

Season 4, Episode 1: The Intersection of Science and Literature

Host: ESF President Joanie Mahoney

Guest: Janine DeBaise

Janine DeBaise: I wanted to be a writer and a teacher, and I ended up being both of those things. A student would say to me, "Oh, I'm not going to need to write in my job." And I'll say, "So how many text messages have you sent in the last 48 hours? How many emails have you sent in the last 48 hours?" I think young people are writing more than ever. They're writing all the time. Let's say you're a scientist and you do amazing research. If you don't publish that research and get it out to your colleagues, no one will ever know about it. And the same with if you're a landscape architect, often you have clients that you have to answer to and you have to give presentations. You have to put things in writing. I mean, grant proposals, there's just so much writing in every single job.

Joanie Mahoney: Thank you. Welcome to season four of Campus Conversations, the podcast. I'm Joanie Mahoney, and I have the honor of serving as SUNY ESF President. This is one of my favorite parts of the job because I get to sit down and have conversations with faculty here at the college. And in the past couple seasons, we've interviewed faculty about their path here. We've interviewed faculty about their research. And this season, I think we're going to try sort of a hybrid and it's an opportunity for people, even though my next guest has been with the college for many years, there's probably people here who don't fully know your background and your path here, and then also about the scholarly work that you've been involved with. So with no further ado, I would like to welcome Janine DeBaise, who is a tenured instructor in ESF's writing program where she's taught writing in literature for more than three decades. Janine's a published author who's passionate about the intersection of environmental issues and literature. She's beloved by her students, and we're going to learn why she believes that writing is such a critical skill at ESF that anyone can learn. Janine, thank you for being here and welcome to the show.

Janine DeBaise: Thanks. It's nice to be here.

Joanie Mahoney: I have known you for the last few years, but as has been the case with the other faculty that I've been able to speak with, I didn't really know what your path was, how you ended up here at ESF. And you're one of the faculty that I have a lot in common with in that we both grew up in Central New York.

Janine DeBaise: Yes, I was born within 10 miles of here.

Joanie Mahoney: And you said your children went to the same high school you did?

Janine DeBaise: Yes. I went to East Syracuse Minoa High School, and my kids all graduated from there as well.

- Joanie Mahoney:** I am a Syracuse City School product, and then my own kids went to Manlius Pebble Hill and JD. Three of my four graduated from JD, not too far from East Syracuse Minoa. I think there's a lot of overlap on that side of town, so I'm sure we have a lot of mutual acquaintances and similar experiences. So why don't you start by just telling people a little bit about yourself. How did you end up in the role that you have here at ESF? What was the path you took?
- Janine DeBaise:** Yeah, it was a little bit unconventional. I was the editor of a publication called Central New York Environment, and this was back in the early nineties back when the internet wasn't really a thing yet. And so publications were still being printed on newsprint and bundled up and given to stores and places like that that would pass them out. So I was the editor of this little bimonthly environmental publication. And because I was always calling ESF and asking faculty to write things for me, I can remember calling Don Leopold and asking him to write something on purple, loose stripe, for example. I sort of got to know people at ESF, and then at some point someone called and asked me to teach just one course. So it began with me teaching one course. It was a literature course, the Contemporary Nature Literature course that I still teach, and that course sort of ended up growing into a full-time job. So it wasn't something I went and looked for. It sort of found me.
- Joanie Mahoney:** So back up a little. How did you end up becoming the editor of this journal? You must have had a pretty strong passion for the environment to be that deeply involved.
- Janine DeBaise:** Yes, that goes back a ways, even as a kid, I participated in the environmental movement because my parents were involved. So that sort of is my family, I would say. And so I have a background in English, so I was a writer and an editor, so I was trained with that. But the environmental issues I kind of learned on my own, just be from a long involvement, particularly in this area because I'm from here. So I knew the environmental issues in this area, and I knew many of the people involved in the environmental movement in this area.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Interesting. Your degree then was in writing or English?
- Janine DeBaise:** Yes, yes.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Undergrad.
- Janine DeBaise:** Yes. Right.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And then did you expect to be a teacher, an instructor, or is it because when you were asked to teach that one class, you found that you were good at it and you liked it?

