

Brittany Barber
Early Childhood Mental Health Program Administrator
Department for Behavioral Health, Developmental and Intellectual Disabilities (DBHDID)
April 11, 2024

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Progress, not perfection is one thing that I actually say a lot, which is to let us know that, that perfection is oftentimes based on an individual viewpoint, and the important thing is to make progress.

Brittany Barber:

I agree. Totally agree with you.

Julianne Hatton:

Welcome to CHFS Community, a place where ordinary people do extraordinary work, helping Kentuckians reach their full human potential. Hosted by Eric Friedlander, Secretary of the Cabinet for Health and Family Services.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Hello, CHFS. This is Eric Friedlander, your Secretary. And today, I have, with me, Brittany Barber, who's a program administrator with the Division for Mental Health and DBHDID. Hi, Brittany.

Brittany Barber:

Hello. How are you?

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

I'm fine, I'm fine. We have a particularly rainy day today, but it's all right. We'll get out our boats and we'll be fine.

Brittany Barber:

Yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

So I always like to start, where are you from?

Brittany Barber:

So I grew up in Louisville, Kentucky, in the southwest of town, Shively area, in a very diverse neighborhood. Really great neighborhood that was very supportive. We were surrounded by love and friendships were genuine, just good times. You remember, in the days, kids will be outside, which was very different from the generation now. We spent lots of our times outside

making mud pies, riding bikes, playing until the street light came on. And so it was just really, really good times in my neighborhood.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

That sounds like fun. Where'd you go to elementary, junior, high school in Louisville?

Brittany Barber:

So in elementary school, I first started off at Cane Run Elementary, which was a school right down the street from my home. And then we were bussed to Watson Lane Elementary School, which was about maybe 30 minutes, maybe more than that. Not for sure the timeframe, but it was quite a drive every morning. And then I attended Williams Middle School, and then I attended Western High School.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Okay, Western.

Brittany Barber:

Yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

I grew up in Louisville too, and went to the Brown School for junior high and high school when it was still at The Brown Hotel. So that was a great experience. It was a great experience.

Brittany Barber:

Yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

So what were you interested in when you went to high school? Were there things that you participated in at Western?

Brittany Barber:

So yes. I was on the dance team. I think I did band for a little bit. Junior, senior class president.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Oh, yeah.

Brittany Barber:

So I was a part of several activities and academic programs and things like that. So yes, I really, really enjoyed high school.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

I think we only had one sports team. It was the chess team. So that was what I did, although I don't know as I remember how everything moves anymore.

Brittany Barber:

That's one thing, though, that I've been interested in, chess. I've never played it before. I love playing checkers but I have never played chess.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

It's a good game. It's a strategic game, but it's been years, it's been years since I've played. I should probably get back into it, I think. So after you graduated from Western, where'd you go?

Brittany Barber:

So I'm thankful to my counselor at high school. She was very involved in finding out what we wanted to do for our future, and so she helped me find lots of scholarships to apply for. And so I attended Kentucky State University to work in elementary education because, as a kid, I had always wanted to become a teacher or a principal. And so we sought out lots of scholarships to help support that. And so Kentucky State University was my first choice of school to attend.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Okay. Go Thoroughbreds.

Brittany Barber:

Yes, yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Did you enjoy? Did you live on campus?

Brittany Barber:

I did live on campus. I did enjoy it. After a while though, I believe my sophomore year, I did move out and had my own apartment, which was even better. But yes, I enjoyed the experience of being both on campus and off campus.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Well, that's good, that's good. And so did you major in early childhood education there?

Brittany Barber:

I did not. So later, I decided to go into the field of early education instead of elementary education. Early childhood education, we didn't know much about that in high school. No one really talked about it. So when I went to Kentucky State University, learned a little bit more

about it. I thought this is something that I may be interested in, especially with the vulnerable population of Birth through 5. So I figured I could work with that population with this degree.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Yeah, absolutely. Did you do anything in First Steps or was it all through the schools, like, Head Start, kindergarten, sorts of things?

Brittany Barber:

So when I had to do some of my practicum work, it was in the elementary schools. There was also a child development center in Frankfort that I did some practicum hours with as well.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

And where did that lead you?

Brittany Barber:

So that led me into Community Action. That was my first professional job out of college. And I started working for Community Action as a toddler teacher. And so I loved that position for a while, and then moved up into a director of a child care facility. And so those experiences were great experiences. And again, working with the family and children was one of my things I truly enjoyed.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

So was it Community Action Blue Grass?

Brittany Barber:

In Lexington, yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

In Lexington, okay.

Brittany Barber:

Blue Grass.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

All right. I was briefly over Community Action in Louisville south, but we didn't do much on the early childhood side. So what were some of your favorite experiences there, maybe working with families and kids?

