##### [00:00:00.570] - Brian Shelton

I'm Brian Shelton and you're listening to Harper Talks, a coproduction of Harper College Alumni Relations and Harper Radio. Today on Harper Talks, I'm excited to speak with Nicole Buchanan. She was a student at Harper college from 2000 to 2001, and life took a different path for her. She transferred to the university of South Carolina where she became the general manager of a McDonald's restaurant, which led to her current career. Nicole joined me in the newly renovated studios of WHCM in the A building on campus. Nicole, thank you so much for being here today. How are you?

##### [00:00:33.500] - Nicole Buchanan

I'm great. Thanks for having me. This is so exciting.

##### [00:00:35.810] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, it's great to be here. The day that we're doing the show, it is rainy and cold and nasty outside. So you got the student treatment of walking from the parking lot through the rain. So I hope it wasn't too bad.

##### [00:00:46.990] - Nicole Buchanan

That brought back a lot of memories.

##### [00:00:48.390] - Brian Shelton

Bring back a lot of memories. That's fantastic. Hey, I was looking at your bio and your information and stuff, and it looks like you started working at McDonald's when you were 15 years old. Is that true? You were 15 when you started there?

##### [00:01:02.320] - Nicole Buchanan

I was absolutely 15. One day I asked my mom for money to go to Woodfield, and she told me no. And that weekend she said, let's go to McDonald's, which was unusual, but I went. And when we got there, she asked for an application. And I looked at her and I said, EW, are you going to work here? And she said, you are. And a career was born.

##### [00:01:19.990] - Brian Shelton

OOH, are you going to work here? That's hilarious. So what was that like when you started there when you were 15? Was it scary for you?

##### [00:01:27.450] - Nicole Buchanan

It was scary, yeah. McDonald's wasn't a cool place to work in the late 90s, so I was definitely worried about getting teased by my friends. And there was some of that. But immediately I found friends there. There were friends from high school there. I made new friends. I learned new skills. It was a fast paced business, and I just really enjoyed learning and growing really quickly there.

##### [00:01:46.420] - Brian Shelton

That's cool. That's great. So how did working at McDonald's lead you to Harper college?

##### [00:01:52.370] - Nicole Buchanan

So, McDonald's offers a lot of educational benefits. We have archways to opportunity which offers our employees educational benefits, like tuition, assistance. And so back then when I was an employee of McDonald's corporation, they were basically reimbursing me for my tuition.

##### [00:02:08.460] - Brian Shelton

That's great.

##### [00:02:09.180] - Nicole Buchanan

Yeah, it was really helpful. So I was able to attend Harper with really no debt, and I did that for my first year and a half.

##### [00:02:14.990] - Brian Shelton

Well, that's a really great opportunity to be able to come to school and not have to pay for anything. That's great.

##### [00:02:18.780] - Nicole Buchanan

Yeah, it really helped me out.

##### [00:02:20.040] - Brian Shelton

So what did you study while you were here? Do you remember anything?

##### [00:02:23.290] - Nicole Buchanan

I was taking a lot of gen eds I didn't know what I wanted to do when I came here. I really didn't want to go to college. I wanted to work, but my parents were really insistent on me getting a college degree. And so I came here. Like I said, I didn't have to pay for it, so it seemed like a good idea. And so I worked and I studied just gen eds. I thought I wanted to be in biology, so I was leaning towards that. But while I was here, I was taking Math and Science, political science. I took English. I took basically gen eds.

##### [00:02:52.370] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. Job interfere with coming to school or anything?

##### [00:02:56.330] - Nicole Buchanan

No, thankfully. McDonald's flexible scheduling allowed me to work my work hours around my school schedule. But I did not enjoy working late nights, so I was very strategic in taking late night courses here so I didn't have to work late.

##### [00:03:10.330] - Brian Shelton

That's fantastic. Not as many late night courses here anymore. That's really died off with the whole online boom. I remember teaching back in the early two thousands, and I would always teach at night. There'd be tons of people there and what I would classify as older students, not the traditional college age students. And so it was a lot of fun, but we don't get as much of that.

##### [00:03:28.340] - Nicole Buchanan

That's a bummer.

##### [00:03:29.000] - Brian Shelton

Anymore. Yeah, it is kind of a bummer. It's not as much fun, but yeah, that's very interesting. Do you remember what campus was like back then for you? Or is it so long ago that you don't really remember?