Janine DeBaise: I wanted to be a writer and a teacher, and I ended up being both of those things. I'm actually a certified as a high school teacher, so I had been teaching sixth, seventh, and eighth grade English, so I had already done some teaching before this. So it was sort of a combination. In first grade, someone said, we had to tell to the class, stand up, and say what we wanted to do, and I said, "I want to be a writer and a teacher," and I still am both of those things.

Joanie Mahoney: Isn't that interesting? That doesn't happen to people very often, and it's one of the things I try to reassure students here, my own kids, their friends, is this idea that what you want to do at 18 is pretty rare, but for you, that was the case. For whatever reason writing is the thing that I think instills the most fear in young people is having to write a paper. I don't know where that comes from, but when you start telling middle schoolers, high schoolers, students in college about writing several pages, it just seems to be difficult for people more so than the other subjects that they're taking. There's this real fear of writing.

Janine DeBaise: And I think sometimes that young people have, and sometimes older people as well have misconceptions about writing. They think that writing is some mystical talent that you're born with, that people are just born these sort of closet geniuses who write these amazing novels and they don't realize that everyone can be a good writer. Everyone can improve their writing. It's just a matter of reading a lot and writing a lot and sharing your writing with other people. So I think there's a lot of sort of myths that as a teacher, I'm always sort of confronting those myths and getting students to think about it. A student will say to me, "I'm not going to need to write in my job." And I'll say, "So how many text messages have you sent in the last 48 hours? How many emails have you sent in the last 48 hours?" I think young people are writing more than ever. They're writing all the time, and somehow they don't think of that as writing. And absolutely it is writing.

Joanie Mahoney: I would say I'm more like I just described, I started out just having this fear of a writing assignment, but at some point, maybe it was my journey through college and law school, I realized, oh, okay, you just have to get started, and if you could turn me into a writer, I feel like you're right that anybody could be a writer. I wasn't sure that was the case, but that's how I introduced you that it's a critical skill that anyone can learn, and that must be pretty reassuring to your students to hear that when they come in your classes, I can turn you into a writer.

Janine DeBaise: And it doesn't happen overnight. And I find there are a couple key things to getting students to think of themselves as writers. And one is that I let them choose their own topics. I mean, I give them parameters for a writing assignment. I might say, you need to pick a species of animal or plant and connect it to a larger environmental issue. I mean, there's parameters, but then within that, they get to pick their topic. And I think the key is to figure out what a student is passionate about, to help them find out what they're passionate about, and then have them choose that as a topic. Because if they really care

about the topic, then they will work hard to research it. They will care about the research, they will ask more questions, they will find out more information, they will work harder on their drafts. And then when they share their writing with their classmates and other people, they will listen to the feedback and they will be really determined to get it right.

Joanie Mahoney: That's interesting. And that is a key. And when I think back, the things that I had to write about sometimes weren't interesting to me. They weren't in this field of environmental or conservation. And you have students here that have all come to a college that has a very narrow mission. So for you to talk on the subject of environmental science and forestry and animals, wildlife, but then go from there, what are you interested in that that does strike me as something that's easier than something overly prescribed that you may or may not have a passion for.

Janine DeBaise: Yeah. And I could see why that happens in high school and junior high, because often a teacher might have 150 students, so it's harder for them to work individually with each student.

Joanie Mahoney: How about your classes? How big are your classes?

Janine DeBaise: They're limited to 20 each class. And that that's really important because learning to write is an individual process. One student might be terrible to organizing and be learning how to organize their thoughts. Another student might write pretty well, but really need some editing skills and be working at sentence level problems. So each student is actually working on something different and just becoming a better writer. And writing isn't something you teach and just a single semester, and suddenly you're this great writer. It's a lifelong process. And I always share that with my students. I asked them to do what we call peer review. They get together and read each other's writing and give each other feedback. And I share with them that I have a writing group that once a month I go and I share my writing and other writers give me feedback and I read their work and give them feedback that this is something that we continue to do, improving our writing.

Joanie Mahoney: And you're teaching both required classes and other.

Janine DeBaise: Yes. I teach EWP 190 and 290, which in most places you'd refer to as first year comp. Those are required classes, but I also teach a couple of literature classes.

Joanie Mahoney: And what are those?

