

Check It Out! Podcast Transcript
Episode #34
“Following passions for news and education with Lynne Varner”
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Ken Harvey: 00:00:00 In today's episode, we get to spend some time with a former United Press International reporter, Seattle Times newspaper editorial board member and columnist, and a two-time Pulitzer Prize nominee who now serves our region as the associate vice chancellor at Washington State University Everett. Stay tuned for our conversation with Lynne Varner.

Ken Harvey: 00:00:30 Welcome to season two and episode 34 of Check It Out, the Sno-Isle Libraries podcast for lifelong learners with inquiring minds.

Speaker 2: 00:00:38 The views and opinions expressed on this podcast may not necessarily reflect the official position of Sno-Isle Libraries.

Ken Harvey: 00:00:46 Hi, I'm Ken Harvey.

Jim Hills: 00:00:47 And I'm Jim Hills.

Ken Harvey: 00:00:48 And we are delighted to be joined in the podcast studio by Lynne Varner. She's the associate vice chancellor for marketing, strategy, and community engagement at Washington State University Everett. Hey Lynne, thank you so much for sitting down with us.

Lynne Varner: 00:01:03 Absolutely.

Ken Harvey: 00:01:04 Gosh, it's such a pleasure having you with us. And as we were looking at your background, you have an incredibly rich and full biography. I consider spending the five minutes I knew it would take to read it all out loud to the audience. But if you don't mind, let me summarize it this way so we can get into our conversation. So just tell if everything I'm about to say is correct. You're an East Coast native?

Lynne Varner: 00:01:30 Yes.

Ken Harvey: 00:01:31 You have a degree from the University of Maryland?

(Continued)

Lynne Varner: 00:01:33 Yes.

Ken Harvey: 00:01:34 You are a John S. Knight fellow at Stanford University?

Lynne Varner: 00:01:37 Yes.

Ken Harvey: 00:01:38 Okay. You were a reporter for UPI, otherwise known as United Press International?

Lynne Varner: 00:01:44 Yes.

Ken Harvey: 00:01:44 And you were a staff writer at the Washington Post?

Lynne Varner: 00:01:47 You got it.

Ken Harvey: 00:01:47 Okay. Wow. Columnist and editorial board writer at the Seattle Times?

Lynne Varner: 00:01:52 Yes.

Ken Harvey: 00:01:53 Twice nominated for a Pulitzer prize?

Lynne Varner: 00:01:56 The last I never won though.

Ken Harvey: 00:01:59 Oh, well, and I was never nominated. Former president of the Seattle Association of Black Journalists, and you were involved with the national association with the same name?

Lynne Varner: 00:02:08 I was on the board of the national association.

Ken Harvey: 00:02:09 Oh, okay, on the board. And you've also co-authored a book?

Lynne Varner: 00:02:13 I have.

Ken Harvey: 00:02:15 I think we want to get into all of those a bit. Final thing, so you've been with the Washington State University since 2014?

Lynne Varner: 00:02:22 Yes.

Ken Harvey: 00:02:23 And then first as associate vice president of public affairs and now as associate vice chancellor for, and I want to make sure this is right, marketing, strategy, and community engagement?

Lynne Varner: 00:02:33 Whatever they need me to do, that's the shorter.

Ken Harvey: 00:02:36 And that's here at the Everett?

Lynne Varner: 00:02:39 Our Everett campus, yes.

Ken Harvey: 00:02:41 Wow, that's a lot. And I know that I was leaving out something. God, congratulations, you've accomplished a lot.

Lynne Varner: 00:02:55 Well, and I'm not done yet.

Ken Harvey: 00:02:56 More to come.

Lynne Varner: 00:02:56 Yes, more to come.

Ken Harvey: 00:02:56 Well, let's learn a little bit more about you and talk about of the things that are important to you. Let's talk about WSU Everett, let's start there. Why is the Washington State University now present with an Everett campus?

Lynne Varner: 00:03:13 Because it falls into our land-grant access mission. Snohomish County is a fast growing county. In fact, it was designated on the US census as one of two of the fastest growing counties in the entire country. And for us, we look at that and we think is there access there? Is there access to higher education? Because we believe that everyone deserves the opportunity to get a degree, a college degree. And there was not access to a four-year institution here. And the public had been asking, lawmakers, just public officials, leaders in the communities had been asking if someone could build an institution of higher education in this region. And for over three decades, no one stepped forward, and Washington State University did.

Lynne Varner: 00:04:03 And one of the things that we said was that we would come here, we'd built a campus, but we would do it with the community. What's important to the community, what degrees are you most interested in for your children? And that's why we offer nine programs at WSU Everett that are industry aligned. So mechanical, electrical engineering, software engineering, we offer business, data analytics. These are degree programs that you will emerge from and immediately be able to go and get a job in a fast growing industry. So we did all that deliberately, but we were embolden by this service mission to serve the public.

Jim Hills: 00:04:46 And I'm interested because when I first started hearing about WSU coming to Snohomish County, perhaps the leaders were aware of what was coming for Snohomish County. But I don't know that residents were. It was prior to the explosion, and leaders like former WSU President, Elson Floyd really saw that opportunity. And by the time the explosion is now, WCU was in

place. I'm interested in how the organization, how the institution saw that ahead of time.

