

147. Caroline Milford: Dance Tells a Story

Gavin Kelly

Hey, everybody, you're listening to Beyond 1894. This is the official podcast of Louisiana Tech University. My name is Gavin Kelly from the Office of University Communications, and we are joined for this episode by Caroline Milford. She is the coordinator of facility operations and special events at our Lambricht Sports and Wellness Center. And she is also the head coach of the Regal Blues dance team here at Louisiana Tech. Caroline, thanks for making time for us in a busy spring quarter.

Caroline Milford

Thank you so much for having me. Gavin, it's a pleasure.

Gavin Kelly

Yeah. So I've, I've known you since my days in the athletics department here, because you've, you've been a staple on the Regal blues dance team for a while. We'll get into that and sort of your history there. But let's go back even further. Take us back to your your humble beginnings. Tell us about where you're from, and kind of those days early on, discovering your passions for dance, what you thought you were going to study in college, and, you know, picking tech when the time came.

Caroline Milford

Yeah, so from an early age, I grew up dancing and cheering my whole life. That was something that was important to me coming into college, just because I knew I wanted to continue that Tech had some great programs for dance and cheer and so, you know, I'm from West Monroe, Louisiana, yeah, not far down the road. Originally, I thought I wanted to go far away from home, you know, like every young adult does, and quickly realized that tech was going to be home, probably from about a junior in high school. I knew I wanted to come here. I grew up dancing at Debbie School of Dance then, which is now DBK dance and performing arts. And then my mom actually owned a gymnastics studio. So some people say I came out of the womb, tumbling and again, just a huge part of my life, all throughout.

Gavin Kelly

Well, look, talk to me about, you know, so dance, you know, you mentioned how important it was to you. What about that? Like, what do you get out of it? What was, what was to this day, kind of special about it for you?

Caroline Milford

Oh, gosh, dance in any capacity, can tell any story, and it's just kind of a release for me, at least. And I feel like that's kind of a general topic across the board, when anybody talks about dance and why they love it, and it just gives some, you know, women and men, young adults, kids, anybody, a chance to just kind of have fun and find something that they're passionate about. And, you know, I grew up from three years old on the stage and joined the company team at an early age. And I mean, I just fell in love with it immediately and never stopped.

Gavin Kelly

Yeah, so, I mean, like you said, you knew you wanted dance to be a part of your collegiate career. And you know, it's easy to fall in love with tech. We talk to guests all the time about, you know, the moment they step foot on campus and all that. So, so talk about that experience for you. And was being able to dance here at Tech always a given thing. Was it something you kind of had to push for? How'd that work out?

Caroline Milford

Well, it's funny, because my freshman year at Tech, I was actually on the cheer team. Okay, so coming into college again, I had danced and cheered my whole life. I did not I have never been on a dance team at school, so I was always a part of the company team at my studio, but I was never a part of the dance team at West Mary High School, is where I went, and they're more of a kick line. I mean, they do some, you know, traditional like jazz, hip hop, palm stuff as well, but they are known for their kicks. And so I never was on that team. And so coming into college, cheering at West Monroe, cheering at my mom's gym, on the all star team, being on the competition team at West Monroe High school cheer was my more comfortable spot for a school related team, and so my first year at Tech was actually the first year that Lauren durvaloy was the head coach of the Regal blues, and I didn't know how that was going to go. I mean, she did a phenomenal job, and it was funny, because cheer and Regals both practice on the third court in the red gym of lamb bright so we're sharing spaces all the time. And I just remember I would be in cheer practice, and the Regals were on one side, and we were on one side, and I would pop down, pop down from a stunt, and just turn around and watch the Regals dance. And I was like, Okay, I want to be a part of that. And it actually kind of is a god wink, because I was selected to be on the Nationals team that year for college, and I had competed in middle school and high school, college, middle school and high school nationals in Disney World in Orlando at ESPN and. And so I was like, Okay, I finally made it to college. Like, I'm going to be, you know, middle school, high school, and now college. I tore my ACL on the tack floor at halftime of a basketball game the week before we left for college nationals. So I never got to fulfill that part of it. But that was just another reason of God saying like, hey, just go dance. You know, give up the cheer thing. But I do believe that my experience in cheer and dance all throughout my life has helped me become the coach that I am now. Yeah, and I even grew up, I mean, again, my mom had a gymnastics studio, and she had an all star cheer program, and from the time I was 16, I started coaching and helping her coach those teams at her gym. So just little things throughout my life, and I feel like it's truly in my DNA to just, you know, be a dancer, a cheerleader, a coach, and you know, I've loved it.

