

## **CLAIRE DARMSTADTER**

Hey, everybody, I'm so lucky today to be joined by Kristin Montgomery. She's currently a Spanish teacher at La Follette High School in Madison. But she has taught all over the world. So I'm so excited to hear about all her different perspectives she has to share with us. Thank you for taking a couple minutes to chat with me!

## **Kristin Montgomery**

No problem.

## **CLAIRE DARMSTADTER**

Yeah, so there's so much we could cover here. But first, could you just walk us through very generally your linguistic and educational background and maybe the highlight reel of your journey of getting to La Follette?

## **Kristin Montgomery**

Sure. So it's kind of a long story. But I guess it probably started when I was a little kid. My dad was very into geography and travel. So we didn't travel very much internationally, but we always did road trips all over the US. And I think that kind of passion was there at the beginning. But neither he nor my mom really knew other languages. But I ended up taking French in high school and really enjoyed that. And then, when I was a junior in high school, I ended up adding Spanish also, because I had an open class. And so I remember being really excited about that, but also, it being something that was not that common at all, which is interesting, because it's certainly in Europe, and in most other countries, kids are studying three different languages or four different languages. So it's not something that was common here in the US. But so after I graduated, I actually got a summer camp job as a counselor at the French camp of Concordia Language Villages, and had an awesome experience there and just really, really loved what they did with immersion. After that, I went to college at the University of Minnesota. And I didn't think I wanted to be a teacher, I had done all these teaching things like teaching swim lessons, and being a camp counselor and love doing that. But I think for some reason, I just was kind of always like, mo, I don't want to teach. So I ended up doing a French major. And I was originally a Global Studies major also. But that ended up being very theoretical. And I was kind of like, *Oh, I don't really see how this is going to help me in the future.* So I changed and I did a Bachelor of Individualized Studies, which was essentially make up your own major, which is kind of cool. So I had been planning on doing some business stuff. So I did intercultural communication, marketing, and Spanish kind of all rolled in together. And when I graduated, I ended up going to Spain, and worked there for a year in a primary school, in a bilingual school. The government has a program that sponsors college graduates from the US to go over. You work like four days a week, not too many hours, it's pretty chill, and you can live in Spain for a year and get paid. So that was really nice. In college, I also studied abroad in France. And so in college, I was more French centered, and Spanish was always kind of like the second language. Now that I'm teaching Spanish, my Spanish is much better than my French. Unfortunately, I've lost my French a bit. But so after I came back from Spain, I decided that well, first I got a job working in marketing, again, for Concordia Language Villages, but more of a full time job. And I really enjoyed that because I was kind of spreading language learning and multilingualism and

encouraging people to to learn other languages. So that was very fun. But it was kind of right at the Recession when that hit. And so it's kind of like, Oh, I don't see many future opportunities here. And I had kind of come back and decided that I wanted to be a teacher. And so I ended up getting my teaching license while I was still working at the language villages. And I knew that I wanted to go abroad again, and realized that I could do so by teaching. So after I got my teaching license, I then ended up going to Switzerland, and lived there for four years in the French speaking part. And yeah, I definitely used my French a lot because there are many, many languages spoken in Switzerland, and we were in a small town in the mountains. And after that, I went and taught in Singapore. And I did try to learn Mandarin, but it was not very successful. Everyone speaks English in Singapore, that's really more common. And yeah, then I came back here and I've been in Madison ever since.

### **CLAIRE DARMSTADTER**

Oh, I am so jealous. And I have a very big travel bug right now, although I know that's probably a year at least in the future. So that's that, but in Wisconsin, of course, we want to keep our teachers staying in Wisconsin schools. Of course, that's the aim. But how do you think these international experiences have either helped you to become a better teacher? Or is there anything you notice about like, pedagogical techniques in other countries that you've adopted to maybe help your classes be more successful or more enjoyable here in Wisconsin?