- Lynne Varner: 00:05:24 So we spend time, of course, running our five campuses, and our six is a global campus, our online education program. But we also spend an equal amount of time looking forward, looking 10, 20 years down the road and making sure that we're in a position to serve the public in the way that we know we must as a land-grant institution. And so part of that was looking around the state and saying, "Are we in the places where we should be?" We offer engineering in Bremerton, I don't know if you guys knew that.
- Jim Hills: 00:05:58 I didn't know that.
- Lynne Varner: 00:06:00 But we do that because that's an area that needs it, and we can't expect that they are going to go to Pullman where our largest campus is. We want to make sure that people have opportunity. And so we spent a lot of time thinking about that, are we offering the right programs? Are we reaching out to communities and letting them know that you can be a cook? It's within you. We have to build a path for you, but it's within you. So that's part of what that kind of thinking 10, 15 years ago, that kind of thinking led us to where we are today.
- Jim Hills: 00:06:39 So you mentioned land-grant university, and I think of land-grant university as a term from actually a couple of centuries ago now. But it's come to the fore for WSU in its mission here and elsewhere. Can you tie that together for us?
- Lynne Varner: 00:06:59 Yeah. So you're right that land-grant institutions, that's an old term from the 1800s, the moral act when that was created. And so it tasked one university and every state with the obligation, the mission to serve communities through both education but also through research. So that's what WSU does, both our education side and our research arm. They are both strategically designed to benefit the public. And so you bring that forward, and how do we do that today? It's really about making sure that our institution reflects everyone, reflects our communities. So we talk a lot about diversity, but it's also about making sure that everyone has access and opportunity. Because if we're doing those two things, then we're creating that kind of society that our founding fathers envisioned in the first place when they thought we need to have institutions in every state that are responsible for educating our children. The other thing is when we think about our programs, we think about what do people need to have a sustainable, healthy life and one that's productive?

- Lynne Varner: 00:08:18 And so doing the original land-grant university formation, that was around agriculture, it was around farming and engineering. And you bring that forward now, and we've aligned that with technology, the sciences, liberal arts. So we have evolved our thinking around land-grant institutions. And I wanted to give a plug, it's summertime, we've got time to read. Our entire university, we've all been Land-Grant Universities for the Future: Higher Education for the Public Good. This is just a really profound book. It lays out some of the challenges that we face. But it also gives such hope for the future of universities like WSU for why we were founded and why that need to serve the public through higher education continues to this day.
- Lynne Varner: 00:09:23 It gives some ideas of ways that we can evolve, and we've just all been transfixed by this. It's been just wonderful to read it and to realize that I am aligning my values with my profession.
- Jim Hills: 00:09:36 Sure. So it's not just a legacy term, but in higher education, there are those who are taking that foundation and imagining it for the future. So it's fresh, it's new.
- Lynne Varner: 00:09:48 Absolutely. Yeah. And so the way we do that is just like any other institution as we're constantly thinking about how we grow and in what ways we grow. In the back of our minds is the foundation upon which we were built, that service.
- Ken Harvey: 00:10:05 What really excites me about what you're saying Lynne is, I remember being a young person living in Mississippi back in the 60s. And so I'm giving away my age. And in the neighborhood that I grew up in at the time I first moved there, it was a segregated neighborhood. So I remember segregation. And it was clear that the adults, the parents all felt that education was the way out. It was the way out and the way forward. And so there was a great deal of emphasis on preparing the children through secondary education to be ready for post-secondary education, and do whatever you need to do to get to college. If you can't get to college, make sure you do whatever you need to do to learn a vocation. Because it was either through college or through vocation that you were going to find a way out.
- Ken Harvey: 00:11:09 So for me, it's really exciting that we've got WSU Everett in place because I think it provides that for so many of our students who are coming up through the secondary schools and helping I think to ensure that there's a pathway to the promises of the founding fathers or the promises that our country is built on that anyone can be anything that they desire to be, especially if they're willing to work for it.

Lynne Varner: 00:11:37 I like that, I like that. About a third of WSU students are students of color, a little over third are first generation students. And I'm a first gen college student myself, and so I'm-

Ken Harvey: 00:11:52 Explain what that means just for anyone who's listening who doesn't really understand what it means to be a first generation student?

Lynne Varner: 00:11:57 We're the first in our families to go to college, our parents did not go. And so we navigate college without that history in our family. We navigated with parents who-

Ken Harvey: 00:12:09 You're like pioneers.

Lynne Varner: 00:12:10 Yeah. And our parents want the best for us, but they don't necessarily know how to go out and get it for us because they didn't go to college. I remember filling out applications on my own, figuring out financial aid, classes, all of that. And so we really spend a lot of time supporting those students who are coming to us without a lot of experience with college. Because you're exactly right, ultimately, everyone's parents, we want the best for our kids. And we know that higher education is a route to get there. So we're meeting you half way by coming to Everett or Bremerton or like our campus in Vancouver, our campus in the Tri-Cities.

Lynne Varner: 00:12:58 We're coming into your community, we're working with K-12 schools to start students early thinking about college because college is rigorous, particularly if you want to go into engineering or business or the sciences. It's not easy. And we're a tier one research institution, high quality academics. So we have rigor, but you can meet that rigor no matter where you're coming from. We have to help you do that. So I love the fact that you were talking about your childhood. And I think mine was similar where my parents didn't stand in my way, but they didn't have the experience or the knowledge to help me. And I went to a land-grant institution too, the University of Maryland. And one of-

Jim Hills: 00:13:45 [inaudible 00:13:45].