Gavin Kelly

Let's talk a little bit more about academically. Your time at Louisiana Tech. You mentioned before we started recording that you changed that you changed your major more than a couple times. Talk to me about like, what you came in wanting to study, or thinking you wanted to study, and then kind of your journey switching through those majors and finding something that that you were happy with and felt comfortable studying.

Caroline Milford

Yeah, so I had a math brain my whole life. I actually got an award in high school for 10 straight semesters of A's in math. Okay, which pop off, okay. But the the college courses I took in high school automatically jumped me to like the 300 level math classes when I was a freshman at Tech, and so I came into tech as a math major, and I will never forget my first math class. I'm sitting in it. It's a 300 level math course as a freshman. Yeah, I think it was fall quarter, and I had Dr Barron, and he said, raise your hand. Anybody in here that is not an engineering major? And I raised my hand, and I look around, and I was the only one. And I was like, Okay, this is intimidating. I stuck with it for a while, but then I switched majors to secondary education with a concentration in math, thinking that I wanted to become a math teacher. From there, I went to Family Child studies. After that, I think, is when I actually transferred. Okay, I went to University of Lafayette because they had a dance major, and so I majored in performing arts dance at University of Louisiana Lafayette and I spent one semester there and said, this is not it for me, sure. I came back. I majored in marketing psychology. I think there was a couple of different and I actually think I might have been like, one or two courses away from minors in both of those. Anyways, long journey later, I ended up just graduating in Interdisciplinary Studies and have a lot of different pools from

Gavin Kelly

Yeah, it sounds like if you wanted to, you could, you're probably a few courses away from completing three or four degrees if you really wanted.

Caroline Milford

Yeah, I'm thankful that my advisor could kind of help me pull together the classes to just graduate. So, yeah,

Gavin Kelly

so after graduation, I mean, like, I know what you do now, but, but walk me through, kind of, like, did you see yourself in the roles you're in now? Like, what did you want to do with your career, and how did it work out for you? Like, what were those differences, and how has it been?

Caroline Milford

I definitely did not see myself in the roles that I'm currently in, especially at lamb, right? So, right out of college? Well, during college, I was working two jobs. I worked at a clothing boutique downtown, and then I also worked as a waitress. I worked at portico when it was still in Ruston. And then I also worked at La Bamba. And I was waiting tables at La Bamba, this was, I think, June, right after I had graduated in May, and I had already had a job lined up to work at a bank, and I waited on this man and woman, and by the end of my time with them, they handed me their card, and they said, We want you to come work for us. And so that's actually how I landed my first quote, unquote, big girl job out of college, and I was a business development manager for Coca Cola, wow. And so it was pretty much a marketing role going around, excuse me, all over, selling our products, you know, just doing all of the things Coca Cola related. I was actually Kyle Cavanaugh rep when he was at Cedar Creek, wow, so that's how we first met, so I worked with them, and then growing up as a little girl, I always saw myself in the medical field, but I never pursued that. And I think just because I liked school, but I was not committed. To being in school for, of course, 10 years you'd already been in for a minute. It took me five Yes, with the transfer and the return to tech, but I then started working at the eye clinic of Monroe, and got some experience