##### [00:03:41.220] - Nicole Buchanan

Well, much like today it was kind of rainy and a little cold. I do remember that, but it was beautiful. I really liked it here. I know it's in Palatine, but it really felt like you could be in California. You could be anywhere here at Harper. I loved the layout of the campus. I loved how much green there was. The buildings were beautiful. Since I left, there's been a ton of growth. I walk by buildings, I have no idea what they are. I was completely lost trying to find this building this morning. I remember it because I paid my tuition here, but I couldn't find it. So tons of change. It's really good to see the schools growing and continuing to thrive.

##### [00:04:11.010] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. Before we started recording today, we were talking about how this campus is different than other community college campus because it looks like a real college campus. You really feel like you are somewhere as opposed know, a lot of community college campuses are basically office buildings and kind of

##### [00:04:26.210] - Nicole Buchanan

yeah, this there was a definite energy about Harper that I enjoyed more than some of the other local community colleges that I'd visited back then. When I decided to attend Harper, I like the energy about it. It really felt like it was preparing you to be successful in life. And when you transferred out eventually, like I did.

##### [00:04:44.880] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. So you did transfer out. You transferred to the University of South Carolina, but you stayed focused on your career also while you were there. Right. You were working McDonald's while you were at the University of South Carolina, and I read that that led to you dropping out of school.

##### [00:04:59.680] - Nicole Buchanan

Yes. Well, if anybody from the University of South Carolina is listening, it led to me being put on academic probation and getting kicked out.

##### [00:05:07.460] - Brian Shelton

Oh, wow.

##### [00:05:08.710] - Nicole Buchanan

Yes. Unfortunately, I was not responsible in notifying them that I was going to be pursuing my career. So I left school, and I didn't notify and they took that as a you just dropped out. Okay. I wasn't on good terms with them, and when I returned, I eventually had to beg forgiveness and take accountability for my actions.

##### [00:05:24.860] - Brian Shelton

What did your parents think about that?

##### [00:05:26.820] - Nicole Buchanan

They were not pleased. They were very insistent on me getting my college degree, and they wanted me to finish, and I really wanted to work. I was passionate about working as I was attending school. I was learning things at school that I was being paid to learn at work.

##### [00:05:43.000] - Brian Shelton

Right.

##### [00:05:43.420] - Nicole Buchanan

And so it didn't seem to me to make sense to be doing both. I could get paid to learn at work, and so I wanted to do that. I was passionate about pursuing a career, getting started. As you said, I started at 15, so I had an early jump on my career. I wanted to pursue that. And so they were not pleased with that decision, but they supported me, and luckily for me, I worked really hard and it worked out.

##### [00:06:02.880] - Brian Shelton

That's great. Do you recommend the dropping out of school route to others?

##### [00:06:07.110] - Nicole Buchanan

No, I don't recommend dropping out. What I do recommend is listening to yourself and your heart and your dreams and doing what those following them, but knowing that if you drop out of school, it's going to be a very hard road and there is no backup plan. You've got to be prepared to make it work. That's your only choice.

##### [00:06:25.540] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, it's interesting. A lot of people school is the right route for them. A lot of people going directly into some sort of work is the right route for them, and then they wind up a lot of times coming back. I mean, I see that a lot because I have worked in academia for a long time. It seems to be recently there's a little bit of this push that to try to push people away from going to college and going into vocational fields. And we need people in what we used to call vocational fields. Right. But that's also secondary education as well. Right. We teach all of that here at the college. We teach HVAC and welding and plumbing. We teach all of that here. And so it seems that you can embrace both. Right. You can both go to school and be working towards a career and let those two things complement each other, I guess, is what I was trying to get at.

##### [00:07:10.700] - Nicole Buchanan

Absolutely. Couldn't agree more.

##### [00:07:12.730] - Brian Shelton

So when you came back to this area, you eventually started working with the Bear family of restaurants, which owns, I think you told me, 35 McDonald's stores in the region, which that seems like a lot.

##### [00:07:24.850] - Nicole Buchanan

It is a lot.

##### [00:07:25.470] - Brian Shelton

It seems like a lot, yeah. And you worked your way up from a general manager to a vice president. So what does that mean? What does your role entail?

