

Corey Andrew Powell ([00:02](#)):

I'm joined today by Sherri Graf who used her keen insights into the college admissions process to create the academic resources platform. Imagine scholarships, Sherri, welcome to Motivational Mondays.

Sherri Graf ([00:14](#)):

Oh my goodness. Thank you for having me. I couldn't be happier to be here.

Corey Andrew Powell ([00:17](#)):

Oh, wonderful. We are happy you are here too. Now, before we begin though, I just wanna jump into some of the commonalities I realized between the two of us. I read your bio and of course we both like to help young people and we both love writing and we both love good eighties music. So ...

Sherri Graf ([00:35](#)):

That's Right. That's right. I'm feeling your vibe buddy.

Corey Andrew Powell ([00:37](#)):

Yeah. I felt like we knew each other already, as soon as I read that. That's right. So just please, if you would share with us what inspired you to create the imagined scholarships platform and what does it actually provide?

Sherri Graf ([00:48](#)):

Oh my goodness. Such great questions. What inspired me to create it is I was a first generation college student. Uh, I grew up in a wonderful loving family who had no financial resources to help me go to school. And that wasn't something that was necessarily encouraged. Not because it was discouraged just because they didn't know what they didn't know. And so, um, my journey through education was more difficult than most, and that consisted of starting school and then having to stop and work for several semesters and then stopping and working for several semesters. And it wasn't until many years later that I went back to school and I finished those degrees and super excited to have that behind me. And now I'm just eager and hungry to do more, but I also have four children of my own. And one that just graduated from medical school. One that graduated from college in May. I have a junior at Baylor university and I have a senior in high school. And so not only was it a big part of my life personally, it was a big part of my own children's journey through education. And then I've been an independent educational consultant for the last 15 years, helping students find their way to college or, sometimes trade schools or whatever their journey looks like. Mm-hmm <affirmative>. And I wanna help them with the educational dollars to make their dreams and goals become a reality.

Corey Andrew Powell ([02:12](#)):

And you tap into something that's really interesting, the different segments of students. There's not just one type of student. You mentioned there, the trade school or vocational yeah. Student who they may also need funds to complete a program to get certification. Uh, then you break down the traditional and non-traditional. So tell me, does the Imagine Scholarships platform, does it specify and have like categorization for different students?

Sherri Graf ([02:38](#)):

Yeah, I wanted to help all students, you know, at the end of the day, I've gotta put my head on my pillow at night and look at the new and say, okay, are you proud of who you are today? And the choices you made today? And the choice that I make today is to help as many people as I can change their future by gaining whatever education they need to realize their dreams and goals. So that looks like, of course, the traditional college student, in addition to those getting graduate degrees and getting doctoral degrees, as well as, you know, Master's program law school, medical school, whatever that is. But it also goes down all the way to basically ninth grade. So helping students learn that they can start looking for money ahead of time. I really have a love for undocumented students. So I have quite a bit of scholarships in there for undocumented students.

Corey Andrew Powell ([03:27](#)):

Oh wow.

Sherri Graf ([03:27](#)):

As well as international students. Yeah. And then a lot of trends in education are tending towards certification programs. So a lot of people are doing what we call upskilling and they're going back to school and maybe just getting a certification in

something to help them refine the skills they need to do the job that they wanna do. So I have looked at all of that. I've also made very, very careful parameters on what we put in our system because as a mom and as someone who's worked with students for the last 15 years, nothing makes me sadder than the thought of people using a scholarship to actually obtain students information, to sell for marketing purposes. I don't really want that. So I try really hard to make sure every scholarship we offer is what I call a quality scholarship. And that is there to actually provide money for the student rather than capture their information. That being said, we don't sell any student's information to anyone and we don't do any advertising. So we are just here to give students an efficient and organized way to find dollars for school. I am fiercely protective over their information.

Corey Andrew Powell ([04:40](#)):

Wow. That's important to call out because so many times young people, especially they do see offers and opportunities and they don't really know if they can trust them, but you're sharing that you vet all these opportunities so that you know, their quality and their actual scholarships that exist. Now. It's really interesting when I went to college. You and I, another similarity is I also, I didn't go until later in life. I was like in my thirties when I went.

Sherri Graf ([05:03](#)):

Me too, I was much later in life.