there. And then I also, after that, I went to cables and Robinson orthodontics, and so I worked for them, and that was the most fun experience I've ever had with a job, as you know before now. And I learned so much there. I never knew how interested I was in, like the mouth and teeth. And people are like, how did you work in mouths? And it really wasn't bad. I learned so much there. I loved that job. If I was 18 again, I think I would go into dental school to become an orthodontist or some type of related field. But we had five offices working for cables and Robinson, and they were in West Monroe, Bastrop, Mangum and Rustin. Right out of college, I was offered the assistant coach position for the Regal blues under Lauren. And so for two years, I was the assistant coach, but I was also working as at Coca Cola, as a business development manager, running all over I had territory from basically Arcadia through Sterlington north of the interstate, so there was a lot of ground to cover. And then when I switched to cables and Robinson, I was working in all five offices, Bastrop, Mangum, Russ and Westminster and Monroe. And so it was taking a toll on me. You know, I would leave Mangum at five and have to book it to Rustin to get to practice by 530 in 2018 Sam speed told me about a job opening at land bright, and I jumped on it. And I'm so thankful that I did, because I've been there in that role, and it's kind of changed a little bit over the years, but I've been in that role for so long now, and I truly love it. I love the people that I work with. I love that I get to continue to be around college students, not just in a coaching atmosphere, but I oversee about 60 student workers as well, and just getting to connect with them, mentor them, help them in ways you know, that I never saw myself in and so but I also get to work with the community as well. I'm a big people person. I love working with the community, helping them play in their birthday parties, their field trips, their church camps, all the summer camps. So there's a lot of different people that I get to interact with and work with on a daily basis, and that's a big reason why I love the role that I'm in now. But again, never thought that I would see myself in that role. But again, I'm so thankful that God placed me there that, you know, Sam Dr speed reached out at that time, and, you know, thought that I would be a good fit for that. And, you know, it's convenient, because the Regal blues practice in land bright and I oversee, kind of like, the indoor schedule of everything. And so it's nice. It's really convenient and a lot less hectic than running the road ragged.

Gavin Kelly

So and things just have a funny way of working out the way they're supposed to, you know. So yes, for sure, even when you feel like a journey is winding a certain way and moving up and down and you know, you end up where you meant to be eventually. So that's exactly right. Let's talk a little bit more about the regal blue side of it. You mentioned assistant coaching. When did it come about that you were able to take on a head coaching role? And I'm sure that was an immediate yes for you, but, but talk to me about kind of that decision.

Caroline Milford

Yeah. So again, I assistant coached under Lauren for two years. And then, you know, she has two girls. She was busy. They own CrossFit Rustin here, and her and her husband, Evan, and so they are busy people. And I think it was just time for her. And you know, when she first contacted me about it, I was honestly in shock, because not that I didn't think I was capable, but I was still so young. And again, I had been coaching at my mom's gym for a while, but this is such a different capacity, and it's something that I was already a part of, and I'm I have so much pride in and care about so much that I didn't want to let anybody down. Yeah, so when she asked me, I was kind of in shock, and then it kind of became reality quicker than I expected it to, but I took over in 20, 2017 I took over as head coach, and it's been

the best experience. Yes, I have made mistakes. Yes, I have, you know, just There's been ups and downs, for sure, but I'm I've grown so much as a coach. I'm still growing and learning as a coach. I think this is year 11 total nine as head coach, and it has completely changed me, yeah, for the better. So yeah, I mean, definitely not expected. But again, some. Than that. I'm so thankful for that opportunity. Yeah, and

Gavin Kelly

like you said, too, you kind of oversee the Lambricht facility, so whenever you need to use that court and get some practice in, you get free rein on that. But yeah, let's talk a little bit more about Regal Blues. So obviously, like you said, you came into it young and, you know, into a head coaching position and kind of figuring out as you went along, but where you're at now, kind of the teams that you put on the floor, what kind of like culture do you hope that you're cultivating amongst these girls that come in and are a part of this dance team? Because dance culture in general, you know, I'm obviously on the outside looking in, but I think it's something that's special, in particular to the people that are a part of it. So talk to me kind of like what what you feel like your vision is and what your culture is on the Regal blues team here at Tech.

