

THE STORY GOES | JESSICA WEAVER | COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS

MOLLY: (dramatic voice) Coming to you *live* from a darkened closet in the KLRN studios. I feel like that was a movie, right.

KIRAN: That totally makes me want to keep listening.

MOLLY: (laughing) Everybody's just turned it off. It's me, Molly, and I'm here with Kiran.

KIRAN: Hello!

MOLLY: And we are with SA2020, and you are listening to The Story Goes, a collaborative podcast between SA2020 and KLRN. It's an opportunity for us to share a more complete story of San Antonio by highlighting the organizations and the individuals who are doing things in the community you may not know much about, or maybe you've heard about, and you just want to hear more about their story, in general. Today, we are in our darkened closet. Welcome, Jessica Weaver from Communities in Schools.

JESSICA: Thank you! [\(0:48\)](#)

MOLLY: We always try to set it up as, "Come over. We are going to go in the darkened closet, and we are just going to have a conversation." I think that everybody sort of in their brain says, "Yeah, yeah, sure." And you get here, and you're like, "You were serious." (laughing)

JESSICA: Yeah, it fits all that descriptor.

KIRAN: And you've been told nothing else.

MOLLY: We are like, "that's it." We are not sending you questions. We are just going to sit down and have a chat. Hope you're ready!

JESSICA: I'm ready.

MOLLY: I've known you, Jessica, for a hot minute I feel. It was not just working at SA2020, but prior to that. I feel I've known you a decade or more, which seems like, it always shocks me when I say that.

KIRAN: Oh, I didn't know that. [\(1:26\)](#)

MOLLY: Yeah. It's 'cause I knew Communities in Schools prior. You've been at Communities in Schools, how long have you been there?



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JESSICA: So, this is my 30th school year. I've probably met you in between those 30 years.

MOLLY: Yeah, somewhere in there. We hung out. How did you get involved with Communities in Schools to start with? [\(1:45\)](#)

JESSICA: So, I graduated from UT in Austin with a degree in social work. Honestly, my high school coach was aware of the program they had started in Edgewood, and she was familiar with me graduating with my social work degree, and said I should really look at this, and I applied and was hired and started at a school in Edgewood School District 30 years ago.

MOLLY: What?! And just worked your way up in the organization itself?

JESSICA: Yeah. We were in like four schools at the time, and you know, you can't help but continue to grow and see expansion and see opportunities to do new things when you're small. You're like a whole staff of ten. Everybody does everything, so you just get to do those things. So, I was just given that opportunity when we were really brand new.

MOLLY: You're, how long has Communities in Schools been in San Antonio? [\(2:38\)](#)

JESSICA: So, we've been in San Antonio since '89.

MOLLY: So, about 30 years?

JESSICA: A little more than 30 years.

MOLLY: I don't know the math. Is that 40 years?

JESSICA: Close to 35 or 40 years.

MOLLY: Every time somebody says, "Yeah, last decade." I think '90s, and that's not right. (laughs)

JESSICA: So, CIS started more in like '84-ish era, and by the time I came here, it was four schools.

KIRAN: Wait a minute. When you went to school for your degree in social work, did you know you wanted to take that and work specifically in education and with kids? [\(3:16\)](#)

JESSICA: Actually, I knew I wanted to work with kids, but I actually really wanted to do medical social work. My internship was in a clinic, but I knew kids were my interest because the reason I ended up doing social work is because I did volunteer work as part of my class, and I worked in a runaway shelter. I loved it. It changed my degree plan at that moment 'cause I knew it. So,



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kids were always part of it, but I thought I was going to be medical. Far from that at all, however, when you're working with kids with so many different issues, very similar to medical social work in the sense of you know there are other issues potentially affecting their medical needs. [\(4:06\)](#)

MOLLY: You know, every time that we talk to the community at-large, and say, "what are the top priorities in San Antonio? That if you think we could get this right, we could figure it out to get closer to the Community Vision." Education rises to the top every single time. I think when we start talking about education, medical, we sometimes tend to, if we don't see the full breadth of it, you just sort of tied it all together. Everything is influencing or being influenced by other things all the time. So, a young kid whose sick or can't get to school or doesn't have food at home, it's influencing their education as well. I want to talk more about what Communities in Schools is. What's amazing about it, is it says right there in the name, what Communities in Schools is. What is Communities in Schools? [\(4:54\)](#)