Corey Andrew Powell ([05:05](#)):

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, I tried, you knew we were kindred spirits.

Sherri Graf ([05:07](#)):

I tried <laugh> I,

Corey Andrew Powell ([05:09](#)):

I tried too, when I was like, you know, 21 or something. It just, you know, it didn't work out. But what I did discover though later when I wanted to try to find scholarships is that it was difficult. I didn't know how to actually do it. And, then, someone maybe told me about one and I put all my heart and soul into applying for that one. I mean, I wrote this letter that was like a soliloquy that could have been published. <laugh> in like, you know, the journals of heartbreak if you had, you know, and, um, and I didn't get it and I was devastated and I didn't even try anymore. Now, mind you, there are thousands and thousands. And I just did this one and was crushed and had no idea the resources. So in your line of work, how do you keep students optimistic if they feel burnt out by the process or don't realize that it can be an arduous process? How do you prepare them for that?

Sherri Graf ([05:57](#)):

Yeah. Well, you speak to some statistics, so I've done some surveys and I found that 65% of students don't apply because they don't know where to apply. And another 15% say that they find the process overwhelming. So I built something to simplify the, this very easily so that you can look through match scholarships, find something that interests you click save, and it puts it in a little save bucket. Or if you don't ever wanna see it again, like I saw one the other day for a pet lover scholarship. Well, let's say you don't even own a pet. Like I don't want you to have to look through that ever again. So you just get rid of it. I do own two pets and I'm fiercely in love with my, my golden doodle.

Corey Andrew Powell ([06:40](#)):

Awww...Well, I, yes, I saw that you have a golden doodle, but you know, but a kid can also then if they want the scholarship bad enough, just like, go get a pet too. I mean, that's also an option.

Sherri Graf ([06:55](#)):

You know what? A goldfish counts! A goldfish counts! Yeah. To answer your question, looking for it really is a marathon, not a sprint mm-hmm <affirmative> yep. You know, you can't have your tuition bill for, for two weeks from now and decide, oh, this is when I'm gonna grab a scholarship. It really is something that takes consistency. And I recommend that students apply to three to five scholarships a week. And if you do that consistently, you will be successful on average, our students find around \$21,000. And so if you continue, you will be successful. And what we call the secret sauce for our site is in addition to scholarships and the ability to save and keep track of what you've applied for. We also have internships, but our secret sauce is this incredible page filled with videos and resources. So I have videos in there helping students through every step of the process. Mm-hmm <affirmative> right? Like here's how to make yourself successful. Here's how to work on

your resume for your applications. Here is how to do an interview. Here is how to make yourself successful in networking for the, the job that you want. So this video resource page is really what sets us apart from everyone else, in my opinion. And it's a way to keep the student engaged. So if I can keep them having fun, learning new things on our site, it will keep them in the site continually applying long term. It's a marathon, not a sprint.

Corey Andrew Powell ([08:17](#)):

Yes. Because I saw that you, you do mention on the site that you have those other resources and they just speak to not only the financial part, they actually are sort of more career resources that even can be utilized beyond college. Correct?

Sherri Graf ([08:31](#)):

Absolutely. We try to cover things for everyone in every stage of life. We have resources for, you know, single parents who are going back to school. We have resources for those in graduate school. We just try to accommodate as large of a range as we can provide continued encouragement and empower students to be their best and go get their dreams.

Corey Andrew Powell ([08:54](#)):

And I love that you mentioned you start as early as the ninth grade, because I don't think many people think about scholarships until they get close to graduating, right in that sweet spot of, I need this money for next year when I start school. But going back that early to like the ninth grade, I'm curious to know, how do you approach those younger grades as far as like, what, what is it that they need to do? I mean in the ninth grade at 15 I was not thinking about that. So how do you approach that student?

Sherri Graf ([09:19](#)):

Well, I really start to engage them with, hey, let's find out what kinda study skills are needed for success in high school. Those ninth grade grades, they really can affect that GPA more than you realize. And so I like to encourage them to keep that up. Help them be strong in their studies, help them be strong in their communication skills, help them with time management organization, all those things. And while I'm capturing them through those critical skills, I'm encouraging them to begin to apply. And hopefully we train them as they move all the way up so that, you know, eventually they're able to have completely debt free education, which many of our students have.