Lynne Varner: 00:13:46 And one of the things I have to say is that all I did was apply, and they did the rest. They said, "You are accepted. Here are your strengths, here are some weaknesses that we want you to come in the summer and work on so that by fall you are ready to do X, Y, and Z." It was really great to have that outreach, it set me off on a strong path.

Ken Harvey: 00:14:11 The other thing that you said and that was prompted by Jim on the question about land-grants is that, in Snohomish County and Island County, there are significant number of communities that, I would say and surrounding areas that really still are pretty agricultural based. Even as we're experiencing growth in our region and some of our communities are becoming more urban like, there's still a significant amount of farming that's happening. And I know from friends who live on farms that there's actually a lot of technology and engineering and business that goes into making farms work and making them successful. And a lot of those skills, I've been just impressed over the years how many of the skills or kind of the knowledge that they received actually came from attending land-grant universities.

Lynne Varner: 00:15:18 Absolutely. Our newest program at WSU Everett is organic agriculture and sustainability. And I'm really excited about that program, I have high hopes for it. And part of what we are doing is, because you're right, there is a strong agricultural economy here in Snohomish and Skagit, and this entire region. We want to build on that strength, but also for the future around automation, food processing, canning, food science. People more and more want to know where their food came from. They want to know the science that is going on to creating different kinds of food and to ensuring a healthy food supply. And so we hope to build all of that into this program.

Ken Harvey: 00:16:09 Well, that's exciting. Hey, I would love to just kind of maybe pivot a little bit from there and hear a little bit about your personal journey. One of the things that you shared with us before the tape started rolling ... Actually I think that's old technology.

Lynne Varner: 00:16:29 That is so old.

Ken Harvey: 00:16:29 Tapes don't roll anymore. Before the button got pressed to start the podcast.

Jim Hills: 00:16:32 We have the hamsters running to keep the tape rolling.

Ken Harvey: 00:16:36 Is that you were born in Stuttgart.

Lynne Varner: 00:16:39 Stuttgart.

Ken Harvey: 00:16:40 Stuttgart. In Stuttgart. So tell us about kind of your beginnings and what's been the arc of your journey?

Lynne Varner: 00:16:50 Oh, wow, yeah. So I was born in Stuttgart, Germany, the daughter of a military family. My father was in the army, he was also in Korea. So he traveled a lot. And we were based in Germany. So we were based there probably six years, and I was born and then we stayed there the final two and moved to the DC area, which there were a couple of airport bases there that he worked on. The thing about being part of a military family is that the work ethic, I used to think that my parents were the strictest parents. But their work ethic might work that come from the-

Ken Harvey: 00:17:35 No, mine were.

Lynne Varner: 00:17:36 ... Oh, my God, that get-upness at a certain time every day, even on Saturday and Sunday.

Ken Harvey: 00:17:42 Dad, the sun is not up yet.

Lynne Varner: 00:17:43 Thank you. And everything has to be clean. Well, I don't see any dirt on the floor. Wipe, sweep it again. Every weekend you're cleaning the entire house from top to bottom. So there were those things that now that I realize they're ingrained in me. There was a sense that anything is possible, but you have to go forward. And I think that was partly, that came from living outside of the country. And so realizing how in America it was very much even then driven by innovation, and what's your greatest idea? And let's take that idea and go forward with it and be successful. And so my parents were always saying, "You've got to make a way for yourself, and you can do that. If there's not a way, you make away." So I grew up outside of DC in Maryland right across the county line actually.

Lynne Varner: 00:18:39 So Fourth of July, we used to climb up to the top of our backyard, and you could see the fireworks. That's how close we were to Washington DC. And I can say that that probably, being that close to the center of the nation's power center, that that probably set the arc of my life because I went to the University of Maryland. And all of my internships, all of my summer jobs were in DC. And they were things that when I put them on my resume, people went, "Wow, you've done a lot." And I thought, "Well, no, United Press International was the wire service that was right there in Washington DC. And Associated Press was there, and I just happened to do that."

Lynne Varner: 00:19:26 I worked for a Congressman for three years, a Democrat from St. Louis. And I did that because when I first came out of college, I thought, "Okay, I'm not going to jump into a newspaper job right away because few people do. So I'll get into research and

writing and go in that way." And Congress was right there. Maybe if I had been in another state it would've been different. But that was the go-to is I'll go work for a Congressman or I'll work in some sort of public policy arena.

- Jim Hills: 00:19:58 I think that's interesting. So it's not like in DC and Maryland suburbs that congressmen are rare, they're all over the place.
- Lynne Varner: 00:20:07 And they're always hiring.
- Jim Hills: 00:20:09 And they're always hiring. I grew up in Seattle, and everybody worked at Boeing. You worked for one of the biggest corporations in the world. Yeah, well, it's just the one that's down the street, it's the one that's closest.
- Lynne Varner: 00:20:21 But people think, "Wow."
- Jim Hills: 00:20:23 And it's hiring. That's really interesting.
- Lynne Varner: 00:20:25 Yeah, yeah. But what led me out to the West Coast was actually, if you all remember the Seattle Post-Intelligencer, I think they're now online. But I came out to work for them. I wanted to cover city hall.
- Ken Harvey: 00:20:44 So before you get to the West Coast, let me just ask a question about working in DC, especially for a Congress person. So any insights into that, were there any ahas for you as you were doing that work?
- Lynne Varner: 00:21:02 Yeah. I got a great appreciation for how messy, how beautifully messy our laws and our policies are created. It is the hundreds, thousands of employees like myself who are researching, who are writing that build this. So it's not just the 535 members of Congress, it's the people that they task with the researching. We all had specialties, we all had areas. And you were responsible for basically developing your congressional leader's opinion on that by virtue of the research that you chose to highlight, this portfolio that you built for them, this portfolio of knowledge. And some of it was in contradiction with each other. You would sit in committee meetings and try to figure out how we can take these polar opposite views, these polar opposite impacts should this law pass. How do we marry this into something that is eventually going to be workable?
- Lynne Varner: 00:22:19 It was hard because it was messy. There were no easy paths, no right answers. And you're working with people on the opposite side of the aisle in committees. You may be working for a