Janine DeBaise: And so one is Contemporary Nature literature, and the other is Urban Environmental Literature. And those classes, a short version is we read books, we read essays, we read poetry, and then we analyze it using, I would call an

ecocritical lens, which I think the best definition of ecocriticism is Ian Marshall's literary criticism informed by an ecological consciousness. So the idea is that we look at what we read and talk about the environmental issues that play out and how nature's represented and things like that in that class. And the students do quite a bit of writing as well.

Joanie Mahoney: And in your experience, are you giving students minimum page limits? Are you giving them maximum page limits? How do you make somebody a good writer?

Janine DeBaise: I don't like to give word count because my experience with that from high school students is they, "Oh, I got 500 words. Great, I'm done. Let's send it off." But what I always tell them is you have to have something to say if you're going to, for each paper. And my students write usually twice a week, they just are writing all the time. And for each paper I say, "You have to say something." And that is the key to becoming a good writer, is having something to say and then working on it so that you actually get it across, do your reader.

So I stress that with any piece of writing, even if it's an email, you want to think, what's my purpose? What am I trying to achieve here? And who am I writing it for? And I always try to make my students think about that. Who are you writing this for? An email to your grandmother's going to be different than an email to your friend. And that's going to be different from an email where you're sending it for a job interview. So who you're writing it for will change how you write, but also what's your purpose? Are you trying to educate them? Are you trying to persuade them? Are you writing an email to a teacher wanting to get an appointment to talk about your grade? So always those two things, purpose, audience.

Joanie Mahoney: How about you on your own time? What kind of writing are you doing? I know you've written a book of poetry. Have you written fiction?

Janine DeBaise: So I write poetry, but more recently I've been writing a lot of non-fiction essays, which is a form I like, and eventually I'll probably write a novel.

Joanie Mahoney: That's very interesting. That seems daunting to me. You're starting with essays in this same space about environmental?

Janine DeBaise: Yes. All of my writing is informed. I'm an ecofeminist. I'm going to throw that word out. All my writing is informed by my interest in environmental issues and in my interest in feminist issues. And it's particularly where those intersect, which often means writing about the human body, but it also, most of my writing is place-based, talking about where we are and how we interact with the landscape. And that brings in environmental and nature issues.

- Joanie Mahoney:** So before we came on being recorded here, you told me that that term ecofeminist goes back to the 1970s.
- Janine DeBaise:** Yes.
- Joanie Mahoney:** So what does it mean?
- Janine DeBaise:** It's the intersection of environmental issues and feminist issues, but particularly looking at what is causing environmental degradation. And let's look at the ways in which we've oppressed women, and let's look at the patterns and look at what's common between those two things. And often we're pointing the finger at patriarchy as this is what's causing these problems. It's often the same things that are oppressing women and causing environmental degradation.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And can you give us some examples of what those things are that we have in common that the same maybe bad behavior is causing this environmental degradation and also holding women back?
- Janine DeBaise:** I'm trying to think. I'm thinking of an essay wrote about breast cancer, for example, and the ways in which when we put toxins into the environment, people think of environmental issues as, oh, we're just destroying the habitat for polar bears or wolves or something like that. But we're also destroying the environment for humans. And some things in particular like breast cancer is linked to environmental toxins. So when we say have a government that wants to ignore the health concerns of women, then that leads to higher rates of breast cancer. There's a lot of complicated connections.
- Joanie Mahoney:** But I'm following you because I know historically there's been a lot more research done on things that affect men. And so that is an example where had we put the same amount of time and money and effort into studying what causes breast cancer, it might not have been allowed to be used and poison the environment. I know from reading about you that you had an older sister who passed from breast cancer. I'm very sorry. Was this experience that you had, this awful personal experience, something that led you down this path?
- Janine DeBaise:** I was already down that path a long time ago, so I even knew when my sister was dying, I knew about the connection.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Yeah, that's awful. I'm really sorry. So you've done a good job of explaining where that collides, so the dominant culture's, treatment of the human body, the parallel between misogyny and environmental degradation. So that was a good example of that. And you take that idea and turn it into essays that you publish.
- Janine DeBaise:** Yes.

