

Ryan Renee Rudkin (00:00):

I know there's other goals in mind, you know, standards and test scores. But at the end of the day, I wanna come back and I want them to come back.

Eric Cross (00:35):

My name's Eric Cross, host of our science podcast, and I am with Ryan Rudkin, middle-school teacher out here in California just to the north up near Sacramento? El Dorado Hills?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (00:46):

Yeah. 20 miles east of Sacramento.

Eric Cross (00:49):

Nice. And I am down here in San Diego. And so Ryan, to start off, what I wanna do is ask you about your origin story, like a superhero. So how did you become a middle-school science teacher to become part of this elite profession of science folks that get to do awesome things with kids?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (01:08):

I would agree with you that it is definitely an elite profession. I got my credential and I thought I was gonna teach third or fourth grade elementary school. And the second day I got called for a sub job for middle school. And I just thought, "We'll take it," you know? And by second period, I knew: This is where I belong. The kids, middle school, students are just a species of their own. And you have to appreciate them. And if you do appreciate them, then you're in the right spot. And I quickly looked at my coursework and I was able to get authorizations in science, history, and English, and I love science. So I chose science. And the rest is history. It's been a wild ride and I wouldn't have changed or asked for anything different. I love it.

Eric Cross (02:02):

I definitely agree with you. So, your history—you've been in various middle-school classrooms. Can you tell us a little bit about that? What classrooms have you been in? What disciplines of science have you taught or are currently teaching?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (02:14):

I was hired for seventh grade life science, and then I did that for a few years and then I got moved into eighth physical science, and I was there for 12 years. Love eighth grade science. I love eighth graders. Chemistry and physics are my favorite. There's just so much opportunity for just awesome labs, great conversations, student discourse, all of that. And then the past three years I've been in sixth grade and

now we're integrated. So, a sixth grade integrated science and I also teach social studies and a technology design class.

Eric Cross (02:52):

Oh, nice. What do you do in your technology design class? That sounds cool.

Ryan Renee Rudkin (02:56):

Right now it's mostly internet media and we use WeVideo, it's an editing-video program, and we produce and put on our school weekly news bulletin. And then we weave in other projects. We do some interdisciplinary projects. Right now my students are working on a mythology God, Goddess, and Monster project that relates to our social studies curriculum. And we're learning about Greece. So yeah, we just try to give them added projects and they're using the WeVideo platform. By sixth grade, they're coming to us now with wonderful skills with all the tech. I mean, if I need help, I ask them like, "How do you do something on Google Docs?" Or, "How do you do something on Drive?" The kids are definitely tech-savvy.

Eric Cross (03:49):

They must love being the teacher in the classroom. They get to—it kind of switches power roles, where they get to teach the teacher something.

Ryan Renee Rudkin (03:56):

Yes. And especially WeVideo, sometimes we've had some hiccups, and the kids show everybody, and that's part of the design class. They're trying to solve—we're teaching them how to solve their own problems. So if there's any kind of issue with anything with the technology, honestly, I usually tell them, "Go ask a friend," or we kind of shout out, "Hey, who knows how to troubleshoot this?" And the kids are eager to help each other, which is nice.

Eric Cross (04:21):

And they have this authentic experience where they're actually doing real problem-solving, as opposed to something that we manufactured. Like, those are real things that we have to deal with in life. And that's exactly like how we solve it, right? We just go ask people! We look it up, and the ahas are genuine too. Throughout!

Ryan Renee Rudkin (04:36):

Yes, especially thinking on the fly. Especially yesterday, I was in the middle of teaching and my laptop froze, and it's like, "OK, everybody take a couple minutes, you know, work on this, this, or that while I switch out laptops!" And so I'm modeling, too, how to solve my own problems. And I think it teaches the kids how to do that too.

Eric Cross (04:59):

I've always thought it was interesting that when teachers get to teach in real time, how do we handle stress and frustration when it's really happening? And I think the tech—at times, failure is the real one where you feel this chill or this sweat that kind of comes over you and you're trying to present or cast or the video won't play and things like that. I think I've done enough times in my years of teaching where now my students know what to do, or they want to come up and help, and we're good with it. But I remember in the beginning when those things would kind of glitch or go wrong or the wifi goes down, and you're like, OK, what do we need now?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (05:33):

I think it's honestly, after the fact, when I think in the moment, I'm not thinking of feeling stressed, but just afterwards, then I'm like, "Oh my gosh, this has just been a wild day." But yeah, you just have to kind of go with it. And that's just the beast of middle school. I just added to the list of why we love it.