Democrat, but you're going into a committee talking to the personnel of Republican leaders. You're sharing, you're researching, you're trying to come to some sort of agreement. So it gave me a great appreciation for this country.

- Jim Hills: 00:22:54 That little vignette for me, I was thinking about watching politics unfold now in DC. And there had been a brouhaha over who was going to ask the questions, was it going to be the electeds or could it be staff in some of these hearings? And the comment was, well, staff has the knowledge. It's not that the electeds don't, but the depth of the knowledge for the questioning at some of these hearings was actually in staff. I'm hearing you say that, that that's how it works.
- Lynne Varner: 00:23:28 That's exactly right, which is why you'll find in most hearings a staffer is right behind the elected official. And part of that is because you're tracking what's being said and making sure that you've got the right answers with you, that you can then feed to that person if they need it. And that's not to say that they are puppets or anything, it's just that an elected official covers a lot of ground. They're on a number of committees, first of all that they're responsible for that. They think about the constituency of their congressional district and all of the different issues that they have to deal with. So they have to be able to rely on staff for the specifics.
- Ken Harvey: 00:24:10 Because they can't know everything.
- Lynne Varner: 00:24:12 No, they can't know everything. What they can rely on is the values that they hold and the promises that they made to their district. And then the rest, they really got to rely on a strong core staff.
- Ken Harvey: 00:24:25 So I think we're going to take a short break here. And when we come back, we're going to travel with Lynne Varner to the West Coast and talk about her time on this side of the country, and especially in the Pacific Northwest as we continue to track the arc of her rise to greater and greater success and making a great impact. So we'll be back in just a minute.
- Speaker 5: 00:24:49 Hey parents, your two to six-year-old is sure to enjoy the High Five Magazine, available online from Sno-Isle Libraries. Treat your favorite preschooler to age appropriate stories, poems, puzzles, and activities. Every issue, free to download with your library card from Sno-Isle Libraries.

Ken Harvey: 00:25:08 We love hearing from our listeners and subscribers, especially if you enjoyed a guest or have a suggestion for a future topic. Drop us a line at checkitoutpodcast@sno-isle.org. Again, that's checkitoutpodcast@sno-isle.org. And let us know what you're thinking. Don't be surprised if we read your comment or answer your question on a future podcast episode.

Ken Harvey: 00:25:42 Okay. We're back in the studio. So Lynne, you were just talking about the East Coast and your work with members of Congress. And I had stopped you as you were transitioning to the West Coast, so talk about coming to the west coast and the work that you had here.

Lynne Varner: 00:26:02 So I was at the Washington Post as a staff writer having a great time, as you can imagine. There are a variety of stories to tell in Washington DC. And I wanted-

Ken Harvey: 00:26:14 Well, can I just jump in for a second?

Lynne Varner: 00:26:16 Yeah.

Ken Harvey: 00:26:16 So why a reporter? Why did you want to be a reporter?

Lynne Varner: 00:26:22 I've always wanted to tell stories. When I was in grade school, I made my own newspapers out of notebook paper. I probably should've been using that for my class work, but I actually created newspapers. I drew my own cartoons, I drew my own ads, dish detergent ads and things like that that I would have.

Ken Harvey: 00:26:45 That's remarkable.

Lynne Varner: 00:26:46 And I would take all of the pieces of paper and I would staple them together as a newspaper. And I would show my mother, and I guess she was encouraging and maybe she just wasn't discouraging. So it was always to me obvious that I would become a writer in some form. I didn't know if it would be journalism necessarily until I got to college, but I just always knew. And so I read a lot and wrote a lot when I was younger too, which was great grounding and a great foundation. But I was doing it then just because I was thinking, well, this is what writers do. When I was 9, 10, I thought writers sit and they read. And when they're not reading, they're writing their own stories.

Ken Harvey: 00:27:30 Neat. So you were a reporter at Washington Post, and were transitioning from there to?

Lynne Varner: 00:27:40 Yeah. And so I wanted a bigger landscape. And one thing about the Washington Post is there are some amazing journalists there, some of the best journals in the world. And I was talking to one of the city editors, actually one of the top editors there, Milton Coleman. And we had this great conversation about my future at the Washington Post. And he said, "There is a deep bench, and all of you are amazing. Go out there and build your own path, your own road." And I thought, "Okay-

Jim Hills: 00:28:12 What a great advice.

Lynne Varner: 00:28:13 I know. At the time, I was hurt because I thought, "Well, just put me in front of all them, why did you do that?"