- Joanie Mahoney:** And where do you publish?
- Janine DeBaise:** Oh, gosh. I've published in maybe 80 journals. So I wrote an essay about my sister dying of breast cancer. It was published in a journal called The Hopper. I've been published in Orion.
- Joanie Mahoney:** So is this something that you're always doing? Are you always writing?
- Janine DeBaise:** Yes.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And publishing.
- Janine DeBaise:** I'm always writing essays and poetry and publishing them. And then currently I'm putting together a collection of essays. So to put together a collection of essays, you take a bunch that you've already published, but then some that you haven't published yet and kind of come up with a theme and put them together. So that's what I'm doing right now.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Interesting. And do you have a working title or an idea for this future novel that you have?
- Janine DeBaise:** No. No, it's not.
- Joanie Mahoney:** That's different. Yeah, I understand.
- Janine DeBaise:** The collection of essays is different than the novel, and I don't just, everyone eventually writes a novel, and I just haven't.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Is that common among writing instructors at colleges that everyone writes a novel at some point?
- Janine DeBaise:** I think it's common among writers. It feels like writers have a path, and I could be completely wrong about this. You start with poetry when you're younger, and then you kind of move to essays, and then eventually you write a novel. So I'm not sure, but in my head, that's the evolution. I could be completely wrong.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Do you have any interaction formally or informally with the writing program at Syracuse?
- Janine DeBaise:** I don't know. I went to grad school at SU, so I used to, and I taught in the writing program over there.
- Joanie Mahoney:** The reason I'm saying it is because I see more of their books at Barnes and Noble, right?

- Janine DeBaise:** Oh, yeah. And the Parthenon, the independent bookstore downtown carries most of the local writers.
- Joanie Mahoney:** That's a great new bookstore.
- Janine DeBaise:** Yeah. That's nice to have an independent bookstore back in town.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And I didn't realize that they have a lot of the local authors, of course.
- Janine DeBaise:** Oh yeah. They have a whole, if you walk in and turn to the, a whole wall of local authors.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Will I find your collection of poetry there?
- Janine DeBaise:** Yes, you will.
- Joanie Mahoney:** What is it called?
- Janine DeBaise:** It's called Body Language.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And is it the same idea where it's this intersection of environmental and feminism?
- Janine DeBaise:** Yes. Yes. And I think where those often intersect is with the human body. So there's a lot of poems about the body, the opening poem, and it is a poem in which I compare my measurements to that of a Barbie doll.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Oh my. I don't think I would want to do that. I know that that's an unrealistic measurement.
- Janine DeBaise:** And the measurements are crazy. It's like my legs have to be two feet longer. I mean, it's utterly ridiculous. And my breasts were the same size because I was breastfeeding a young child at the time I wrote the poem. It's a utterly ridiculous, I think it was like I had to lose 16 inches from my waist. It was, yeah. So it's a funny poem when I read it. A lot of people-
- Joanie Mahoney:** Yeah. Okay, good. I will look forward to reading that. We laugh about it right now, but it is true that it has had an effect on women, this ideal that we put out there for girl, little girls to play with.
- Janine DeBaise:** I had hoped that would be over by the time I had children. And it's still going on these crazy things that women are supposed to look like in ways. And I have grandchildren now, and I hate that those pressures are even going to be on my granddaughters to look a certain way.

- Joanie Mahoney:** You may be interested in this. I was kind of proud. One of my sons, who's in his 20s, was with a group recently, and they were playing some kind of trivia game. And he said to me, "I just am now realizing I never saw any of the Disney movies when I was a little kid." And I said, "You mean the ones where women had to give up their ability to speak, to get their man?"
- Janine DeBaise:** Yes. The Little Mermaid. Oh my gosh. Yes. Yes.
- Joanie Mahoney:** So my poor kids were not even aware of the fact that I was trying my best to keep that message away.
- Janine DeBaise:** My kids had to put up with me letting them see the movies while I analyzed them and made them talk about it.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Yes.
- Janine DeBaise:** So I ruined many a Disney movie for them.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Oh, I think I ruined Rudolph the Red Nosed Reindeer for my kids, because there's this one scene after Rudolph runs away because he's been teased by all the other kids, and it's a blizzard, and his father wants to go look for him, and his father's name is Donner. And then the narrator says that naturally Mrs. Donner wanted to go too. So I said, her name is his, and-
- Janine DeBaise:** She doesn't even get her own name.
- Joanie Mahoney:** No, not no, no different. It's Donner and Mrs. Donner. And then Donner looks at her and says, "No, this is man's work." So every time I think my kids gave up watching it because we had to stop and listen to Mom rant about the movie. I'm surprised it's still out and about.
- Janine DeBaise:** And it's still around when I used to read aloud to my kids, and I always read to them at night, but I would add my editorial comments.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Our poor kids, Janine, I was doing the same thing.
- Janine DeBaise:** My youngest son would look up and say, "Mom, I know that's not what it says."
- Joanie Mahoney:** And you know what? I have raised some great kids, and I'm sure you have too. So they got through the editorializing of their childhood, but I thought it was interesting that my son was unaware that he had even missed all those. So you compared yourself to a Barbie doll in your poem.
- Janine DeBaise:** That's the opening poem of that book. Yes.