Corey Andrew Powell ([09:58](#)):

And in your own experience, you mentioned being a first generation college student. So were you the first then to graduate as well? Once you did go back and well, well, congratulations on that. Yes, that's wonderful. What are some of the things that you can notice that were a difference between when you were then trying to pay for college? Was it a lack of resources or there's nothing else out there, or if you could find them, you didn't know how to apply. Like, what are some of the sore spots that you're trying to rectify with this platform,

Sherri Graf ([10:30](#)):

The sad reality is often there are many students who spend their money trying to pay their tuition and maybe they're food deprived. Maybe they're living in very delicate situations, housing situations, like some people are so committed, they'll do whatever it takes. And I applaud them and I recognize them. I just wanna make it less difficult. I want to support them in any way that I can. I want to increase their effort, double their efforts. You know, if, if they're working two or three jobs to help pay their tuition, that's excellent. But what if I can come along and match like half of that through this system? Mm-hmm <affirmative>, if there's anything I can do to help people realize their goals and their dreams, I wanna be there. Like we only get one life. I want everyone to get to live it the way they, if they wanna live it and I wanna help them get the skills that they need to do, what they wanna

Corey Andrew Powell ([11:21](#)):

So, one other thing I find fascinating about the whole scholarship process. It's a bit provocative because it's misunderstood. Maybe you can speak to this. There are scholarships that are geared towards certain marginalized groups, misperceived by people as being just unfair, perhaps. I'm sure you have those sorts of scholarships in your umbrella. So tell me a little bit about that and why it's okay that there are some scholarships geared towards certain groups and not others.

Sherri Graf ([11:51](#)):

Well, I do believe that there are scholarships for everyone. So I wanna address that first. And there are many times I hear people say, well, I make too much money or my parents make too much money. I'm not gonna get any scholarships.

Absolutely not the truth. I watch it every single day. Some of my wealthiest students actually have gotten very significant amounts of money because they put the effort in and often people who have money, know the value of keeping their money and earning interest and using someone else's money that is earned to go to school. As far as the different groups, I believe all groups need help. So I may not have specifically fallen into one of the groups that you may be thinking of, but I was just as in need. Does that make sense? And so I believe that there are segments for everyone to fall into. And I do believe that there are certain segments that definitely have a disadvantage and definitely need more help. So I offer scholarships for all of those people across all races, all majors, all ethnicities. I want everyone to be represented and everyone to have opportunity.

Corey Andrew Powell ([13:07](#)):

You know, when I first heard someone, you know, and speaking in generality, but when I first heard someone complain that another group, they saw all these scholarship opportunities and they thought it was sort of one-sided. I did some research and I literally found there are scholarships....like if you're an alien — with green skin and bubbles on your head, there's a green bubble head scholarship. There's literally something for everyone.

Sherri Graf ([13:31](#)):

Absolutely. There's a duck calling scholarship like who ...I don't know how to duck call!

Corey Andrew Powell ([13:36](#)):

No, there is really?

Sherri Graf ([13:38](#)):

Yes. There's vegetarian scholarships. There's scholarships for left hand people. There's scholarships for, I mean, you name it. There's a \$10,000 greeting card scholarship. If you can, you know, make a good greeting card. I also want to point out sometimes I get the question of, hey, there are some free scholarship sites out there. What about that? Well, there are, but if you recall early in our conversation, I talked about scholarships that are just there to capture your marketing information. Mm-hmm <affirmative> so I always think of it like this. If you're not paying for the product, you are the product. Right. Right. Right. So if you're just accessing something, your information is now the product. And in addition, it is very, very hard to navigate and organize and keep track of it almost is so defeating that you give up. Yeah. So our solution is to have a database that's very easily or organized. It's very simple. You have matched scholarships, saved scholarships, keeps track of what you've applied for. We have hundreds of internships. And then again, we have our secret sauce, which is a page of videos and resources. We have a download budgeting tool. I talk about building a budget to help you stay on track. Yeah. Yeah. We just try to encompass all of the whole dynamics of the college admissions, paying for college scholarships, financial aid, all of it.

Corey Andrew Powell ([15:07](#)):

Thank you for listening to Motivational Mondays presented by The National Society of Leadership and Success and available wherever you listen to your favorite podcasts. I'm Corey Andrew Powell. And I'll see you again here next week.