Jim Hills: 00:28:21 I'm on the bench, I can go there, put me-

Lynne Varner: 00:28:22 Although now I look back, and that bench included Gwen Ifill, it included Michelle Norris, just some really great, David Maraniss, some really great journalists. And so the Washington Post had an embarrassment of riches in terms of journalistic talent. And they were absolutely right to tell me to go forth and build my own path. Or I could have stayed there because I have friends that I stay in touch with who did stay. And you wait, and pretty soon your time does come. But the best advice I got was to go forth, and I took that literally. I looked at California, Oregon, Washington, I've looked on the West Coast for opportunities.

Jim Hills: 00:29:13 I think it's interesting also about the post is that it is both a local newspaper covering DC local news, and a national newspaper. So there's lots of opportunities there. But I just find that advice coming from that editor like, "Go find your path." How empowering actually.

Lynne Varner: 00:29:31 Yeah. Later on, it felt empowering to me. As I said at the time I just thought, "But make a path for me." But the best thing and that served me well once I got to Seattle was that because I had to make my own path, I owned everything that came next. No one gave it to me, no one created it for me. I owned it, I built it.

Ken Harvey: 00:29:55 Yeah. U just think that part of the story that you just shared and part of the insight there is how incredibly powerful it is to have someone who essentially as a mentor steps in and gives us advice that can change the trajectory or becomes the fuel behind our rocket. I just want to throw this out to the audience. If you have an opportunity to speak into the life of someone, especially someone younger and give them the benefit of your

experience and wisdom, take that opportunity because it can really change someone's life.

- Lynne Varner: 00:30:44 And always leave them understanding that the power is in their hands, that they can shape whatever they want, they can design their path forward.
- Ken Harvey: 00:30:57 So you arrive here in Seattle, you begin working here. And over time, I mean, how do you go from being a staff writer, a reporter to editorial board member? What is that process like?
- Lynne Varner: 00:31:15 Well, the first thing you have to do is build a really strong body of work because editorial writing is pretty difficult from the sense that before you can have an opinion, you must really understand the issues that you're writing about. So it's great to have had that body of work from being a reporter. So understanding process and policy, understanding communities. I gravitated toward education reporting pretty early in my career. And I did this because I learned at the ... At the post, I was a generalist. I was a general assignment reporter, so I did a lot of different things. But what I learned about education was that you can cover everything, poverty, families, public policy, politics, economics, everything can be written about through the lens of education.
- Lynne Varner: 00:32:08 So that's why I kept going back to that time and again. And I was able to build a strong body of work through that, and that led me to opinion writing. And I always had strong opinions. You are trained as a journalist not to let those opinions bleed through. So when people say that we don't have biases, well, everybody has biases including journalists. But our obligation to our work is to not let that bleed into our product.
- Jim Hills: 00:32:44 So how do you go from having to watch that to being told to accentuate that as an opinion writer?
- Lynne Varner: 00:32:55 It was freedom. The only challenge I will say is that my editor at the Seattle Times, Jim Vesley used to tell me, I would sit in his office as all opinion writers do, they would come in his office and sit down and just noodle over a problem. And I would say, "Well, this issue on the one hand, on the other hand." And he would say, "Stop, opinion writers, columnists only have one hand, get rid of that other hand." Because I could see both sides a lot of times, I could see the nuances.

Ken Harvey: 00:33:25 Well, that's what journalists are trained to do to see both sides, to make sure you've got voices from both sides if possible. But opinion writers ...

Lynne Varner: 00:33:34 Which side is most equitable? Which side is most workable? Which side has the best chance of actually being met with success? That's what you end up falling on, you end up going there. And that's taking it a step further than a reporter would. But I was able to fall back to on just my experiences in DC too, because what I love about Seattle still to this day and the whole region from Pierce County up to Snohomish, what I love is the dedication to process. Now, some people laugh at that, oh, we think too much out here, we're too collaborative, we spend too much time getting everyone's opinion and everyone's buy-in. That is beautiful, That's democracy.

Jim Hills: 00:34:26 We'll just have a moment in the sun there in the beauty of collaborative democracy.

Lynne Varner: 00:34:32 And it's also a reporter's dream because meetings, good. I need to go to those meetings and attend them and just understand the issue and interview people. So what we don't want is behind closed doors decision making. We want everything to be in the daylight.

Jim Hills: 00:34:53 So your transition from the Times, your fascination and focus on education and transition from the Times to your current position and moving away from journalism and into higher ed, that is not unusual, that's a reasonable next step based on everything that you've been doing.

Lynne Varner: 00:35:16 Yeah. I have to tell you, I have always felt an obligation to put my money where my mouth is, and my personal sweat equity. And as a journalist, you're not really allowed to do that because, again, you're trying to be agnostic and you're trying not to let your biases creep into your work. But one thing that I have always wanted to do is give back and help people in education the way that education helped me, the way that I believe that I will not be the person I am today if I had not gone to college, if I had not dedicated so much of my emerging adulthood life to learning and empowering myself through knowledge. And I know that. And so why wouldn't I try to help others in that same way? So it was a no-brainer that I would do this. The timing, of course, I didn't know when. But I knew that one day I would leave journalism and move into some area where I was helping people, where I was pulling people up like people have pulled me out.

Jim Hills: 00:36:25 So how did you make that initial transition into WSU in your first position there at WSU? Because it's not what you're doing now, right?

Lynne Varner: 00:36:36 No, no. So I had an institutional role before, so it was institution wide, it was serving the university at large. And I was based in Seattle. And I knew the former president Elson Floyd. One of the things that I try to do in my career, and I did it as an opinion writer, was to always think who's not at the table, who's stories aren't being told? And we spend a lot of time in this region writing about the university that's right around the corner, they're there, they're large. And I would often say, "Well, what does Washington State University think?" "Well, they're in Pullman and they're long distance." "Well, then let's call them up. We can do that, can't we?"