- Joanie Mahoney:** Are you still writing poetry?
- Janine DeBaise:** I do, but I've been focused more on essays these days. And I think part of it is I wrote poetry when I was younger because I had so little time. I was also raising kids and working full time, and if I had a little moment, I had to work on something that only took one page. And as I've gotten older, I'm like, "Oh, I have a little more time. I can write a whole essay." And that's why I think the progression eventually would be to a novel. I'll have a more time.
- Joanie Mahoney:** That's interesting, right? Yeah. That's interesting. It's just the progression of your life. For me, it takes me a while of quiet and it takes a clean desk for me to write. I don't know if that is how it is for you, but if I wanted to even write a poem, which I've never really written up poem in my life, I would love to.
- Janine DeBaise:** You could.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Okay. So I will take that challenge, but I would need my whole desk cleared off. I would kind of need my to-do list done. So I don't know when my kids were little that I ever would've gotten around to writing a poem, because I have learned to be a writer. I'm not probably as good as the students that are coming through your class. I've never really taken that kind of writing classes that you teach, but I just know about myself that if there's clutter and noise and busyness, I just can't do it. So I can't imagine carving out a space and writing when your kids were little. Do you have to have that clean desk?
- Janine DeBaise:** Yeah. No, my desk hasn't been clean in decades. So yeah, that's not going to happen. But I think the harder thing nowadays is that I'm of course writing on a laptop. I open my laptop and there's that text messages chiming in and emails chiming in. And I talk about this with my students. We all fight this forcing yourself to turn it off so you don't get notifications about emails or text messages. So all those electronic distractions, I think that's even worse. I have a friend, and I always tell my students this, he's a writer and he uses an old laptop that can't connect to the internet, and he goes down in his basement and sits in a chair corner of his basement, and that's when he gets his writing done.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I think I'm a better still longhand writer. I like to write on a piece of paper if I'm want to collect my thoughts or give remarks to somebody about something.
- Janine DeBaise:** And most writers I know still have the spiral bound aligned journals. And there's just nothing like a pen in a notebook really. I have at my house probably 40 or 50 journals piled, and they take a whole shelf in a closet. So all writers I know, I think pretty much still do the pen and paper, especially when you're brainstorming, you want to see what comes out.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Yeah, I would think so. But then young people can't even read cursive anymore.

Janine DeBaise: I mean, maybe they're printing instead, but they can still much lower that put pen and paper. But I often tell them, I mean, this is sort of a writer's trick. If I'm working on something and I kind of feel stuck, I go to a different room and I leave my laptop behind and I take a pad of paper and a pen, and I sit down. So in a different location with a different medium, and I just kind of free write, make myself write for 10 minutes. Usually if I look down at the paper out of that 10 minute of scribbles, there's a sentence I can use, and then I go back and use that sentence.

Joanie Mahoney: That is an interesting tip. So how do you convince the students who are here that think I'm going to be an engineer, or I'm going to be an architect. I don't need to tell anyone a story, I don't need to communicate through writing. And as you said, they're emailing, they're text messaging, but there's more to it than that. And I wonder how are you describing the value of being a good writer no matter what your career is?