Caroline Milford

I'm so glad you said the word culture, because that's exactly the word that we use, and just cultivating a culture that is welcoming. Because the thing is, is a lot of girls don't know where they're going to college, and so when girls come into our prospect clinics or our basketball clinics or any type of form of clinic that we're hosting, I want anybody to feel welcomed and loved, just as you do when you second Step on text campus. So I get asked all the time, like, what are you looking for in a regal blue it's not just about the dancing aspect of it. Like, sure, you have to be a good, talented, well rounded dancer. But I want individuals who not only love this university and love to dance, but that are going to love each other and pour into each other. Dance is very competitive. It can be very individualized a lot of times. So when you put a team of 20 plus girls together, you are just hoping and praying that they will all get along, that there will not be any drama, that they will support each other and lift each other up. And that's exactly the type of culture that we have tried to cultivate, and we have accomplished that, I would say, over the last three to four years, it has really meshed together and just come together as a program that I am so proud of the girls on the team, just because of the way that they lift each other up, support each other up, support each other, pray for each other, pray together, love each other and just want each other to be better. You know, when we talk about our football performances and our basketball performances, they have to try out for every single dance. They learn it one day, and they try out for it the next day. And there can be cuts made, if you don't know the material, but not one time has anybody going why she in the dance? And I'm not, you know, and so that's a that's an important part of the culture as well. But they're not only dancers, they're ambassadors of this university. Yeah, we want girls that are going to represent the university well, and they're held to a higher standard, 100% and, you know, with grades, with socials, with every, any aspect that you can think of as a just a human and you know, I try to teach them soft skills that are going to take them into their career when they graduate. I don't get them forever. I wish I could, but they graduate and they move on from here. So for me as a coach, it's important to pour into them lessons that they can take with them from here on out. And I love another part of my job at land bright is that my office is right there. They come in all the time just to sit down and talk about problems or praises or the good, the bad, the ugly. They can just come

and sit and talk to me about things, and I'm just so thankful that I'm the one that you know gets to help with them. They're five, six hours from home. Some of them are closer, but they don't have their mom here, and so it's, it's a great joy to me to be able to be that kind of, quote, unquote, second mom to them and just pour in to them and love them. But yeah, culture is huge for us, and it's probably the most important part of just, how are you as a human? Yeah, not just a dancer, yeah?

Gavin Kelly

And you know, another thing too, you mentioned being held to a higher standard, and, you know, they are representatives of the university. And also, I think at the very least, and this is downplaying it, but like, at the very least, they're going to be faces that people recognize 100% they're at, they're they're going to be on TV, a lot of them, you know, so so people, they come to games, they see them on the sidelines, whatever they they start to notice these people. And so it is important that they, they represent the university well. But also, you know, being integrated into the community. You can hang around during after any game in any sport, and you can see, you know, little girls coming up to these regal blues and looking up to them and wanting to be a part of what they're doing one day. And so just being integrated into the community, too, in a way, is also important. And so I think that speaks to, kind of, like you said, the culture that you're do you hope that you've. Created. You said, you know, you mentioned highs and lows, like anything else, I'm sure, but let's talk about the highs. Since you've been coaching the Regal blues, talk about some of the the moments that stand out to you, some of the successes. I know you guys are always competing nationally. I know you guys have put a lot of really good routines together. Talk to me about kind of, some of those moments that stand out to you over the years.