JESSICA: So, our goal is really to build a support system in schools for student's needs outside of their academic needs. So, not that we can't support their academic needs, but that's what schools are doing. So, if we can build those integrated student supports that really support basic needs, support social emotional needs, support mental health needs, all those other factors that may be affecting their opportunity to learn or opportunity to engage, we see the whole child. Our mission is to surround our students with a community of support, which means we are surrounding our kids with systems that can support them. It doesn't mean it's us by ourselves. When we can bridge support systems that are out in the community to school, it helps influence the support of our kids. It also takes responsibility and some help for our schools trying to navigate through all those things. We are really trying to bring support systems to our kids. We may be the bridge, or we may be the provider. Whatever way that may be, but really looking at the whole child and seeing all the intricacies of human beings, and you know it's not one child, and really letting teachers do what they do best. [\(6:14\)](#)

MOLLY: Like, teach you mean.

JESSICA: Yeah, teach! And not trying to navigate *everything* about every child, but having a support system to help them navigate that. It's not that they don't care. They want to be there, and they want to support every need, but they can't do it all.

MOLLY: Right, and I think that's the conversation we've been hearing so frequently on this podcast, and generally everywhere, one teacher in a classroom full of 30 kids, is literally working with 30 different needs at all times.

JESSICA: 30 times.



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MOLLY: 30 times and 30 and 30, and how an organization like Communities in Schools beautifully takes away the necessity of the teacher to also be social worker, parent, medical, dentist, and everything else. [\(7:00\)](#)

KIRAN: I would imagine to that part of that has shifted and changed within the education system to be responsive to children's needs over the last three decades. Maybe part of it hasn't shifted? What have you noticed in your career with this work?

JESSICA: So, I've seen mores shift than not in these 30 years. When we first started, (1) it was kind of an unknown for a nonprofit to be in a school. Like, that "doesn't really make sense." "Why are you coming to our school?"

MOLLY: We are an academic institution. We do not need you.

JESSICA: So, it was just an unknown, and that's not an unknown any longer. Not just for us, but for other nonprofits. So, that in itself, and then looking at the whole child, I think that's always been the intention, but you know, that hasn't always really been dedicated resources for just that purpose. I do see, and our last legislative session really showed that, that we are seeing, schools are the places that kids are, and there has to be dedicated support systems to support our kids. The other thing is really let all kids can't be treated equally in need. There are varied needs. We've got to really recognize the fact that our kids come with varied needs, and we've got to support our kids in those varied needs. I think those are three very big things I've seen really change, but I've really seen more change than not change. Now, there are some systems that haven't changed, and you know, not that there isn't any work on systems. Some of those systems are bigger systems, you know. There's always conversation about districts, but I really think when it comes to seeing kids, I've seen a lot of really great changes. [\(8:55\)](#)

MOLLY: So, you started in four schools at Communities in Schools, small, kind of figure it out, "how is this working," how many schools are you in now?

JESSICA: We are serving 100 schools where we have our traditional full-time staff in the school. Then, serving about 40 more schools where we provide mental health supports in a different way from our normal model. Really 100 schools from the original four schools.

MOLLY: When you talk about varied needs based on a student, we've been having conversations in San Antonio recently, and of course nationally, we keep hearing the word equity, equity, equity. It's because this kind of—

KIRAN: Buzzword! [\(9:35\)](#)

MOLLY: It's become a buzzword. We know that equity is really supposed to be a process and an outcome. We are consistently asking "Why are we doing this?" "What are we ultimately trying



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to achieve?” If we are taking into account different histories, needs, and challenges, sort of looking at pivoting resources to accommodate those histories, needs, and challenges. It appears to me that Communities in Schools was doing that long before the buzzword became a thing. I’m curious how is that just trial and error? Was that just trying desperately to support a student? Where did that come from? [\(10:07\)](#)

JESSICA: So, Communities in Schools, we are part of a national network. Our founder, he actually started working with youth out of school. That’s how it all started. They would create store fronts and try to get them back and get their GED, stuff like that. At some point, they recognized, why are we waiting for that? And where are kids every day? That’s how the school-based programming conceptually was brought to light. So, in Texas, Governor White decided to make it one of his education initiatives knowing that they were addressing a drop out problem, knowing that we had areas of need in addressing kids’ needs in order to keep them from dropping out. So, it was built from we don’t want to wait until kids have all these obstacles, and they end up dropping out. We want to get there sooner and help them through those obstacles, so they can graduate from high school and move on. [\(11:10\)](#)

MOLLY: It’s the prevention intervention conversation.