Eric Cross (05:53):

You said something about interdisciplinary work, and I wanna kind of ask about that. Because it sounds like you've had your hand in several different areas of science and grade levels. Working, doing design courses, working with tech. Are there certain lessons that are your favorites to teach? The ones that you really enjoy, or that no matter what, you're like, "We need to do this; this is such a rich experience for students"?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (06:17):

Yeah. I definitely try to do lessons or activities along the way. I like to do projects at the end of my units. When I taught physics, we did a project and it was mainly an assessment tool called the Wheeling and Dealing. The kids, they would all get a different car. And then they to sell their car. And so they had to pretend to be a car salesman, and they did that with their knowledge of the physics unit. So everything we did on forces and speed and motion. So I like doing culminating projects like that. And you're kind of tricking them into assessing them.

Eric Cross (06:57):

When I think about your car salesman project, I'm thinking of a bunch of students, but they're like on Shark Tank, but they're just littler versions. And they're doing these sales pitches, but they're speaking in scientific terms as they're trying to do it. Do you record these or do they just exist in the classroom?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (07:12):

No...And that was a long time ago, when I taught eighth grade. I wish I had; I wish I had recorded. That was definitely—it was fun, 'cause the kids, they would get their little piece of paper and they—some of 'em didn't know what car it was. And so they're like "A Boo... A Boo-gatti? What's a Boo-gatti?" And then

someone from across the room would be like, "Ooh, I want it! Here, I'll trade you my Ford Focus!" And <laugh> so they would kind of wheel-and-deal which car they would...and then once they got their choice, then they would do the project.

Eric Cross (07:44):

So they're really embodying this persona of a car salesman. The wheeling and doing back-and-forth and trying to trade a Bugatti for a Ford Focus. <Laugh>

Ryan Renee Rudkin (07:53):

I know. <Laugh> I like to make my class, my learning environment, enjoyable. You know, I gotta be there; they gotta be there. So I know there's other goals in mind—you know, standards and test scores—but at the end of the day, I wanna come back, and I want them to come back. And I just have that as a priority.

Eric Cross (08:18):

Well, based on the projects that you're doing and the way that you approach education with students, I can see why middle-school students would want to come back, even if they had the option not to. Just because of the cool things that you're doing. Now we're on this—hopefully, fingers crossed—tail end of COVID in the classroom and schools, and I know it's impacted all of us differently. Has student engagement changed since COVID and if so, how, and what have you done in these last two years to maybe adjust your approach, to continue that engagement and that richness that you provide for your kids?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (08:57):

I definitely—I think for me, I recognize that when the students are in my classroom, I want them to, I dunno, for lack of a better word, just escape the noise at home. And I know we've always had students that are going through divorce situations or their dog died, other things, but I think with COVID, it's definitely been compounded. And just creating a safe place for the kids to want to be and...it's hard. We've had a lot of students that have been out, absent, for various reasons and on quarantine. And they're struggling with doing work from home, 'cause their parents are stressed and their parents are dealing with their work issues. And so I think just having grace for the kids and just keeping...I don't know, I guess like I said, I've always had student engagement as top of my list.

Eric Cross (10:06):

It sounds like—the things I hear you say really have to do with who these students are as people.

Ryan Renee Rudkin (10:12):

Yeah.

Eric Cross (10:13):

And then as a second, who they are as students. How do relationships fit into your engagement? 'Cause I'm hearing this connection that you seem to be making with kids as you're talking about things that are beyond academics: their home life, how they're impacted.

Ryan Renee Rudkin (10:28):

Yes.