Janine DeBaise: And we talk about that. Let's say you're a scientist and you do amazing research. If you don't publish that research and get it out to your colleagues, no one will ever know about it. And the same with if you're a landscape architect, often you have clients that you have to answer to and you have to give presentations. You have to put things in writing. I mean, grant proposals, there's just so much writing in every single job. And sometimes we'll play the game of, I say to my students, "Let's come up with a job where you don't have to do any writing." And I think the last time we did it, they came up with what if you're the guy? And I think this actually comes from a kid's book, the guy in the lighthouse on the island in the early ocean, and your only job is to go up and make sure the light is still on.

I think they're automated now, so I don't think this job even exists. But then when we talked about it, we were like, "Well, they probably still have to keep a journal." And then if they're stuck on this island in this lighthouse, how do they communicate with their family? They're probably writing letters and they're still having to communicate, especially nowadays, so much of our communication is written. We don't make phone calls anymore. We send emails, we send text messages. I mean, for my students, we put things on social media. So we use writing more than ever. And it's not just in many disciplines, like writing is used to communicate disciplinary knowledge. You're a scientist, you make this discovery, you want everyone to know about it. But writing is also a way to think through something. So you're doing a project that's big and complicated, and you map it out on paper, you write it down to think it through. It's a way of making your work better.

Joanie Mahoney: Now I agree with that. I had opportunities in my previous career where I had to give 45 minute sets of remarks or whatever. I always had to start with an outline. But I had a group here for this podcast, I think it was last season, and it included somebody from environmental studies, from the communications

standpoint, and they made that exact point, which is all this discovery can be happening, and you can have incredible breakthroughs in your research, but if you're not able to tell people about that, then it may as well have not have happened. So I certainly see that, but I wonder how successful you are convincing the students who come through your required classes in particular, that this is something of value that they really should put a lot of time and effort into.

Janine DeBaise: No, I think they see it because I think they see it from the other faculty members here at here at ESF. I mean, scientists, engineers, landscape architects. I'd say most of the faculty are doing a lot of writing, and they share that with their students. So I think students do understand that.

Joanie Mahoney: How many writing instructors, tenured writing instructors, do we have here at the college?

Janine DeBaise: I think I'm the only one.

Joanie Mahoney: That's crazy. So everybody has to come through a writing program. I mean you're touching all of our students.

Janine DeBaise: I don't see all of them. Yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: Are there majors that don't require the writing classes that you teach?

Janine DeBaise: No. I think every student who comes through ESF has to take at least a couple writing courses.

Joanie Mahoney: So they're seeing some of your colleagues, but maybe not tenured instructors.

Janine DeBaise: Exactly. Exactly.

Joanie Mahoney: Gotcha. And you've been here since 1992. Have you seen a lot of change or are we pretty much the same as we were when you got here?

Janine DeBaise: ESF as an institution, has it changed? Gosh, yes. It has changed. I mean, for one thing, gosh, when I first came here, nobody was using email. I mean, the internet wasn't ... Right. I mean, I think all of that technology has really changed us. The one thing that hasn't changed is we get the most amazing students I know. And that has been the same for my 31 years. We get students who come in here who are passionate about environmental issues or really motivated to become a landscape architect, or they come in here and they want to learn. And that makes it easy to teach them because they are motivated. And that hasn't changed.