JESSICA: Right. And the earlier you start, like elementary, the more prevention you are moving into. But that’s really how our model was built from the national thought process, but from the state network, Governor White and Linda Gale White, who was an educator, knew that from being an educator, so that’s how conceptually began.

KIRAN: I think sometimes in doing this work, Jessica, we witness how overwhelming folks can get, especially just looking at the breadth of San Antonio’s Community Vision. There’s so much work to do to reach this vision. When you’re doing systems change work on a day-to-day, it can be hard to celebrate the incremental progress that’s being made. How do you stay motivated and inspired in your work with education for as long as you have? [\(11:55\)](#)

JESSICA: I think just pay attention to every child’s story that you hear. When I was working at the site, I had every story. I knew them in and out, but I really try to stay connected to—if you just hear one story. So, a couple years ago, I decided to help volunteer with a group of students in writing their college application essays, not that I was really that much help, but I was helping to bring the story out. I was like, “Okay, what’s going to make you different?” And I’ve held on to that story because I still keep in touch with the student. Her story was amazing. It was really about finding herself. Her senior year, she just talked about—I’ll tell you this story real quick. She was a decimal point in her physics exam, and she put it in the wrong place, and you know, got it wrong. What she wanted that to be the theme of her essay because she finally realized her senior year that, and she had gone through so much in life. She talked about her story was seeing more flashing lights than she ever needed to see. Not knowing if she was going to live, whether they were going to have cold water, hot water, whatever it may be. She’s been through more than



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what most human beings have been through as an adult, and had to really navigate that her whole life. It's her senior year, and she's really successful. She said for the first time in her life, she finally realized that she has been that decimal point in the wrong place. She's finally finding herself in the right place. So, she's now at Lee High University.

MOLLY: As a writer, I would hope. Yeah, what a storyteller. [\(13:38\)](#)

JESSICA: She's at an amazing university. We keep in touch, an email here and there. You know, that one story is changing, you can imagine what that life is going to change. You can't even put a data point on that. You can't put a percentage on what that change for the rest of that life is going to be. So, it's still, and that's just one. I try to hear those from our staff. I recognize that every human being that we touch, every child that we touch, we change their story or give them hope is worth everything that we do, even if it's just counting one at a time. You know, if it's just one today and one tomorrow—

MOLLY: Right, the ripple it sort of creates from that. [\(14:26\)](#)

JESSICA: I think that is, I grew up really recognizing the difference. I grew up and moved, ended up going to, I moved districts in the middle of going from middle school to high school. I ended up going to UT. It was just a different environment that I didn't recognize. I was the first in my family to go to college. It was like that. I kind of recognized that experience, and if it wasn't for people that invested in me I would probably not have had a vision to do other things.

MOLLY: I even appreciate the fact that you were like, "I graduated from college, and my coach was like 'Hey, you might enjoy this job.'" And 30 years later, you're like I kinda dig it. I think it's going alright.

JESSICA: Yeah, I think she was right.

MOLLY: She may have been onto something.

JESSICA: A coach, a site coordinator, somebody in your life invested in you and believed in you, more than you believed in yourself. I hear that from our kids about our site coordinators all the time. [\(15:29\)](#)

MOLLY: How does a student get involved with Communities in Schools? How do you pick a student, or they come to you?

JESSICA: Varied way. One is wherever we are, as a partner in that school full-time, that staff that are there full-time, so in different ways. I think in elementary, you really have the administration really focusing on students that they really want to have additional support systems, and then they have some systems in place to identify. Teachers can recommend. I



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think that this student could really use some additional support. We've had families come, maybe needing some additional support. So, from there, I think at high school though, you have all that, but you also have themselves.

MOLLY: They can identify it. [\(16:15\)](#)

JESSICA: In middle and high school, you start seeing that, but a lot in high school, where they really, or a friend says, "Hey, they helped me. You can get help." I always tell this story. We just did the "Stuff the Bus" School Supply Drive. People think they're just giving school supplies, but I don't think people recognize the fact that when we have school supplies in schools, it's a safe place just to go ask for pencils, go ask for paper, go ask for a pen. But what it is, is to start with asking for a pen, and then, "Oh, by the way, can I just tell you, I don't want to burden my parents right now. They're going through a hard time. We can't afford this." It's a safe place to start then, you ask for something really safe, and then you start telling more. So, I think that it's bigger than *just* school supplies need. It's also we are here. There's no judgement.

