

Suzanne Montoya PodCAST Transcript

Kara Snyder:

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 Suzanne Montoya. Suzanne is a Criminal Justice Sciences alum and currently serves as the Director of McLean County Probation and Court Services. Welcome, and thank you for being here.

Suzanne Montoya:

Thank you.

Kara Snyder:

Let's start at the beginning. Why did you choose ISU?

Suzanne Montoya:

So I am native to Bloomington-Normal. I was born and raised here, so I am local. I went to University High School actually, and graduated from there in 1995. I started out at Heartland Community College and finished there after two years with my associate's degree, and then transferred to ISU. I have parents who are alums of ISU as well, and it just seemed like it was a great fit for me.

Kara Snyder:

And how did you end up in Criminal Justice Sciences? What made you decide that that was the fit for you?

Suzanne Montoya:

So I think I always wanted to go into a profession that was helping people. When I originally envisioned my career path, it would have been for nursing. I was thinking of going into nursing, and I'm not scared of a lot of the things that go along with that field, but I wasn't overly thrilled

to do all of the science/biology-type classes.

And my dad is actually a judge, and so I was always interested in criminal justice too. So then I just kind of diverted and changed into Criminal Justice Sciences.

Kara Snyder:

What would you say you miss the most about your time on campus? And I'm really curious to ask you this, both as someone who was familiar with campus from being a local townie, but also attending U-High, and then coming to campus as a transfer student.

Suzanne Montoya:

So I think my first response would be: I miss my youth and being young when I was on campus. But I think being a U-High student probably was kind of—I don't want to say helpful—but there were a lot of opportunities with that being a lab school. And also being able to spend time over the lunch hours or use Milner as the library when you were at U-High, so that was kind of a great transition for me in going to ISU. But I think mostly the things I miss about being in college on campus are just being young and the relationships that were built there, and knowing the campus and being from in-town—it was easy to get around. It was just a really good experience.

Kara Snyder:

And I'm really curious to learn more about your career story, because these days it is so rare for people to stay with one company for the majority of their career. So can you give us the CliffsNotes version of how you got from your entry-level job to your current position?

Suzanne Montoya:

Absolutely. And I totally agree because I'm in the position now where I have a lot of employees that transition in and out of my department within probably six months to a year. Which I think is great with this generation—they are finding what their niche really is and able to explore a lot. But with me, I think the opportunities just fell into place in my path. I actually did an internship with McLean County Court Services, so that last semester of ISU I was able to complete my internship and actually get offered a job a little bit pre-graduation for a position that was open in the department. And just from there, I just had the right leaders and mentors in place to help me professionally move up and develop me to where I've gotten today.

Kara Snyder:

Can you tell us a little bit about the benefits of remaining loyal to your workplace?

Suzanne Montoya:

Absolutely. As I said, I've been promoted a few times while being employed by Court Services, and the director is the highest position that you can go within probation.

For me, my loyalty probably lies because I was able to professionally develop and move up.

There is a retirement pension, which I think a lot of younger people don't always look at when they're looking for job opportunities. But we still do offer a pension in McLean County for any incoming new employees.

There's just the safety and security of the position. With the economy and the way things can go, it felt like a safe place for me to be. With the longevity that I've had, it's just comfortable.

Kara Snyder:

Yeah, you cannot find a pension program everywhere, that's for sure. So that's a huge perk that I think you're right. We probably don't talk enough about.

Suzanne Montoya:

Yeah.

Kara Snyder:

I am curious. How do you find new challenges to ensure that you're continuing to learn in an environment like that? I know sometimes when companies see turnover, it's because employees are maybe not as engaged as they once were. How do you seek out those challenges to ensure that you continue to grow?