### **Kristin Montgomery**

Sure. I think one thing, certainly that was very helpful was I had students from all around the world. So just learning more about them and their cultures, and their languages, and even, like teaching Spanish to learners, or to people who were native speakers of Japanese, or Turkish, or Arabic, or all these other languages, I think, definitely helped me make connections between languages. So that was very good. And yeah, like I said, just the culture, learning more about what students, you know, what their culture is, what they like to do, what their favorite foods are, and any connections that you can make any of those personal connections are very helpful.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

And I know that La Follette currently doesn't have any bilingual or they don't have like heritage language classes and a really expensive bilingual program. And I know you're advocating for some of these additions, which on your fabulous website, people can check out, I think there's a section kind of talking about that. But can you just kind of share why you think these types of programs are important and valuable? And maybe why you think that, you know, La Follette, to try to add these on and other schools would really benefit from having these opportunities for students?

### **Kristin Montgomery**

Sure. So La Follette does have a dual language immersion program. That is, it was actually the first school in the district to go all the way up because they started at Nuestro Mundo with elementary school students. And now actually, all of the high schools this year is the first time that all four high schools have the program, which is really cool. But yes, now that that's kind of rolled into the dual language immersion program, there are students that are heritage, speakers

of Spanish and native speakers of Spanish and non-native speakers of Spanish all together. And so yeah, there are no more classes that are just heritage speakers because of numbers. But I think having programs like that is really important because it really raises the status of Spanish. So instead of seeing students as less because they don't speak English as their heritage language, they're seen as more because they have two languages, they have English and Spanish or whatever other language it is. I think that's a very important attitude shift that unfortunately, in the United States, we haven't always had.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, that additive, bilingualism and multilingualism. So currently, in your classes, when you do have these mix of students, all different linguistic profiles and backgrounds, how do you support different students when they might be coming at it with totally different backgrounds in the language?

**Kristin Montgomery**

It's definitely very difficult. And I still have a long way to go in my teaching to really get there, but you try to differentiate as much as possible by looking at different reading levels. For example, I'm making connections bridging between Spanish and English, or if students speak other languages, there are some students that speak Hmong at home or Mandinko, or other languages that are in our DLI program. So trying to make those connections with their own language, and also their home heritage, too when we're teaching culture.

**Claire Darmstadter**

For sure. And you know, with language educators, of course, at La Follette it's a bigger school. So you do have other language educators within your school, but some people might be a department of one, they might not have as many connections. So are you part of any organizations? Or like Facebook groups? Or what ways do you connect with other language teachers to kind of learn about new ideas and make sure you're kind of keeping up to what's the latest news and ideas in the field?

**Kristin Montgomery**

Sure. Yeah. As a teacher that's the most important thing. I think that the most important professional development comes from the teacher next door, literally in your school or elsewhere. We have teachers who come in from other districts just to do observations, and we've done that in other districts also. There's a wonderful Facebook group for teachers of heritage speakers and really for any language teacher, any teacher interested in multicultural education. There are so many great Facebook groups and you can just put whatever your concern or your question is, and you'll have answers in an hour. I'm also a member of ACTFL, and was able to go to the conference for the first time in Washington, DC, I guess it wasn't last year, technically two years ago now. And that was a really good opportunity just for networking with people from other states that I have known. And yeah, I'm also doing conferences that are here more locally. Actually, I've been more involved in the one in Minnesota because they have more of a heritage teacher strand and Minnesota is well known for being strong with immersion

programs. And so I've done a few things through that. So the Minnesota Council of Teaching of Languages and Cultures.

**CLAIRE DARMSTADTER**

Yeah, for sure. Well, finally, in celebration of multilingualism, can you tell us in as few or as many languages as you would like, why do you think we should celebrate students who speak more than one language?

**Kristin Montgomery**

Yes, so ser bilingüe es un superpoder. So being bilingual is a superpower. And it's really something that needs to be celebrated. It offers you so many different opportunities, and I think you're never too old to learn a language, shall we say? And it's, it's challenging, but it's challenging in a good way. And more important than that, it's incredibly rewarding. Whenever you have experiences where you can really connect with someone from a different culture, when you speak their language, you do so in a way that you could never connect with them if you're just speaking English, or through a translator or through Google Translate. Those precious moments that you can have with other people where you really connect on a human level.

**CLAIRE DARMSTADTER**

That is so true. Well, thank you so much for all your time and your perspective. I know a lot of different people will find it interesting. So thank you again for taking a couple minutes to chat with me today.

**Kristin Montgomery**

You're welcome.