MOLLY: There's no agenda.

JESSICA: Eventually, kids feel like, "Oh, I have a place. I think I can tell them." So, yeah. I don't think people recognize how much they help by providing support systems like that. [\(17:29\)](#)

MOLLY: Yeah, you buy a thing of paper and pencils at the Stuff the Bus thing, and then you throw it in the bus and walk away, and then realize I've just given the invitation for a student to talk to someone and eventually get more support.

KIRAN: Yeah. How big is the team at Communities in Schools? That makes me curious now about what does it look like to have the capacity to serve this many schools and meet the different needs of students at each of these schools?

JESSICA: So, we are a staff of about 203.

KIRAN AND MOLLY: Wow!

MOLLY: From 10. I love that.

JESSICA: From 10. So, it's actually a huge leap from last year. We provided and grateful for an increase in funding from the legislative session. So, we are actually, this year, adding 20 more schools. So, yeah, and you know those 20 schools, it may be multiple staff. We've added quite a bit of staff. So, I am, when I started with Communities in Schools there was 10 of us. So, we knew each other, our families. So, the big challenge for me is I don't have that same connection with staff who work at a school every day. We don't even get to see them. So, yeah, it's 203, and it's different. Trying to keep that grassroots level—



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KIRAN: Touchpoints, of course, and relationship-building. Both of the schools, as well as your entire team. That makes me think about your leadership, and how has it shifted as you talk about the education system and the things that you've seen. What are some of the changes you've experienced in your leadership? [\(19:08\)](#)

JESSICA: I think you're constantly trying to find what's the right strategy. So, part of me, I hope I can still be the same person, and I think because I came from working with students and working with schools, that it is my primary interest in understanding that story, but also navigating becoming bigger has been, it takes you away from that part of it. So, as a leader, you're trying to figure out, okay, where does my time go? Where does my time need to go, so that I'm a support to my staff? So, that they are feeling supported for what they need to do, but maybe it has to go in a different direction. I think that's when, as we've grown, in the last five years, we've grown tremendously. As we continue to grow, I see myself having to analyze my time a little bit differently and realizing I am helping them from a different lens or a different angle. [\(20:10\)](#)

MOLLY: Sure. It's also, as you're telling me this growth over the last five years is also something that has to do with leadership. Either understanding we need to pivot and grow some, or we are seeing some different needs and less shift. So, I assume that takes some, maybe it takes a little bit of time to grow to 200 people, 20 schools in a year. Would you say that the growing, I would assume, it's "Hey, we believe in Communities in Schools, so let's grow that program." But what is the shifting need in our community that has seen such growth for your organization? [\(20:46\)](#)

JESSICA: Yeah, so I think there's two. One is our support system of just case management. Understanding that the more poverty we have, the more the schools are feeling it. So, that had its own growth from our very model that we started with. The second growth has been around mental health. A ton of just mental health support, mental wellness. We have increased our team. What we found was students needing supports around mental health needs, send them referrals and recommendations, and it really wasn't happening at the rate we wanted it to, so we just embedded it into our program. We started with one clinician, testing that out, like is that a good model? And we now have 22 clinicians within our agency and also trying to find other partnering agencies who can provide that support. So, that's a second one, and that's a big one. We really have continued to see that. The third one is around special populations. We feel being school is us, that's who we are. But also, our special populations that a school-based model isn't always hitting that. We now have a staff at Haven for Hope, what we find is our families that are going through this period of time of homelessness need someone in their space, not somebody at the school system waiting for them. So, if we can be in their space helping them navigate and helping their kid get back to school, so we can help the adult, then that's a space we can help a kid to still find a seamless opportunity to continue to learn, while they're going through a difficult time of housing right now. What we are really trying to do is



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address some special populations. The focus is to keep kids engaged in school, so we are not leaving our mission because we know if our kids don't stay on target, then the opportunity for them to drop out or lose hope in that is there, so that's another area we are really trying to do. One more, we are doing some work with the adults in the school. So, we are actually putting coaches, who are also clinicians, and they're really just helping teachers, and administrators, and schools navigate to addressing our student's social, emotional and mental health needs. It kind of goes with the increase in social emotional mental health needs of our kids. It's helping a teacher who sees a student, who knows they are distressed or something is going on in their life, and helping them navigate that conversation. Like, "what should I say?" "What should I not say?" And then, helping just educate them on issues around mental health because that's not their training, and we are not expecting them to be clinicians, but the more we become educated, the more we become aware, the better we are at creating healing environments for our kids. Also, self-care for adults, who are taking on all this responsibility for the needs of their kids and helping them think of themselves and self-care, so that's the fourth big one we are working on right now. [\(24:11\)](#)