Caroline Milford

Yeah. So last year is actually probably the peak of my career. We actually placed the highest in school history at college Nationals last year, and we got fifth, and before that, the highest that they had ever placed was six. Yeah. So I would definitely say that's the highest peak of my career so far, and it only makes me and the team just more hungry to keep pursuing that, you know, level of excellence and just like, continue to move up our kind of, our word this year is elevate, like, just continue to elevate, and not stay complacent with, yeah, we gotta. We broke a school record for us last year, but not staying complacent to keep elevating. Some other highs are seeing some of my girls get married, being a part of their weddings and getting to experience life after college with them. I'm still in contact with several of the girls that have already graduated and moved on. And I think one thing as a coach, you know, they come back and say, like, Thank you for XYZ, you know. And just that part of the career, for me is always a high when they can come and say hey to you at games, or, you know, they haven't seen you in forever, but they want to text you and say, hey, guess what happened? And just knowing that you made an impact, and they still care and want to reach out to you. Of course, you know, anytime any of our athletics teams do, well, that's a high for us, just because, you know, we're cheering them on to the best we can and just getting to see them succeed is also super fun for us. But definitely, nationals is the one time out of the whole year after football, basketball, you know, like all of these sports that we attend and cheer at and and support all these athletic teams that we get to compete for, just us, yeah, and so definitely, last year is probably the peak.

Gavin Kelly

But can't wait to see what happens this year. And it's also, you know, you think about like someone from the basketball team eventually getting to play in the pro somewhere about like there are instances of that too, on the Regal blues. You know, it's not, not every person who comes through the program obviously just dances professionally for the rest of their life, but, but it happens. And so I guess that probably feels please.

Caroline Milford

I'm glad you said that, yeah, because that's definitely a high, seeing them succeed in their careers. But specifically dance after college, we've had several dancers go pro, and that's super awesome to watch.

Gavin Kelly

Yeah, let me so just talking about dance a little bit longer being dance being such a big part of your life, and it's still being able to be how has it been sort of blending a leadership role, a coaching role in dance, and comparing it to being a dancer and being, you know, actively part of a dance team? Like, is it kind of the same for you? Are you like sort of dancing vicariously through the girls on the regal blue team? Or have you sort of perfected a way to look at it differently in terms of coaching versus dancing, or is it kind of just one big thing, talk to me about that.

Caroline Milford

No, that's a great question. I would say for sure, early on in my coaching years, I was like, dang, I wish I could still be out there with him performing now that I'm in my 30s, I realized that that's never going to happen again, and I have definitely looked at it from a new lens and a new perspective over the last probably five or six years. You know, being on the team, I did hold the title of Captain and CO captain for a couple of years. And so again, that leadership side of me was definitely God given, and I feel like that's been in my bones for a long time, figuring out the coaching aspect of that and not being so close in age to them right off the bat, definitely was hard to be like, you know, I want to be out there like, I still want to perform because, performing at the joke, performing at the tech, performing at Nationals, like, it's just a surreal feeling that you don't understand unless you get to do it. And so yes, there was definitely that period of coaching where I was like, I wish I was still on the team. I wish I could still dance. And just honestly, as kind of a blow at myself, just like, this is bittersweet, but I'm thankful to be where I'm at. But then, you know, changing that lens and and really diving into, like, the coaching side of it, and looking at it from a new perspective of just like, Okay, I'm not on the team anymore. I don't dance anymore. How do I make them feel what I felt when I'm dancing? How do what we do now? Is it similar to what I did when we were when I was on the team? How can I make it better for them? How can I make their experience better than when I was on the team, and my experience was great, but I just I keep fighting for them, and I keep pushing for them in ways as a coach that you know when I was on the team, I can't push for it, you know, I'm not in that leadership role. So, yeah, I think that's the biggest, you know, thing is just fighting for things for them that you know, we may have not gotten when I was on the team, or, you know, how to make that experience better for them and and just things like that. And then, you know, just obviously being harder on them each year, because I expect more each year, because our standards have risen, yeah. So it's a really cool feeling though, being on this side of it, yeah.

Gavin Kelly

And it sounds like too. It's just a natural progression. Obviously, like you mentioned early on, you were so close in age with them, and being a part of the team wasn't that far in your past. So it makes sense to kind of feel that way early on. Last question before we let you go to talking about dance How do you think, or how do you hope that your own sort of personal tastes in dance routines, styles, whatever? How do you think that's rubbed off on the on the way the Regal blues operate?