Brittany Barber:

So their mission, of course, is serving communities and families and community involvement and advocacy. And so one of the stories that quickly comes to mind is me working with our

families. And so I had a father who came into the classroom and told me one of his goals was to go back and finish his certification at Bluegrass Community College. And he had a daughter in the classroom. And I'm always big about motivating people into accomplishing their dreams and goals. And I told him, "I believe you can do this." He had one class left, I believe.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Oh, yeah.

Brittany Barber:

So I encouraged him to apply and to make it happen, not only for him, but for his daughter. And so he applied and started the classes, but you could tell that he was exhausted from working, trying to go to school, as well as taking care of his daughter. But I continued to encourage, "I know it's rough, I know it's hard. I've been in school before. Keep pushing. You've got this." And also, it was important for me to make sure that our families had the appropriate resources or anything they needed to help them fulfill their goals, and so reached out to some of our resources to help support in that way. And so finally, as time had passed, he finally completed certification, and he came in the classroom, "Ms. Brittany, I finished my certification. I'm finished."

So tears of joy, and his daughter comes over with this concern on her face, like, why is my dad crying or why is he shouting? So I had to talk to her in forms of talking to a toddler and using the appropriate language, explaining to her the excitement that her dad had and that he completed school and those types of things. And so that was just such a joy. I mean, you never know. We all have goals and dreams, and then sometimes we just need others to help support us and encourage us. So that's one story out of many stories I know I have that really sits with me, just seeing him become resilient and watching those families thrive.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Yeah. Well, that's what we're supposed to do, is lift each other up and support each other. That's how people make it.

Brittany Barber:

Exactly, exactly.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

I'm sure there are many, many stories of working with kids too, and you've really become an advocate for kids.

Brittany Barber:

Yes, I have. That's always been one of my thanks, is being an advocate for young children.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

And of course, we are.

Brittany Barber:

Yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

That's who we want to make sure they have a good start so that they can join us here. What led you into the state government, because we've been here all the time, and then you were leading that childcare center? So what was your path over here?

Brittany Barber:

So I had my daughter, and working in the childcare center, having my daughter, it was a lot, just trying to balance everything. And so I had applied for a position within the Division of Childcare, and so I got that position. Very surprised, because I was like, oh, it probably wouldn't work out. But ended up working out. And so I had been with state government ever since. Spending most of my time with the Division of Childcare, and then moving into Behavior Health. I did take a quick leave because I wanted to accomplish my master's degree at Georgetown College. And so with that, I needed to do student teaching. And so I spent some time doing that. Didn't quite finish student teaching and really sat down and thought about, do I want to be certified or non-certified? What do I really want to do? And so I ended up going the non-certification route, coming back to Division of Childcare, and then received a position at Behavioral Health.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

And behavioral health is so important in the area of early childhood and some of these childcare centers. We had those behavioral health advisor positions. So talk a little bit about how important that is for that behavioral health, particularly, for kids.

Brittany Barber:

So with my role as the Early Childhood Mental Health program, we have early childhood specialists work with young children, Birth through 5.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Those are the words I was missing. Thank you.

Brittany Barber:

Yes. Early childhood. We have early childhood specialists that work with young children, birth through 5, who provide child-level consultations to early care and education programs, and that's regarding social, emotional, and behavior issues. So they're able to complete evaluations, assessment, therapeutic services for this population. And again, it is so important that this work happens in early care and education. A lot of people don't feel like, at this young age, that there are behavior issues or mental health issues, and there is. It does happen. And so to get those early interventions started at an early age will really help our young children's future.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

And it's not just one group that can do that. You came from the child care group, you're in the behavioral health group. Being able to work across those kind of systems, I think, is really important.

Brittany Barber:

Yes, it's so important. And collaborating with individuals too. I'm the co-administrator of the Early Childhood Mental Health program, but we also have a co-administrator at the Department for Public Health. And so having those relationships with Public Health and some of our community partners, community mental health centers, in order to make sure that these early interventions for our most underserved population is there and important.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Looking across departments is really, really an important piece. You've participated in some of the resilience and equity work too, right?

Brittany Barber:

Yes. I am trauma-informed care liaison at the department. And so one of my big roles is to provide three trainings for agencies, departments across the state. So it's a trauma-informed care training for trainers. So if you're interested in training individuals across the state on trauma, secondary traumatic stress, those components, then we offer this three times a year. And to this date, we have 420 trainers across the state who have went through this training. And it's so important, it's so necessary. At the department, we're very proud of the work that continues to happen. So we will be offering one in June coming up, but I really love collaborating with our agencies and partners on that work.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Well, it's so important because I always feel like by the time somebody gets to us in our programs, often, there has been some trauma involved to get here and having us understand what that trauma response is and then what that trauma response can produce in us, I think that that's really, really an important thing to understand.