Lynne Varner: 00:37:27 And what I found was that the former president Elson Floyd, and even the current president, Kirk Schulz, they're accessible. They will come here to Seattle even though they're based in Pullman. They will come here to Seattle and have a great conversation about higher education and the priorities. So I made it a point to always reach over. No shade to the U-Dub, I love them, but I would always reach beyond them and talk to some of the other educational leaders. So I got to know Dr. Floyd pretty well. And at the time, WSU was planning to open a medical school, which became a really highly-charged issue. And what I thought was that we were missing the point about the massive health disparities in this state and the equity that we needed to pursue. So in writing about that, Dr. Floyd said, "Would you like to join us in this fight?" And I'm always up for a fight, I'm always up for joining the underdog. But I hadn't been able to do that as a journalist. So it was kind of scary because I thought once you go down that road, you can't come back.

Jim Hills: 00:38:44 It is a moment of an inflection point, right?

Lynne Varner: 00:38:46 You know that, yeah.

Jim Hills: 00:38:48 You choose, I'm no longer going to do this, I'm going off in a different direction.

Lynne Varner: 00:38:53 In fact, people call it going to the dark side. So I had to really think, is it that important to me? And what I thought was I am at a point in my career where I can do that. I am well-respected, I know people in Olympia. There were law makers, heads of committees, budget committees who I had on speed dial. They knew me, we had great relationships. Why not spend some of

that? Why not lend that to a good cause? So I went to WSU, and it was probably one of the best decisions that I made.

- Jim Hills: 00:39:36 So your entry point was around the medical school in Spokane?
- Lynne Varner: 00:39:40 Right there, yes, yeah in 2014. When I joined, we were probably a year, maybe 18 months from having the legislature approve it. So we were actually in battle at that time.
- Ken Harvey: 00:39:56 It's just interesting to me that in my mind WSU is helping to transform the Spokane area, the Inland Empire as well as, I think what we're now calling a region up here, Seattle North for the Snohomish County area. And so let me just kind of circle this back to why WSU Everett is here. Are you seeing because you spoke about kind of equity earlier. What is your sense in terms of the student base that the university is drawing from the region? Are you seeing or do you have a sense that it's really reflective of the population, the local population, or is it reflective of a global population, a global community?
- Lynne Varner: 00:41:04 It's actually both because we're here on the Pacific Rim. So we are a huge draw internationally, both our industries are, but also our institutions of higher education. But this has also been a great place for students who have gone out into the workforce and who found good jobs up here, but who now realize they need to go back and finally get that bachelor's degree, that they need that credential, that they need that training that comes with it. More than half of Boeing's workforce will retire over the next decade, and a lot of them are young. They've got more things that they want to do, and to pick up a business degree and go out and use the skills that they grew at Boeing is a wonderful thing for them to do. And then we've got young people who were prepared to go out of high school and maybe go work in an industry that doesn't exist or is declining now, we are there for them.
- Lynne Varner: 00:42:20 We're also there for young people who didn't think that college was for them. I am amazed, and I shouldn't be because I thought it too. I felt, well, maybe I should do like my father and go into the military. He didn't go to college. My mother didn't go to college and she started as a secretary and ended at HUD, the federal Housing Urban Development agency. She ended there at a pretty high level position. So maybe I can just do like them. But I thought, "No, I want that knowledge. I'm deserving of that higher order thinking that comes with going to college." And I think of the young people around here, and I think that's what they deserve.

- Lynne Varner: 00:43:03 So it's not about helping them get a living wage as much as it's about creating these educated people who are able to serve their communities, and yes get jobs that are going to lead to much higher salaries than if they didn't have a degree. And we're finding that up here. It's to me as powerful as when we started the medical school and I realized that, wow, Eastern Washington farming families will not have to go an hour just to get to their doctor or in an emergency, they will not have to be helicoptered out to a large city. It's that same feeling that we are empowering people, we're giving them pieces of their lives that they can own.
- Jim Hills: 00:43:54 I think it was really interesting as you were just mentioning about these groups of populations that are coming to WSU and taking advantage of what WSU Everett has. And you're talking about the retirees. When we think of retirees as retirees, you've done something and now you're not doing anything. And that's not the way you characterize that group. Hey, they've got stuff they want to do. So come back, re-skill, get educated, do something, move on in a direction where they probably couldn't have based on whatever else was going on in their life for the past 20 or 30 years. And now they have an opportunity. And it can explode in a bunch of different directions and enrich the region.
- Lynne Varner: 00:44:42 Absolutely. And that's exciting both from an economic and regional standpoint, but also from a personal standpoint for them. They're not going to be put out to pasture, they're going to move into something else. I just read in the paper, I think it was yesterday that Amazon is going to be retraining a large significant part of their population. And I just think that it's really smart of companies to realize that their employees are always growing and evolving, and let's help them do that. Let's always offer a way to educate yourself, to gain more skills. It's only going to come back and better us all.
- Ken Harvey: 00:45:26 That's right. So I just want to remind the audience, we've been having a great conversation with Lynne Varner who's an associate vice chancellor for Washington State University Everett. And Lynne in our last few minutes, I'd like to kind of change the trajectory of the conversation back to some personal things because there was some things that Jim and I really want to make sure that we gave you a chance to chat about. So you've been involved in the community in some really significant ways. And as I understand, you recently have been elevated into a board president role or-
- Lynne Varner: 00:46:15 Chair.