- Joanie Mahoney:** I think that is the most consistent thing that faculty say here about ESF is the students.
- Janine DeBaise:** We get the best students. We really do. They're just wonderful students and wonderful human beings. They're also kind to caring, compassionate people.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Considerate. I totally agree. We had the pleasure of hosting the new Chancellor King from the SUNY system, and he wanted to meet with students and faculty, and he did both. And after he sat with a group of students and we were walking to our next appointment, he was commenting on that this is a remarkable group of students. They know what they want to do, they're willing to put the work in to do it right. They're really smart. And as you said, so considerate of each other. While they were sitting in that group having a conversation, there were probably a dozen students. And the way they interacted with each other with him, he noticed on his way out. And he's visiting all of the colleges across the whole system. And I said, you will see that ESF is different. We're not like any other. Yeah.
- Janine DeBaise:** Because I've done a lot of presentations about pedagogy with colleagues all over the country, and I've done quite a few things where my students have interacted with students at other institutions. And always my colleagues are like, "Ah, don't try this at home. Janine has the best students."
- Joanie Mahoney:** Oh, interesting.
- Janine DeBaise:** Yes. It's always, my colleagues are always like, yeah, yeah.
- Joanie Mahoney:** That would be great in a perfect world, but only Janine has that world.
- Janine DeBaise:** Yeah, her students are different. They're like, she just has these amazing students. Yeah, I hear that all the time. I used to do a lot of different presentations about pedagogy, and I was always bragging about ESF students, but then when I started working with the colleagues would have our students interacting. I mean, the internet makes this possible. So I would have my students interacting with students in Atlanta, Georgia, or one time at Pennsylvania or Taiwan in various places. And the other colleagues were always like, but your students are so motivated, we give an assignment and they do it. I'm like, "Yeah, of course. Because they're ESF students."
- Joanie Mahoney:** Yeah, I know. And as I said, so it's such a consistent theme here among everybody, but I wonder how it's like magic. I know there's more to it than that, but our enrollment people just do a terrific job of finding people that are a great fit here. And I don't know how you can do it looking at just written essays or a transcript from a student, but maybe it's the self selection of those that are accepted.

- Janine DeBaise:** The students who choose to come here. And we see family legacies very often. I'll have a student who said, "You had my older sister, you had my cousin," and so I've taught many sibling pairs over the years.
- Joanie Mahoney:** They know before they come what the culture is here.
- Janine DeBaise:** Friends, or they have a high school teacher who went here, or there's often it's the alumni networks a pretty tight network.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And we have a pretty good retention rate too, because as difficult as it is, they do come in with their eyes open. That is something that I want to make a goal is even increasing that more because students have so much on their plates right now. It just seems like every day there's one more thing to be worried about. And you and I didn't have those same worries growing up. We had this luxury of a carefree childhood, but they come with the weight of the world on their shoulders. And so I want to make sure that we're catching students who might need a little bit of a boost in any area that they need that boost in and try to help them get through here. Because as I tell the students, you did the hard work of getting here. And so now I do see it as our responsibility to make sure that they succeed. What kind of supports are in place for your students? If you do have a student that's struggling in your classes? Is that on you?
- Janine DeBaise:** No, it's not just on me. And one of the biggest things is we have the Writing Resource Center, which is just amazing. And it'd be hard for me to do my job without that, that I can send my students to the Writing resource center and they get peer tutoring and they get so much support there.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Do all of your students use the Writing Resource Center?
- Janine DeBaise:** They all can if they choose to. I don't think a hundred percent of them use it. They would be overwhelmed if every single student went in there, but they all have the opportunity to. And I think it's really important because the students we get are smart, motivated, but they come with different bases of knowledge and different skill sets depending on where they went to high school, what their background was. So once they get here, we need to work with them to meet their needs. So I think every student who comes here can succeed, but some of them need different help than others.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I see that too. And it's going to be interesting to see over the next few years what the effects of COVID are on the preparation that students have when they get here about mental health issues. That's what I see as our responsibility around the faculty. The administration is making sure you have the resources that you need and that students then have the resources that they need to be successful. But that old phrase about, look to your left and look to your right,

and one of you won't be here. I said, we want to be 180 degrees away from that. We want to make sure that we're all getting through successfully here.

Janine DeBaise: And I mean, the students, I think the writing program has done a good job. It's different supports. So the Writing Resource Center, there's a public speaking lab, there's the digital storytelling. We have English for speakers of other languages. So we have a bunch of free-standing centers that support the students.

Joanie Mahoney: Is there something that if you were in my chair that you would be doing for the writing program that we're not doing

Janine DeBaise: More tenure track lines, we need more tenured and tenured-

Joanie Mahoney: Writing instructors.

Janine DeBaise: Absolutely. Absolutely. And a budget. Yeah. So many things. I don't know where to start.

Joanie Mahoney: No, I think that's fair though. And this, you've been here a long time and have experienced some level of budget constraints being part of the state system comes with a ton of benefit, but it also comes with a little bit of lack of autonomy, and you're not able to do everything that you might do. The sky's not the limit for us on how to raise revenue and things like that. You know better than I do. But I think it's important for the powers that be to hear that.