Suzanne Montoya:

So I think with me, it's just always researching, trying new things, thinking outside the box. I'm really huge into innovation and new programming and what we can bring to our department for our clients and what's beneficial for them. So I just feel like I spend a lot of time—obviously, in my position now, I'm not doing the direct supervision of clients. I don't have a caseload anymore. I'm more in the administration role and overseeing the entire department and budgets and grants and whatnot. But really just continuing to educate myself on what's the latest and greatest of

what you can do in probation. Probation has really changed as a field over the years—even the 25 years that I've been in it. It's really data-driven now and based on evidence-based practices and what research is out there that can help change human behavior.

Kara Snyder:

And then on the flip side, I know you said that you work with a lot of employees that transition through your office on the quicker side. So what recommendations do you have to our students or maybe our young alumni that are looking to make a change? How can they do that without burning bridges, so to speak? How can they make that transition while still keeping those relationships intact?

Suzanne Montoya:

So for me, I feel like I'm the type of leader that I'm always trying to professionally develop my employees, and I'm always excited for their next chapter of their career or their life. Even myself, personally, there are probably different paths I could have taken throughout the last 25 years or changes I could have made. I'm just always really encouraging with people. I think sometimes it is good for you to explore. It is good for you to see other options. As long as anybody leaves my department and it's on a good note, then I'm always welcome to have them return. If they figure out, "I went to another job and I didn't love it so much," or maybe, "I left for financial reasons," or whatnot, and they really would like to return—like I said, as long as everything was left on a good note, I will always welcome people back to my department. But I also want them to be able to progress and find what really makes them happy. I think it takes people a while sometimes to really figure out, "This is a career that I really enjoy doing. It's not just a job that I go to for a paycheck."

Kara Snyder:

Do you see a lot of that in your industry—the what we would call post-pandemic boomeranging? I think a lot of people were testing things out after the pandemic, seeing what worked for them, seeing what fit with their lifestyle and what they wanted on a day-to-day basis. Is that something that you are seeing in your field right now?

Suzanne Montoya:

Yes, absolutely. I mean, during the pandemic, we were not allowed to work from home. So we

did not have a remote option or even a hybrid option because we are a field that's working directly with clients and people. We were open the entire time of the pandemic, and I think for some people that was just hard, which is understandable—whether you had family needs, children who weren't in school and you needed to at least be a body in a household, or you had pandemic issues yourself or whatnot.

So I think a lot of employees ended up leaving within that two-year timeframe because of other opportunities from other employers to work hybrid or remote, and it just worked better with the time of the pandemic.

But we did have a lot of turnover during that time period, and I think it's kind of just moved forward because agencies are changing so much in what they allow workplace-wise. Hybrid work or remote work—it's appealing to a lot of people. So I would very much say, yeah, we were part of that boomerang.

Kara Snyder:

One of the reasons I was really excited to talk to you today is I know that you have been very active in the community, and you serve on a variety of boards. So tell us about the importance of making time for service and giving back to your community.

Suzanne Montoya:

So I have parents who are heavily involved in the community, and they're heavily involved in ISU, to be transparent, too—and they're philanthropists. I think they just instilled that into all of us. My career and my personal life have been dedicated to making the community a better place, and being able to share my skill set with others has been rewarding to me. It's allowed me to educate people that aren't involved or don't work in the criminal justice field.

There's a lot of confusion about the criminal justice field sometimes and what we're doing.

Sometimes us locally in McLean County get lumped into some of the national trends, which are very different than what we are trying to do community-wise with criminal justice. I feel strongly that it's up to all of us to make our community a better place to live. That's really my push for being involved—not only with my career but also with my community board work.

Kara Snyder:

So what advice do you have for recent graduates that are trying to figure out how to get involved

in the community outside of work? You've just graduated, you have this new 9 to 5 job—how do you make space and how do you find an organization that's a good fit for you from a service perspective?