Ken Harvey: 00:46:15 ... Chair role for an organization. Why don't you tell us a little bit about that?

Lynne Varner: 00:46:20 Yeah. So Cascade Public Media is a media organization that operates Crosscut news site. It's a daily news site in Seattle. And we also operate KCTS 9, which is a public television station in Seattle, so those two entities. And I joined the board four years ago. And the reason why is because I believe I know that media is imperiled. And how do we save public media in particular? It is so important for an informed community to have the media, and what's the part that I can play? So I joined the board thinking that I would raise money and help and support them. And now somehow, I've moved up to the leadership position. But it's at a great time-

Ken Harvey: 00:47:12 Congratulations.

Lynne Varner: 00:47:12 Thank you, thank you. It's at a great time because we're doing a lot of innovative things that we believe are going to secure at least this organization. And I know a lot of media organizations, the Seattle Times, Everett Herald, they're all trying to figure out the way forward because it's not clear right now. Our business model has been turned upside down. So you've got to create new ones, and we're doing that. We're doing it pretty well.

Jim Hills: 00:47:44 I appreciate you saying find the way forward because it has been a moment of change. it's easy to say it's ending, but I don't think it's ending. I think it's changing. But the trick is to find that way forward. What is going to be a model for where journalism can continue to play the important role that it has in American society and the growth and helping it become what it is? So finding that way forward, it's going to take people like yourself who have some background and knowledge and experience to help look for it, help find that way.

Lynne Varner: 00:48:32 Well, what isn't ever going to change is the public's insatiable need for information. They're always going to want to know what's happening in both near and far, right on their street and also what's going on around the world because we're all so interconnected. So that's never going to change. What is changing is how we convey that information, the delivery models are changing rapidly. And so when I think about broadcast five years ago and broadcast now at KCTS 9, one thing that we're doing a lot is using the interstitials. The time, the periods in between public programming, we're using that for strong, hard hitting local coverage and bringing two audiences together basically. The audience that came for the

public television program, whatever it was, Sesame Street, Downton Abbey, and the public that wants the news.

Ken Harvey: 00:49:29 They want to know what's going on in their neighborhood, in their city, their community, their region.

Lynne Varner: 00:49:32 And we are investing a lot in the news site, Crosscut as well because we believe that we need to be a town with multiple options. People say, "Well, Seattle is a one newspaper town." But don't think in terms of newspapers, think in terms of news outlets. And if you think in that term, then Seattle has got a lot going on in that area. And so we're investing a lot in local coverage, our newsroom is hiring at a time when few newsrooms are. And so that's good too. So I feel like this was a great time for me to take on the role as chair.

Ken Harvey: 00:50:11 Well, in that role, what I'd like to just mention is that I'm thinking that it'd be neat to have a podcast episode that really is focused on the state of journalism. And if you're interested in maybe being part of that conversation, we'll you back for that-

Jim Hills: 00:50:27 That would be a really fun panel to have-

Ken Harvey: 00:50:30 Maybe with some other representatives from the region.

Lynne Varner: 00:50:32 And I think it would be an uplifting conversation. I don't think it would be as dire as it would've been a couple of years ago.

Ken Harvey: 00:50:39 So there are two or three other things I want to make sure that we cover if we can. Recently on LinkedIn newsfeed, and for those of you who that doesn't ring a bell, LinkedIn is a social media channel. But Lynne had posted something that was celebrating I think graduation ceremonies or something for students of color. And I think if I'm recalling, it may have been like Rainier Scholars or whatever.

Lynne Varner: 00:51:08 Oh, yes, yes.

Ken Harvey: 00:51:10 And then you were helping essentially sharing that celebration. And I looked at it, and I loved what I saw there. And do you just recall what was celebratory about that?

Lynne Varner: 00:51:22 Yes, I do. So my husband and I have been involved in and raised money and gave and have given a lot of money to Rainier Scholars, which is a organization in Seattle. And they take students, and they have to spend their Saturdays doing schoolwork so that they can graduate with high GPAs and go on

to fabulous institutions of higher learning, including Washington State University. And these are students who are going to be the first in their families to go to college, more than likely. Some of them are low income, so their families are not able to afford to do things like tutoring and some of the things that help other students grow in school. And Rainier Scholars has just been this great organization at doing this. Every year, they bring these students forward, and these are students who are dedicated to spending after school and Saturdays sitting at a desk doing work when you know they would rather be out playing. But they understand the dedication that they need to pay to their education.