Eric Cross (10:28):

Is there anything that you do to build these relationships, or to connect with your students, to make them feel wanted or feel connected to the classroom or to you?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (10:37):

Yeah, I do. I do a few things to build those connections. And again, this timeframe in their life is so out of their control, their peer relationships, relationships with their parents. And when they're in my classroom, I want them to feel loved and appreciated. Something I do it's called Phone Fridays. And in one of the social media groups, someone posted about it, and I've been doing it for over a year now, actually. So on Fridays I call parents and give good news. And so I'll pick maybe one or two students. And it could be academic reasons. It could be behavior, I've seen a slight improvement of behavior. Maybe a role model in the classroom. And my goal is to get everybody every trimester. So everybody gets a phone call by the end of the trimester. And it's funny 'cause sometimes the parents are a little like "Uh-oh"! When they pick up, they see the caller ID, and their school's calling. 'Cause Some kids don't get good calls. So it's a really—I would say every single parent that I've called, I usually get a follow-up email, either to me or my admin, just saying it's such a cool idea I do this; thank you so much. And yeah, I just call and give good news and just put 'em on the spot. And usually the kids are a little embarrassed, but you can tell, even though they're kind of—I think they're faking it, that they're embarrassed! 'Cause You know that they got the Phone Friday, and everybody's like, "Who's gonna get the phone Friday?!" And so it's a very big deal in my class.

Eric Cross (12:07):

What a great way to—I mean, it seems like that hits on so many levels. You're making these positive calls home. You're praising publicly, which a lot of times can happen where students can get criticized or redirected publicly and then praised privately, which is a lot of times the reverse what we should be doing. But here you are praising them publicly. And then you're not only building a relationship with yourself, but you're also connecting them with their parent or whoever is caring for them, because now when they go home, there's this, "Hey, your teacher called; you're doing awesome!" So it's this kind of triangle that's forming there. I think that's super-cool and a great thing for teachers to do.

Ryan Renee Rudkin (12:45):

It takes, you know, the last five minutes of my class. I do it every class. And then I have a system. Like I said, I keep track of all the kids. That way, by the end of the trimester I've gotten everybody. Sometimes I let the students, whoever I call first, then I let them pick a peer and I tell them, "OK, we have to have a solid reason. Why are we calling?" And a couple times they'll have a student, like one of my energized ones, they'll raise their hand. "How About me? How about me?" And I and the kids kind of laugh a little and I said, "Well, how about this? Let's make a goal. How about next week we're gonna make a goal and we're gonna have a reason to call home." So just working on the kids that need a little push in the right direction. That's other reasoning to it. But yeah, it's fun. I love it.

Eric Cross (13:33):

And you have the community. You have this goal setting. We were talking a little earlier about this transition—so you're becoming this...your school's going through the IB process, is that right?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (13:44):

Yes.

Eric Cross (13:44):

And we were talking about the ATL skills and one of them is goal-setting management. You already kind of organically do this in your classroom, which is really neat. I know being an IB teacher, a lot of times I find the things that I've already been doing and find, "Oh, this is actually an approach to learning!" or "This is something that has a title!" I just thought it was just being helpful! Ah...So the kids are connected. You have this process where you're calling parents; it's working; students are involved, so it's building this community. Now you're engaging students. Do you have any favorite student engagement tools that you use in your classroom or when you're teaching that you feel like you get a lot of bang for your buck? There's so many things out there these days. And so many approaches, tools, web apps. Do you have any favorites that you use?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (14:40):

No. Nothing comes up top of my mind right now. Mostly just projects, like I said. And being excited. I think having my students see me excited about something...and I'm honest when we're doing something that's not quite my favorite, then I'm honest about that too. But just having my—like, we just started thermal energy this week and I told my students, I said, "OK guys, I'm gonna weave in some chemistry in there. I'm gonna weave in some particle motion," and they're like, "Oh! That's when you taught eighth grade, huh!" Cause I talk a lot about when I taught eighth grade before. I don't know, just showing my own enthusiasm, I think, is a good payoff to me. That's a bang for your buck. Other things...I try to give 'em cool videos and Mark Grober, he's definitely a favorite of mine I like to show my students. I like to bring in guest speakers from our community. When I taught eighth grade for physics, I always brought in a local CHP officer and they would bring in the radar and lidar guns and the kids would mark off the parking lot and they would calculate their speed. And then they would verify it with the radar gun. Two

years ago when I taught math, I brought in a local landscaper company, a father-and-son outfit, and they showed the kids how they would do bids on jobs. And so, relate it to our chapter on volume and area. So just making that connection with real life. Plus it's just a nice opportunity, too, for the community to come in. With our design class, put on our newscast. And then one of our units in our sixth grade curriculum is weather. And so I brought in a local weatheruh, chief meteorologist. And he actually talked to the students about his job as a meteorologist and then also being on the news and putting on a newscast. So we got him on our green screen and did a little like Mark Finan, you know, little cameo on our newscast for the week for school. So that was kind of cool.