Brittany Barber:

Yes, it's very important.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Well, and that's why we're doing the resilience work in the cabinet and the equity work in the cabinet. I think those pieces, for us to understand what folks are facing in the world, I think that's really important for us.

Brittany Barber:

Yes. And for us to learn too what we are facing too because sometimes we can't put a name to it. We know something's going on but we can't put a name to it. I've learned about trauma and the components of it when I came to the department. Working in early childhood, again, you see different types of behaviors but a lot of this wasn't learned in school or taught in school. And so coming to the department, being able to learn a lot about this, but then what I've learned, I'm able to go out and share it to the communities. That's so important for us to do. And again, we offer that training for free, and we ask that participants do not associate a cost with offering the training as well, because it's so important and it's so needed.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Well, and it's a part of the wider circle we also try to impact, not only the folks we're serving, but the people who serve them as well.

Brittany Barber:

Yes. Correct.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

So you teach, you provide trainings, you have one child?

Brittany Barber:

So it's a total of four.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Four?

Brittany Barber:

I have two bonus kids.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

All right.

Brittany Barber:

And I have a 15-year-old and an eight-year-old that keeps us extremely busy. Yes. The bonus kids, they're adults, so they're grown and doing their own thing and wonderful adults. And then the 15 and eight-year-old, they're into sports, and one's in high school. And so we're just balancing all of the busyness of everything.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

So with all of that, what do you do to relax? What do you do that feeds you?

Brittany Barber:

So I'm a music lover. I love to listen to music. Music is important to me. It helps my mood. At work, what do I do to relax? I lead the mindfulness breathing activity every Wednesday for DBHDID staff. It's for 15 minutes, where we come and just do deep breathing. And like I have mentioned, this is something that you can totally do on your own. And so it's just that simple, just breathing in and breathing out. That really helps. And it also reduces the stress levels in the body, lowers the heart rate, reduces the possibility of burnout, and then reduces anxiety. And so that's important to do throughout your day, because we're all in meetings, several tasks that we have going on. And so it's just important to take some time to do that for yourself.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Absolutely. Sometimes I just have to remember to breathe. I'm going over-

Brittany Barber:

To breathe.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

... to the general assembly and I'm like, oh, wait a minute, I better breathe.

Brittany Barber:

I better breathe. Yes. And I do that too. I didn't notice this, but I hold my breath a lot. And so just this activity has taught me just to breathe, and it's okay to do that. It makes me feel better. But as far as home, I'm one who likes to volunteer in the community. Although it's been a little while, I love spending time with my family. Again, I'm a concert person, whether it be indoor, outdoor and traveling. I love to travel.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Where have you been recently that's exciting?

Brittany Barber:

We just came back. So last week, we went to Atlanta, Georgia for spring break. We went last year. My kids love Atlanta, so food, culture, just all of those things that, "Oh, can we live here?" And I'm like, "It'd be nice." But we really love Atlanta, and so we enjoy some time there. But I love Jamaica. Jamaica is one of my favorite places to travel to.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

That sounds great. That sounds good.

Brittany Barber:

Whenever I can.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

So want to ask you this question, do you have a favorite quote? What is it that you say to yourself? What is it that you say to yourself to keep you motivated and moving through a day?

Brittany Barber:

Done is better than perfect.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Ooh, amen. Yes.

Brittany Barber:

I'll say that one more time, done is better than perfect. Sometimes, aiming for perfection can cause some disappointment and some delays in achieving our goals and dreams. It can delay completing a task, whether that task be at home, whether that task be for work. And what I'm working on personally is just being done with something because I'm sure it's okay, I'm sure it is okay. It might not be perfect in Brittany's eyes but it's done and it's time to move on to the next task, because if not, I can miss great opportunities, accomplish some goals that I have set for myself if I'm just dwelling on being perfect. So that's what I'm working on.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

That's good. Progress, not perfection is one thing that I actually say a lot, which is to let us know that, that perfection is oftentimes based on an individual viewpoint, and the important thing is to make progress.

Brittany Barber:

I agree. Totally agree with you. Yes, yes.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Well, thank you for talking with me today. This has been fun. I've really enjoyed it.

Brittany Barber:

Thank you so much for the opportunity, and thank you so much for all that you do for the Cabinet.

Secretary Eric Friedlander:

Well, thanks. And I hope folks have enjoyed this and will listen to our next podcast. Thanks, Brittany.

Brittany Barber:

You're welcome. Thank you.

Julianne Hatton:

Thanks for joining us on CHFS Community, hosted by Secretary, Eric Friedlander, produced by Julianne Hatton. Our assistant producer is Brice Mitchell, with help from Jennifer Hubbard. Find us at chfs.ky.gov and tell all your friends about the show. Until next time, stay healthy, Kentucky.