- Lynne Varner: 00:52:32 They understand that they need to do that, which is pretty mature if you think about it for a young person. And so I had gone to their luncheon and to see the recent crop of graduates. And I'm not kidding, so yes, some of them were coming to WSU, but they're going to Dartmouth, to Harvard, to Brown, Stanford. These are brilliant kids. But because of the fact that they didn't have maybe the income or the familial knowledge, they could have been just left behind and ignored. And it just reminds me of the raw intelligence that is in every kid.
- Ken Harvey: 00:53:06 Yeah. I love the story, so I really appreciate that you're sharing it. And I think I responded to your sharing and shared it myself because I think it's just a reminder that there are incredible minds all around us that are worth cultivating and worth encouraging and empowering, doing whatever we can because they're there to help change the world.
- Lynne Varner: 00:53:35 Oh, they totally are. It's a beautiful organization. And a lot of the kids are students of color. And I bring that up because one thing that our K-12 system and our higher education system we struggle to do is to provide that access and support to students of color. Oftentimes, they are in communities where we have to go to them and say, "We are here to support you, we're here to nurture you and help you grow." And Rainier Scholars does that.
- Ken Harvey: 00:54:09 Well, I'm looking at the time, and it looks like I just really have time for one more question. And there are others I would love to have a follow through, so we may just have to plan on having you back just for those. But final question, any library memories or stories you would love to share with us?
- Lynne Varner: 00:54:29 Oh, yeah. So, of course, I love libraries. And when I was younger, my parents called me bookworm, which my husband thought was the most horrific term. He goes, "Why would they call you that? That probably affected your self esteem." I never

even thought about it, but I would go to the library. I would check out like seven or eight books, and my sisters would check out one book. And I would finish my books and can't wait to go back again. And so I grew up in a community-

Ken Harvey: 00:54:59 So you were devouring book.

Lynne Varner: 00:55:01 I was devouring books. And we had a bookmobile in addition to a library that wasn't that far away. And so I started that same thing with my son where once a week we went to the library. And now as a parent, I realize that there were readings and concerts going on at the library. My parents didn't take me to those. I was like, "What, I didn't know all this existed." So I have done that with my son. And the cool thing about it is that that was a way for him and I to bond and relate. With my husband, it was sports. But with my son, we really bonded over stories. And I say stories as opposed to books because he is more of audio, he likes to hear a book as opposed to sit down and read it.

Lynne Varner: 00:55:46 But we have also sat down on the lawn at our local library and listened to bands play. It also was a great spot for tutoring for math and chemistry for him. And in fact, all the high school kids, it seemed like that became like a gathering spot in our area. So can I put a plug in for a book that he and I are reading right now?

Ken Harvey: 00:56:08 Absolutely.

Lynne Varner: 00:56:08 So Ta-Nehisi Coates has a book called *Between the World and Me*. He's got a new book out now, but *Between the World and Me* is this beautiful letter to his son who is going out into the world. And my son is 18 and heading off to college in the fall. And I am so excited for him and so scared for him. And so we are reading this so that I can explain to him the world that's out there that is so full of goodness, but no one's going to love him like his mom and his dad. So we're having a good time reading this book. It'll make you cry because this author is basically telling his son, "I want you to live and prosper, but I want you to know as a young black man, not everybody wants that for you. These are the things I want you to know and the things I want you to look out for, and the things I want you to strive for." And, of course, higher education plays prominently.

Ken Harvey: 00:57:15 So that's *Between the World and Me*?

Lynne Varner: 00:57:16 Me.

Ken Harvey: 00:57:17 And the author's name again is?

Lynne Varner: 00:57:19 Ta-Nehisi Coates. Last name is C-O-A-T-E-S.

Ken Harvey: 00:57:23 All right. We will make sure that we have that listed in the text that we'll have listed with your podcast episode. So Lynne, this has been a great pleasure.

Lynne Varner: 00:57:38 This was fun.

Jim Hills: 00:57:39 I was very excited to have an opportunity to speak with you and hear you talk about what got you to where you are today. It's very exciting.

Lynne Varner: 00:57:47 This was great. It was very relaxing.

Ken Harvey: 00:57:49 Well, we have just spent an hour with Lynne K. Varner. And we didn't even get around to finding out what the K stood for.

Lynne Varner: 00:57:57 Karen.

Ken Harvey: 00:57:57 Okay, Karen. Who is the associate vice chancellor for marketing, strategy, and community engagement at Washington State University Everett. Thank you so much, Lynne.

Lynne Varner: 00:58:10 You're welcome.

Ken Harvey: 00:58:19 Well, that was a great conversation.

Jim Hills: 00:58:22 I really enjoyed that. Lynne has a tremendous legacy in the journalism community here in the northwest, and that she is transitioning, has transitioned that to higher education and having similar impact there. What an awesome person.

Ken Harvey: 00:58:40 Well, I think she represents the community and the region in Washington State University in so many great ways. I see her at events, she is well-spoken. I mean, she's really poised, and she's just a nice person too.

Jim Hills: 00:59:01 Yeah. When you read her bio, some of those points of change aren't always clear. When you talk to her, you can see the continuing thread through it all, the love of education, the love of writing, applying that in different ways, making very intentional choices to move in new directions. It's just very interesting.

Ken Harvey: 00:59:27 Well, one of the things that we didn't really get into that I was dying to, but it just didn't work out was I wanted to know more about her being nominated twice for the Pulitzer Prize. And just for the audience's sake, it was around what was recorded as groundbreaking reporting about race relations and public education in Washington State. So I thought that's pretty interesting. I don't know that I've actually met many individuals who have been nominated for Pulitzers.

Jim Hills: 01:00:02 Right. And done that kind of work, done it for that subject area in the northwest. So we got to have her back.

Ken Harvey: 01:00:12 I think so. It was neat to also hear that she and I had the military family connection and that the two of you especially had the newspaper business connection.

Jim Hills: 01:00:28 Yeah. There were a lot of commonalities there.

Ken Harvey: 01:00:30 Well, I agree with you, we need to have her back. What an asset to the region representing Washington State University in Everett. And, yeah, I'm looking forward to having her.

Jim Hills: 01:00:45 Me too.

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