##### [00:07:35.020] - Nicole Buchanan

So I do a lot of different things. When I came back, I started as a general manager. I was responsible for the operations of one restaurant. As I came out of the restaurants, I become a multi unit supervisor, and I was responsible for five to six restaurants. Shortly after, we kept growing. So when I joined Bear Family restaurants, we had five restaurants. And when I came out of the restaurants, then we had seven, then we had twelve. And it happened very quick within six months. So I kind of moved to a director position where I was managing multi unit supervisors and making sure that they were hitting their operations and financial metrics. And then as we continued to grow, there became more multi unit supervisors and then more directors, and I became above them as a vice president. Now I work with the home office and make sure that all the departments are kind of functioning together and everybody's doing everything they need to do to get it all done.

##### [00:08:21.700] - Brian Shelton

Wow. So how often are you in actual McDonald's restaurants?

##### [00:08:25.530] - Nicole Buchanan

Actually, pretty often. I enjoy being in the restaurants. I love seeing what they do. It's where I started, so I have fun with it. I'll be in one after this interview know, I really enjoy it. They're a lot of fun. And I still love working in the drive through and making fries and seeing what they do every day, it's fun to me.

##### [00:08:41.420] - Brian Shelton

That's cool. That's really great. You've made a really solid career out of working in the fast food industry, and I have friends who have as well. And I'm just curious, do you think there's a stigma about working in that field? I think we were talking before we started here today about when you were a kid or you even talked about in the interview. You didn't want to work at McDonald's when you were 15 years old. Right. So is there a stigma attached to that?

##### [00:09:04.560] - Nicole Buchanan

There is, and there really shouldn't be because these quick serve restaurants give you opportunity from a really young age to learn and to grow and be successful and to learn to run a business. I mean, I was 19. I was running a $2 million business. What other business is going to give a 19 year old that opportunity? And so there's great careers here. There's educational support, tuition assistance. Right. You can pursue your career, and you can pursue your degree at the same time. But unfortunately, yeah, there is a stigma around it. When I go visit high schools, they ask me, oh, you work for McDonald's? Yes, I do. And I started making fries at 15, and there's no shame in that. It's an honest day's work.

##### [00:09:39.950] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, that's great. So tell me about this really cool program that we have now with bear and the college, this partnership program

##### [00:09:47.500] - Nicole Buchanan

That's really exciting. So, for our McDonald's curriculum, we have to take certain courses in order to be restaurant managers.

##### [00:09:54.250] - Brian Shelton

Okay.

##### [00:09:54.640] - Nicole Buchanan

So there's curriculum that we've got to do, and that is college accredited. But it's difficult. So, when I went back to the university of south carolina, I submitted my coursework, and they said, oh, unfortunately, we don't accept this for college credit, and many colleges don't. But it's an exciting partnership because now Harper is going to honor those credits towards a degree, what we have to do for work. And so that's really cool. I'm really glad that our students and our employees will be able to benefit towards their college degree because of the curriculum they need to take for work.

##### [00:10:22.440] - Brian Shelton

That's really great. So, does Bear offer tuition assistance to employees?

##### [00:10:26.050] - Nicole Buchanan

Yeah, we do. So we have what is called archways opportunity. And so if you work for us for 90 days and you work a minimum of 15 hours, you're eligible for $2,500 if you're a crew person and $3,000 a year if you're a manager.

##### [00:10:42.870] - Brian Shelton

That's fantastic.

##### [00:10:43.780] - Nicole Buchanan

It's great. It helps.

##### [00:10:45.350] - Brian Shelton

Wow. That really is great. Because you think about the cost of college tuition today, right. It is just skyrocketing. Now here at the community college, we keep it at a pretty decent level. Right. You can still go to community college for a fairly reasonable amount of money, which saves you a lot towards the four year degree. Right. But college tuition is so expensive in any way where you can find a way to save some money, and if work will pay for it, why not, right?

##### [00:11:06.660] - Nicole Buchanan

Absolutely. It helped me a ton when I went to Harper. Obviously, my whole tuition bill was paid by that money. And then when I went to South Carolina, the $3,000 a year, it did help. It helped. Every year, I was waiting for that check. It made a difference.

##### [00:11:17.390] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. So, the parents weren't happy about you dropping out of school, but where are they now? How do we feel today?

##### [00:11:24.480] - Nicole Buchanan

So, they're very proud. They're very excited about what I'm doing in my career. They've always loved McDonald's. They eat there often, and so they live in Tampa. And so when they drive up to Chicago to see me, they tell every McDonald's they stop, oh, my daughter, she runs a bunch of McDonald's in Chicago. I'm like, mom, I'm sure they don't know who I am. But she's very excited. They're so proud that I'm part of the brand and I was able know, have a great career from an early age and to eventually get my degree because of the benefits that McDonald's offers.