Eric Cross (16:45):

They must have been excited.

Ryan Renee Rudkin (16:47):

Yeah. They're pretty starstruck by him. So that was pretty fun.

Eric Cross (16:51):

This person was on their local news? So they would know him?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (16:56):

Yeah, he's on Channel 3 out of Sacramento. Yeah. KCRA Channel 3, Mark Finan.

Eric Cross (17:00):

So all these guest speakers that you have...how do you reach out to these people? And you sound like you get a lot of success. Do you ever get nos? Like if I'm sitting here listening and that inspires me, but you're getting celebrities and you see a few people...like, how do you reach out to them? And does everybody say yes? How does it go?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (17:21):

Well, usually at my back-to-school night, I always ask the parents if they have a career or hobby that could lend itself to the curriculum. And so sometimes I'll hear about—students will talk about, like, "My mom's a doctor." And so I'll reach out to parents and just say, "Hey, you know, your kiddo said, you're a doctor. May I ask what type?" And most of the time the nos that I've received are just because of schedule conflicts. You just have to get creative! Look in your community and see what you have. People want to come and talk to kids. I've had some presentations that the person is so intelligent and amazing, but they just, weren't very kid-friendly. I mean, that happens. But someone knows someone. And just ask! I mean, it doesn't hurt to ask to have 'em come out, come hang out for the day, with my students. And one time I had a nurse practitioner she was in the cardiac unit. And so she brought in hearts and led a heart dissection with my students. And we did a station set-up. I've had elaborate ones like that, or just

a mom come in to tell my students about her job as a nutritionist and relate it to our unit on metabolism. And so just did like a little 15-minute Q&A with the kids on nutrition. And I would just say, look at your community and/or post on social media. I always do that. Post in your school's PTA groups. So the parents know someone, that's for sure. Or someone's retired. One time I had—I think he was a grandfather of one of the kids—he was into rocks. And he had a bunch of meteorites <laugh> and brought in his meteorites.

Eric Cross (19:15):

Bring in your rocks!

Ryan Renee Rudkin (19:15):

I know! Right? And he <laugh> just brought in his meteorite collection! I was like, sure, come on in!

Eric Cross (19:23):

That's one of the things I love about being a middle-school teacher is that my students have such varied interests and I'll get the Rock Kid every once in a while and he'll come in and he'll have all these rocks and crystals. And a lot of times there's a grandfather that's responsible for this inherited geologic treasure that they have.

Ryan Renee Rudkin (19:45):

Yeah, something like that—I mean rocks are not my favorites, but I don't really tell the kids that. I was like, "Sure, yeah, come on in! We can have a whole-day lesson on rocks!"

Eric Cross (19:55):

<Weakly> "This is great!"

Ryan Renee Rudkin (19:58):

Just utilizing your resources. That's all it's about.

Eric Cross (20:02):

Well, I think the back-to-school night was really helpful. That's something that's super doable. You have a bunch of parents and you just simply ask, "Who do you know? What do you do?" And then just collecting that and then just asking people to come in. I've I've been reluctant to do it more often than I've wanted to, because I haven't figured out—and maybe you can help me with this—I have three class periods a day plus other class periods that are not necessarily science. And I don't want to dominate a person's schedule. Do they tend to be willing to stay all day? Or do you do, one class gets it, and you record it? Like, how do you balance out the speakers with your school schedule?



Ryan Renee Rudkin (20:39):

Mostly they'll they'll just come for the whole day. When I taught eighth grade, I had five classes, so that was easy. That was an all-day thing. And then usually I'll offer to call lunch, have lunch delivered, or snacks during the day. I mean—

Eric Cross (20:53):

Feeding them is key.

Ryan Renee Rudkin (20:54):

Yeah. Just something kind of nice. Donuts in the morning. I mean, you'd be very surprised. Most people that are in the field or retired, like I said, they're more than willing to come. And even if they have to wait an hour, while you teach another class that doesn't pertain to it, then they'll either leave or come back or just hang out in the back and pretend to be a student during that history class that you have.

Eric Cross (21:20):

It's my own limiting belief where I feel guilty. I don't think about it. I need to think about it through the perspective that you do, that these people WANT to talk. I just assume everybody's so busy. But I do know, the times I've had speakers come out, at the end of the day, they're so energized or they're so happy or they're so grateful. 'Cause They're like, "This is what it's like to teach every day?" I'm like, "Yeah, this is what it's like."