Caroline Milford

Wow, that that's a I've never really thought about that honestly. You know, we get a lot of our choreography from like, camps. And so we go to camp in the summer as a full team, but then we go to a select veteran group goes to pro action dance intensive. And so we do get a lot of our choreography from professional choreographers and, you know, at camp and stuff. And then actually, my captains get to choreograph a lot of the band routines that you see at halftime when we perform with the band of pride. Just because I know when I was on the team, that was something that was super special to me, that I was able to choreograph and put my choreography on the field, so I wouldn't say, like, my taste in dance really comes through their performances, just because it's not a whole lot of my choreography, to be completely honest. And that's kind of collegiate teams across the board, like a lot of it is from, you know, professional choreographers, or team choreographed routines. And so as a coach, your your kind of taste and your input comes from, okay, this is the base of the dance. How am I going to add visuals, ripples, formation changes, roll offs, like things like that that make it or like skill, like implementing skills into the routine, or, you know, highlighting a soloist with different skills that maybe one person has and not the whole team. And so when you go to these camps or pro action, you get, like a base routine, and then you can kind of implement how you want it to put onto your team. And so that's the fun part for me, is getting to see, like, again, they try out for every routine that they go into. And so it's like, all right, you absolutely crush that. Try out dance, you know? And so let's put you here. And like, making the formations. And what people don't realize, too, is, like, making a formation for a dance routine is very strategic. It's not just like, all right, you're in the front, you're in the back, like, whatever. Because when you think about like watching a dance, you your eyes immediately go like, center, sure, but it's, you know, it's, it's a cool thing. And there's actually a podcast about it, from, I can't remember who, but how you strategically put a formation together. So that's kind of the fun, calculated part for me, and I guess the only part that I get to put my input on. But then also the way, like, our schedule operates, and it's more administrative than you would think it is. You know, you see a dance coach and you're like, oh, they just, I don't know if people really think this, but in my brain, I'm like, Oh, I'm just a dance coach. But there is a lot more that goes into it. And I'm sure, you know, every coach feels that way. You never know what people do behind the scenes, and there's a lot of work that goes into it, but administratively, structurally, just getting everything organized and, you know, budgets and all of that plays into a lot of what I do. So when it comes to practice, and I get to just go in there and like coach and watch them dance and cleaning dances, yeah, oh my gosh. It takes forever. It takes forever to get 23 girls to look the exact same. And so that's also super fun to me. You know, taking it literally, eight count by eight count. Okay, where's your head, where's your arm? How which way are we looking like it's it's a whole process, so

Gavin Kelly

And it's like any other sport, whenever it comes together and there's an actual performance going on or a competition going on, the people watching are not going to see any of that. They're not going to

they're going to see the results of that, but they're not going to really understand or witness firsthand the time and the dedication that goes in. To it. So it's just like anything else, cheer football, bad, you know, like anything that happens here, it takes work, and it takes effort,

Caroline Milford

and seeing that final performance, first of all, it's so, like, you get so anxious, because you have no control over what they're going to put on the floor. Yeah, you know, you've put in 1000s of hours of work at practice, but what are they actually going to do on the floor you have no control over so seeing that final performance happen, it's so exciting. And like, the proudest moments I've ever had as a coach is just getting to watch them perform, whether it's at the Joe or on the national stage. Like it is always such a proud moment of just going, Okay, we did it. Like they did it, you know, because I can't jump inside their bodies and make them do something. They care about it so much, they love it so much that they are willing to put in the work constantly and just hour after hour after hour. And you know, I was joking before we started today, but they're probably tired of me by this point, just because of the season, you know, and we're nearing the end, but they're great, and it's so fun to watch that come to life after all the hours of work.

Gavin Kelly

Well, they got a good coach. I appreciate you making time for us in this busy spring quarter, between your two jobs and your your very demanding schedule. We kind of mentioned it before we started recording, but at the time of recording, of recording, you guys are getting ready for nationals. Yes, by the time this episode comes out, we'll they'll probably already be in your rear view, but but good luck there. Thank you so much. We'll all be watching, and thanks again for making time for us and go dogs

Caroline Milford

Thank you so much, Gavin. Go Dogs.

Gavin Kelly

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