##### [00:11:50.810] - Brian Shelton

That's really cool. So you also do some volunteer work. I read that you like to ring the bell for the Salvation Army.

##### [00:11:56.670] - Nicole Buchanan

Is that do I do here in Hoffman Estates at the jewel across from our restaurant on Roselle road? Yeah, I will do that at Christmas time, and that's always a fun event. So we love to partner with our friends at the Salvation Army. There's so much need in the Elgin area. There's so much to give back, and we enjoy helping out with their Christmas programs.

##### [00:12:13.250] - Brian Shelton

Yeah. Are you in the Elgin area yourself?

##### [00:12:14.880] - Nicole Buchanan

Yeah, I'm in St. Charles, but our restaurants are mostly based in Elgin and South Elgin. That's where we started in 1967.

##### [00:12:20.970] - Brian Shelton

Okay. Wow. And 35 of them.

##### [00:12:23.840] - Nicole Buchanan

35.

##### [00:12:24.620] - Brian Shelton

Do they have any other restaurants as Bear or is it all McDonald's?

##### [00:12:27.240] - Nicole Buchanan

We're only allowed to do McDonald's.

##### [00:12:28.520] - Brian Shelton

Only allowed to do McDonald's.

##### [00:12:29.250] - Nicole Buchanan

Okay, then McDonald's takes all our focus. Okay.

##### [00:12:32.350] - Brian Shelton

I was just curious if it branched out into other things.

##### [00:12:34.720] - Nicole Buchanan

No.

##### [00:12:35.970] - Brian Shelton

So you've given us a lot of really great information here about your career and what you've done, and so I ask everybody who comes here to Harper talks to tell us what advice do you have for current Harper students or maybe someone who's thinking about coming to Harper.

##### [00:12:51.520] - Nicole Buchanan

So I just graduated from the University of South Carolina last year, so I have a very vivid memory of what it is like to be a current student. And my best advice for current students is really to stay organized. There's really no way you can get everything that you need to get done and manage a work life balance without being organized. If you try to just kind of tackle it as it happens, you're just not going to be able to balance it, and you're going to get frustrated. So staying organized here at Harper, I had a great experience with my professors. They knew me, I knew them. If you're struggling, go ask for help. The professors genuinely are vested in your success, and they're going to help. So don't be shy, don't be nervous. Go ask for help. And for people who are going on, I think it was the question, there's no shortcut to being successful. It really takes a ton of hard work, and there's a ton of people who want to see you succeed. Right. You've got to network and reach out to those people, leverage them, but takes a ton of hard work. So go out there and make it happen.

##### [00:13:48.970] - Brian Shelton

Yeah, that's great. That's great advice. What's next for you? You're staying with Bear, you're moving up. You're going to run the company altogether one day. What's the plan?

##### [00:13:57.280] - Nicole Buchanan

Well, right now I am number two underneath the president, David Baer, so there's no more upward momentum for me unless we grow more restaurants. So this is good for me, right know, supporting my people who are getting their education. I just had an area supervisor come through Harper and get her diploma and that was exciting. So supporting my people, seeing them grow, learn, be successful, get their education, buy homes, have babies, I mean, it's a wonderful thing. And doing so much volunteerism in the community, we're going to continue to grow that program and make an impact.

##### [00:14:25.770] - Brian Shelton

That's really great. Well, thank you so much for coming here today. I really appreciate you being here. And I guess maybe I'll have to go get to McDonald's.

##### [00:14:35.190] - Nicole Buchanan

Well, you let me know. It's my treat.

##### [00:14:36.880] - Brian Shelton

It's your treat.

##### [00:14:37.660] - Nicole Buchanan

My treat.

##### [00:14:38.410] - Brian Shelton

Okay. Great. Nicole Buchanan is a Harper College alumni and leading in our community. If you're enjoying Harper Talks, please subscribe. And while you're at it, rate and review us so that others might find us. Harper Talks is a co production of Harper College Alumni Relations and Harper Radio. Our show is produced by Shannon Hynes. This episode was edited by Coby Pozo. Our online content producer is Matt Byrne. Our theme music was created by Aidan Cashman. I'm Brian Shelton. Thanks for listening.