Ryan Renee Rudkin (21:42):

I think too, a lot of parents...usually being being in the stops at elementary. A Lot of parents don't get the opportunity to come help out in the classroom, because the middle school kids, you know, it's not very cool or it's just not needed like in the elementary classes. So a lot of times, like I said, you'd be surprised. A lot of the parents they're more than happy to come and hang out. And again, some students, they don't want their mom or dad to be there, but then I talk it up. I'm like, "Everyone's gonna be so like impressed that your dad's a doctor," or "your mom's a doctor" or —so then I kind of like downplay it. Like, "Oh, whatever, you're you're faking it. It'll be fine. Don't be embarrassed." Leading up to their parent coming into the classroom.

Eric Cross (22:36):

Right. Kind of redirect that energy toward something positive. With guest speakers, projects, pacing, all these awesome things that you have going on, how do you find balance as a teacher, as a person? And what encouragement would you give to new or aspiring teachers? We work in a profession that will take as much as you give it. And you fall asleep at night worrying about other people's kids and we love it. And teachers by personality can just give and give and give and give. But in order for us to last—I'm thinking about those new teachers who are going into it, who are gonna go in and be there before the

sun gets up and stay after the sun gets down. How do you maintain balance, taking care of yourself? You've been in education for—how long have you been teaching for?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (23:29):

Sixteen. This is my 16th year.

Eric Cross (23:31):

Enough to be that veteran. So how do you find balance? And then, what encouragement would you give to new or aspiring teachers?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (23:39):

I would say each year, pick one or two things to add on. You can't add on 10 things, even though you're gonna find 10 things that are awesome. But just make a little list, put 'em in a file, and every year, just get good at what you do and then just add on one or two things. And reflect on what's not going well that you can get rid of to make room to add something else. Try to be patient with yourself. And don't reinvent the wheel. There's so many things out there that you can borrow and make it your own. Again, I think that's a time-saver, just leaning on your colleagues. And take lots of notes, because then when you do it again next year, you can refresh yourself and, "Oh yeah, this lesson, wasn't the best..." What can you add in to make it a little bit better? And yeah, I would say just take on one or two things each year. And then by the time you get to, you know, being a veteran, you can do all these awesome things and it'll feel natural 'cause you've been practicing and just adding in one thing at a time. I coached Science Olympiad a bunch of years ago, and Science Olympiad is so rewarding. It's just so amazing.

Eric Cross (24:59):

What is Science Olympiad, for the people who've never heard of it?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (25:03):

Oh, Science Olympiad is so awesome. Google it. I think it's just [ScienceOlympiad.org](http://ScienceOlympiad.org). It's 23 different events across all disciplines of science, different topics. And then you have a team of 15 students. And so your 15 students have to cover the 23 events. So for example, if the student's on the anatomy team, usually there's a team of two kids they're gonna study and learn. They provide all the rules and the guidelines. So the students learn and study whatever the parameters are for that year. And then they take a test. And then they compete against other schools. And there's build events, the engineering events, they can build things like trebuchets matchbox cars or mousetrap cars. Oh gosh, there's all kinds of things. There's like a Rube Goldberg device. It changes every year. And it's so rewarding to see the kids; they pick their area of science that they love. And sometimes you have to put them on an event that they don't know, and then they end up loving it. It's so rewarding as a teacher to see these kids that are just on fire and you know that one day they're gonna go off and do amazing things. They just

commit. They commit to their event. And then they blow it outta the water and they win medals and just the recognition...it's super, it's just an amazing program.

Eric Cross (26:42):

One of the competitions that's really low-tech that I've taken into my classroom is Write It, Do It. Have you done that one before?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (26:50):

Oh, yes. Yeah. That's one. Yep.

Eric Cross (26:52):

It's such a low-tech, simple one to do, but it teaches such great skills. And for those people who haven't heard of the Write It, Do It project, you create kinda some abstract art out of random crafts. That's very difficult to describe. You have pipe cleaners and foam and balls and you know, all these different things. And you make it. And then one person on the team is the writer, and they look at it and they write the procedures, and then their teammate, who's in a different room and doesn't get to see it, gets all the materials to build it and the procedures, and they have to rebuild it as closely as possible to the actual original. Even though they don't get to see the original. So they have to rely on their partner's ability to write procedures step-by-step. And it was fun to watch my students become teammates in that. And they learned how to communicate in a really fun competition. So I expanded it to do it with all of my students as an activity, just to teach them how write descriptively, to write procedurally, to be technical writers. And it's, it's fun! It's fun to see what they build based on what the students say. <Laugh> And it's also fun to watch them interact with each other, which for seventh graders, usually it's conflict. <Laugh> But, like, playful conflict. <Laugh> It's pretty funny to see what they build.

