month before we left, so it was really exciting to start connecting dots and really appreciate some of the risk our ancestors took when they came to America.

Kara Snyder 21:43

Oh my gosh, that is awesome. Thank you for sharing that story. And I ask everybody who comes on the podcast, a Von Teese, gondola or pub to cheese balls, gondola. 100% of my drive thru normal. I love that. Well, one last question for you. Michelle, if you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

Michelle Letcher 22:07

Somebody I'm gonna give two if that's OK. The first one goes back to a discussion we had in the beginning of the podcast. And that is about peaking. I tell people all the time, you know, I'd say to my children as well, I have a freshman at a plea with the United States Military Academy, and I have a junior and I have an eighth grader. But you don't want to peak right now in life, right? Like college is not where you peak in life, you're gonna peek down a line. So when things don't feel like they're going your way, or you're not doing as good as you know, the person next to you, maybe that's their peak, right? You don't want this to be your peak. So don't take it as a setback. Take it as just part of that journey moving up that mountain. So that would be the first piece of advice. The second piece of advice was a discussion my husband and I had in the car one day, maybe you're aware, but women weren't allowed into combat positions until 2016. I mean, fairly recently, you know, I've been to combat three times left of that women could serve



in combat positions itself. 2016. And him and I were talking about some of these younger ladies who are, you know, now in those roles, and we'd listen to senior leaders talk about when those women grow up, they'll get to, you know, run the army, or they'll get to do this, but there was this waiting period, about a certain type of military occupational specialty that you'd have to move up. And my husband turned to me and he said, This is ridiculous. We should be Breaking Trail for these women right now. And so my second piece of advice is to break trail. Don't wait for people to make a path for you. We should all be part of that path, not the same path, but different paths, right, that the path doesn't have to be cleared for you. And so I always encourage people, break trail, make a difference, you know, put your hand back help the next person out because nobody does this on their own. We've got to do a for each other. Thanks, Kara.

Kara Snyder 23:57

That is fantastic perspective and wonderful advice. Thanks again for being here. That was retired brigadier general Michelle Letcher. Join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our cast alumni