MOLLY: You've also just painted for me, at least paying attention, we work very closely with our Nonprofit Partners. I, obviously, have a soft spot for what nonprofits do. Nonprofit organizations were built on community need and pivot very easily to make sure it's wrap around how can we help our people. You being in the nonprofit sector for 30 years in this organization and seeing it grow and shift and change and move, what you've just painted for anybody listening is, if your mission is real, right-- we are supporting students, we want them to stay in school and get through school—then what we do on a daily basis will have to shift and change. I'm interested in your professional opinion on, that must be, to me, it sounds so easy to sell. Invest in us because we are investing in students, and we shift and change and move as we need to. We also know that, that's so difficult. As need, we hear it all the time—infinite need, finite resources—you're growing exponentially, and it looks like you've got everything under control. How do you tell the story to just the general public who might want to invest in your organization or a funder or government whose like "oh, wait? Your model seems smart, but also it seems like it's growing exponentially." How do you tell the story? [\(25:39\)](#)

JESSICA: The story really is that we are investing in our kids. Our job is not at risk of dropping out of school. Our job is keeping kids to meet their greatest potential. So, we are at risk of kids not meeting their greatest potential, which means that all of us will be denied of the gifts that each of our kids could potentially bring. We've seen it. For example, we have Rey Saldana, who was a former CIS student—

MOLLY: Rey Saldana, former Councilmember, Chair of VIA Board now. [\(26:20\)](#)

JESSICA: Right. So, all the things he has been successful with, but not just that, he's come to bring it back. Councilwoman Adrianna Garcia, she is a former CIS student. What it is, it's not the person. It's about the opportunity that was given to somebody, and the more we bring adult relationships



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that bring inspiration and hope to our kids, the more we are going to have the potential to see every kid bring us gifts that have been embedded in them. So, I think about that student that is now at the university. I think about what we could potentially lose if we didn't invest in our kids.

KIRAN: It's like the story is, the narrative is in the success of the last three decades, and the people you could point to the success we have had in San Antonio at-large.

MOLLY: Completely right. Our community would be at a loss if we didn't help those kids succeed. I love that so much. We try to end every podcast with a call to action, and as the person who leads Communities in Schools, we are going to ask you to give us one. What is the call to action for somebody listening today [\(27:39\)](#)

JESSICA: I think the call to action to anybody listening today is finding out what your gift is and what you could potentially give to a child or a student or another nonprofit. I think that many people question themselves about what they have to offer, but never ask. I think if I could just ask you to find something you are passionate about, find a nonprofit that you find matches that, and ask, if you at least do that, then you know if you have that gift to give or not. I think that's where people stop. They don't even take that first step in asking if I can potentially be any support. So, I would ask for everyone to think about their gift and what they have to offer. Maybe that's a gift of time, a gift of talent, a gift of maybe resources, none of them are excluded from the opportunity to make a difference. That would probably be my challenge is to find your own gift and find out if it can fit somewhere because it probably will. [\(28:46\)](#)

MOLLY: I'm sure it'll fit somewhere. I love that so very much. I'm also like I feel indebted to your coach right now.

KIRAN: Oh yeah, perfect example.

MOLLY: I'm so happy your coach was like apply for this job. I am so indebted to this person. Thank you so much for joining us.

JESSICA: Thank you for having us and talking about Communities in Schools.

MOLLY: I'm, now, every single time, one ends, I'm like, "Now, I'm obsessed with Communities in Schools." I'm obsessed. I love hearing more about the organizations that are doing things in our community that just make it better. [\(29:17\)](#)

KIRAN: It's a good reminder that everyone is capable of affecting change.

MOLLY: *Every single person.* You just got to say, "Hey, I'm ready." You can find out everything that you've heard today on the podcast at klrn.org/thestorygoes. Yeah. Say I got a gift, and can I give it to you? That's the thing to do. That's your call to action. Go give people your gifts. [\(29:40\)](#)



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