Ryan Renee Rudkin (28:11):

They're like, "Man, what are you talking about? That doesn't mean this; it means this!"

Eric Cross (28:16):

<Laugh> I know part of me feels guilty, but not enough to stop the project. 'Cause I know for some of 'em, it's gonna be a really trial by fire being able to practice their skills with writing procedures.

Ryan Renee Rudkin (28:27):

But they're learning among themselves how to provide more details and to be more thorough with their writing and and their thoughts, put their thoughts onto paper. So yeah, that's a funny event. Definitely.

Eric Cross (28:41):

Earlier you had mentioned something about connecting your kids with kids and students outside of your classroom. What is it that you do with that? Because I thought that was a really cool project. Can you speak to that a little bit?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (28:57):

Yes, I've done—they haven't had it in a few years, but there's something called the Pringles Challenge. And if you Google that, I'm sure it's on the Internet still. So you sign your class up, or your classes, and you get partnered with another school somewhere in the U.S., someplace else. And you decide individually teams, whatever they build. And they make a package to ship a single Pringle chip through the mail. And then you actually mail a Pringle chip through the mail. And then your partner team or partner school, they send their chips to you and then you open everything and then you can take pictures and video. And then there was a whole scoring process where you would score when you receive the chips. And then you input all the data on the website so you can see like how your—and most schools would trade pictures, so that the kids found out how their chip survived. March Mammal Madness is so much fun. Again, Google that.

Eric Cross (30:01):

Did you say March Mammal Madness?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (30:02):

Yes.

Eric Cross (30:03):

Like March Madness, with mammals?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (30:05):

Yes.

Eric Cross (30:05):

1. What is this?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (30:06):

It starts up in March. And you can sign your students up. And that one—it's not too interactive with other schools, but this is opportunity to get the kids interacting within your site or within your district. Or if you have teacher friends at other schools. There's like 60...I think it's 64 animals? And they have this massive bracket that they post. And then you can have the students, I did it—it would be very time-consuming to have the kids individually research each animal. So I just gave one animal per student

and so as a class we researched all the animals and then, I think it's every three days or so, they have these bouts. And it's all posted on YouTube. Google it. It's kind of fun.

Eric Cross (30:56):

I've already got the website up, ready to go! Folks, everybody who needs to Google this: <articulates carefully> March Mammal Madness. And is it Arizona State University? Is that the main site, ASU?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (31:04):

Yes.

Eric Cross (31:04):

So people, listen to this. Check it out. March Mammal Madness. Look, I'm doing this! I'm already,—you've already sold me on this.

Ryan Renee Rudkin (31:14):

It is so much fun, oh my gosh. And then, then the kids—each round, they pick their pick, just like basketball. They do their picks and then you wait for the video. And they do it live on—I think it's live on Instagram, or the next day on YouTube. And then the kids get all excited. And then usually the kids, whatever animal they got as their research animal, they're rooting for that one to win, the whole thing.

Eric Cross (31:42):

But we still have time; we still have time to—

Ryan Renee Rudkin (31:45):

You can jump in anytime. Even if it's already started, you can jump into it. It usually lasts—I believe it's a two-week from beginning to end. When they do the first round, the wild card, and then all the way to the winner, I believe it's a two-week process. Oh, maybe three, actually.

Eric Cross (31:59):

I'm already seeing this lead-up to the video being watched in class to see...I'm already thinking about like, "How do I prevent my students from finding the video?" Or like, "When does it go live so that I could be the one to show them so they didn't go find it early?"

Ryan Renee Rudkin (32:13):

It takes time out of the class, but I believe it's one of those things where you have to just...it takes 10 minutes out of the class, but it's important. So when they each round and then the next day, they release the YouTube video. Last year, when it got down to the final round, we were on spring break. And so I told

my students, "You guys, let's do some optional Zooms. And so I had a bunch of kids log on and we all watched the videos together. So that was kind of fun. And then this year, the other thing, the first time I've ever done this and it's going really well is—on social media, I was talking with one of the teachers from Ohio who teaches science and she and I decided we're gonna do penpals for our students this year. Paper-And-Pen penpals. So that's been a lot of fun. We just partnered up all the students, her students and my students, and once a month we send and receive the letters to each other. So that's been a really cool experience.