Suzanne Montoya:

I think it's just all about contacting local agencies that you have an interest in and asking about what opportunities they have. McLean County is so rich in resources—we have so many different boards, councils, committees, a lot of grassroots organizations. There's a wide array of things. If you have an interest, you can likely find it in McLean County. Take the initiative—just contact a local agency and ask, “What can I do to volunteer for your agency?” or “How can I get on your board?” That would be my advice.

Kara Snyder:

Oh, thank you. I appreciate that. And one question I love asking people on the podcast is: How do you describe your leadership style?

Suzanne Montoya:

Oh gosh, that's a tough question. I think my leadership style is probably a mix of a lot of styles. As I've learned throughout the years, and when I've educated myself about being a leader or manager, it seems that you yield the best results when you have a mix of everything.

But for me, I feel like my biggest strengths are really trying to be a participatory leader, a restorative leader. I've done a lot of work locally with a good friend of mine on restorative practices work, restorative justice work, and it's kind of also spidered into the field of a restorative workplace or restorative leadership.

Also, just coaching—like I said before, I really want to make sure that I am working with my employees and making sure that they feel encouraged to follow whatever path they choose and really develop them as employees. I think I am big into coaching.

Kara Snyder:

That's great. Thank you.

Well, we are going to wrap up with a speed round. So I want you to just go with your first instinct on these questions.

Texting or talking?

Suzanne Montoya:

Definitely texting.

Kara Snyder:

What is your go-to breakfast?

Suzanne Montoya:

I would say coffee. When I'm indulging myself—probably coffee and a donut.

Kara Snyder:

What is your favorite season?

Suzanne Montoya:

Probably spring and summer. I really like the sunshine.

Kara Snyder:

What's your favorite trip you've ever taken?

Suzanne Montoya:

California.

Kara Snyder:

If you have a free Saturday, how are you spending it?

Suzanne Montoya:

Oh, probably just relaxing. Probably binge-watching any streaming outlet.

Kara Snyder:

I was going to say—what's on your list currently? Can you recommend anything for us?

Suzanne Montoya:

I don't know. I feel like I watch so much, it all just kind of gels together. I don't know.

I'd have to think on that—on what I would actually suggest somebody else watch. That's probably a hard question for me.

Kara Snyder:

And I ask everybody that comes on the podcast: Avanti's gondola or Pub II cheese balls?

Suzanne Montoya:

Oh gosh. Both are great, too, so that's hard.

But I'm kind of a bar food, cheese ball kind of girl—so I'd say the Pub cheese balls.

Kara Snyder:

There you go.

Well, one last question for you, Suzanne. If you could give one piece of advice to a college student, what would you say?

Suzanne Montoya:

I would say be willing to try things. If you don't try, you'll never know if the outcome could have yielded some type of success.

And then also, right now, at this point—where we're at as a nation overall—I would say practicing emotional intelligence and just teaching others how to regulate their emotions.

I think that will lead us into a better world.

Kara Snyder:

How do you recommend that individuals practice that? Do you have any tips for where they might be able to start regulating their emotions and practicing that emotional intelligence?

Suzanne Montoya:

I think that it's kind of such a hot topic right now. I just think there's so much out there about emotional intelligence and mental health needs and regulation needs.

I think you could really just get on the Internet and Google.

Or that's another thing—there are so many social service agencies around here that have therapists and clinicians and people that would probably be willing to talk.

Or there's a lot of different seminars, classes, groups going on.

We here in McLean County are currently working on updating our Behavioral Health Action Plan. So we should have a lot of information going into that.

That is always updated and published on the McLean County website, and so that could always

be a great place for people to go just to see what's going on and what is available in the community.

Kara Snyder:

Well, thank you so much for being here, Suzanne. It was great to get to know you a little better, and I appreciated the opportunity to chat with you.

Suzanne Montoya:

Yeah, it was great to talk to you, and thanks for having me on.

Kara Snyder:

That was Suzanne Montoya, Director of McLean County Probation and Court Services.

Join us next time on the podcast for more stories from our CAST alumni.