Eric Cross (33:14):

If you keep doing that, and you need more teachers to be involved, can my students be penpals with your students?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (33:20):

Yeah!

Eric Cross (33:20):

If you open it up to more people? I think that, to get a letter, old-school? Letter in the mail? It would be so exciting.

Ryan Renee Rudkin (33:28):

It is. We mail them, the teacher and I, we just put them all together in one package. But yeah, it's an actual handwritten letter.

Eric Cross (33:37):

The only letters I feel like I get in the mail now are bills.

Ryan Renee Rudkin (33:42):

Right? Exactly.

Eric Cross (33:42):

But I feel like the digital version of that is if someone calls me, it's probably bad news. I don't know if I'm the only one that's like that, but I'm like, "Who's calling me? Why aren't you texting me? What's going on? Text me first, then call! I need to know who's going on, and if you're unknown, you're going to voicemail.

Ryan Renee Rudkin (34:00):

Exactly. The penpals has been a lot of fun.

Eric Cross (34:03):

You've been in education for a while. You're on the other side of what it's like to be a student in the classroom. Which can be surreal in itself, when we think about our own experiences as being a student. Is there a teacher or a learning experience that's had an impact on you while you were a student in school that really stands out to you? And you can interpret the question however you want. But is there someone that's memorable or an experience that's memorable that you still carry with you today?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (34:32):

Definitely. My favorite teacher, and we actually still keep in contact on social media is Mrs. Sheldon. She was my fifth and sixth grade teacher. I had the pleasure when I was in elementary school, I was in an all-day contained GATE class—Gifted and Talented Education class. I vividly remember doing so many amazing projects. We built this big, giant—she brought in a big ol', like, TV box. It was big, big, big. And you could stick like three kids inside there, standing up shoulder-to-shoulder. And we built this big dragon. The head, and we had the whole rest of the class in a big sheet behind us, and we would do a little parade around the school. And she had that thing for years after. They had to repair it every year, and they would do the little parade around school. She did a lot of traveling and when we would go on vacation and then come back, that was always the big deal: "Where did Mrs Sheldon go?" And she had sand from Egypt and pictures from the rainforest. And later when I became a teacher and then I looked her up and we reconnected I did ask her, "Did you go to those places? Or did you, like, lie about it?"  
<Laugh> To get us engaged?

Eric Cross (35:52):

You went for the real questions!

Ryan Renee Rudkin (35:54):

I did. And she laughed and thought that was funny. And she did travel for real. But yeah, she's an amazing woman. We still keep in contact. And I remember, you know, little things...like we would be out there doing our PE time and she'd have her long skirt, you know, dress on, with her tennies, and she's out there playing kickball with us. Just a very kindhearted, smart, amazing woman. I'm very fortunate and I'm grateful that we are able to keep in contact. Love social media for that reason. So.

Eric Cross (36:33):

Yeah. And that's Miss Sheldon?

Ryan Renee Rudkin (36:35):

Mrs. Sheldon. Marlene Sheldon. Yeah.

Eric Cross (36:37):

Shout-Out to Marlene Sheldon influencing the next generation of teachers, with engagement with your world travels and all those different things.

Eric Cross (37:04):

Ryan, thank you so much for one, serving our students. And in the classroom, our middle-school students who need us. I think that middle school especially, elementary school, those years are when students are really starting to decide, "What am I good at?" And the experiences that we create for our students really shape what they believe they can do. These really cool, engaging experiences, these projects that you're giving them, whether they're doing these car sales, Shark Tanks, or they're doing penpals, or you have guest speakers, or they're designing planets. These are things that students don't forget. And then when they move on to higher grades, they remember more than anything, I think, how they felt about something. And it sounds like you're crafting these awesome experiences. And so I just wanna thank you for your time. I know as a teacher it's very short. And I thank you for being on the podcast with us.

Ryan Renee Rudkin (38:04):

Thank you. This has been a great experience. I just—I really enjoy my students. And I feel very, very grateful and very blessed for finding where I belong.