When the chancellor was here, I told him, it's been a long time, and I'm sure people at system are well aware of the budget constraints that we have here at ESF and other colleges across the system. But as time goes by, it becomes more and more urgent. And I know of a couple faculty that have not stayed to get tenure because they're worried about the budget constraints. And I said, "We really are part of a system and we're going to be fine," but you don't really know if you're not from here and you haven't spent your career here, that they do meet their obligations at system ultimately. But it is a tough environment, I would imagine, for faculty to always be keeping their eye on the bottom line. Has it been like that? Was it like that when you got here in the '90s?

Janine DeBaise: Not in the '90s. It's been like that for let's say the last past 10 or 15 years.

Joanie Mahoney: So where it's just been this conversation about the budget, and I know from our conversations with Chancellor King, he wants to help us with that. He was brainstorming ideas, things that we could look at, and there's ways that we're a doctoral granting institution in the system where we don't get exactly the same treatment as the others. There's ways where we have this relationship with Syracuse where Cornell does, Alfred does, but we don't get exactly the same

kind of treatment inside the system. I'm just trying to draw their attention to that. And some things, like for instance, if you look at the cost of room and board for our students, it's not cheap. And that is in large part because they have to buy their meal plans at Syracuse. So that money that earns campuses revenue to spend, we just pass it through. So anyhow.

Janine DeBaise: I'll say, and it's tough, and the time of a budget crisis, sometimes programs that work well, but just kind of work quietly under the radar can get underfunded. And I think people don't always realize just how vital the writing program is for student success. And one of the things that we discovered years ago when we were working with learning communities is that for first year students, many of their courses they take are big lecture courses. But in a writing classroom, that teacher actually knows the names and knows quite a bit about each student because the classes are small. And that is so vitally important for those first year students that someone sees them and can refer them to other resources on campus.

Joanie Mahoney: That is a really good point.

Janine DeBaise: And I think we don't always recognize that because most of the writing instructors, there's a lot of wonderful people in the writing program who are just quietly doing this amazing work, and it doesn't really get highlighted.

Joanie Mahoney: And that's why you're here today.

Janine DeBaise: Yes. To highlight it.

Joanie Mahoney: And you have touched on a lot of the really great resources. We're here today because of Tyler Dorholt's work in the digital storytelling lab.

Janine DeBaise: Yes. And Tyler is amazing.

Joanie Mahoney: So I want to switch gears just a little bit. I want to ask, so you're working right now on this compilation of essays. What's the timing? When can-

Janine DeBaise: Oh gosh.

Joanie Mahoney: Did you set yourself some time limits or you're just doing it when you can get to it?

Janine DeBaise: No, I'm working on that right now. And I don't have a title, but I have a theme. So it's a book of essays, and many of them have already been written. So I'm just kind of rearranging and putting the book together. And it's about change. I'm someone who has always actually hated change. I've lived the same place

my whole life. Change isn't something I embrace, but there are certain changes that are inevitable. Kids grow up, we age, our parents get old and die.

In the essays, I sort of come to accept those changes because as humans, we are animals. We're subject to the same cycles of life and death and all the cycles of nature. And in some ways it's the price we pay for living on this beautiful, amazing planet. But set against that as sort of a complicating factor is there are changes that aren't natural. My sister dying at the age of 55 from breast cancer. And so in one essay I talk about that connection between breast cancer and environmental toxins. So woven throughout this book are those connections between environmental issues and what we're doing to the planet is sort of what we're doing to ourselves, to our bodies, to our own health.

Joanie Mahoney: So some of the change is natural and can be just fine.

Janine DeBaise: My dad is 92. At some point he will die, and that will be a fairly natural death.

Joanie Mahoney: But the change that is the result of maybe neglect or-

Janine DeBaise: The environmental damage that we've inflicted on the planet that's affecting our health, it's affecting our bodies. And that's not a natural change.

Joanie Mahoney: And so we got the word change in your working title. We haven't really solved the problem.

Janine DeBaise: If you come up with a good title, text it to me.

Joanie Mahoney: The nature of change, I'll keep working on it.

Janine DeBaise: It's going to be a little sexier than that. Okay.

Joanie Mahoney: So before we conclude, I have a couple questions here. One is, what are the journals, one or two that you would recommend for somebody who wants to read about nature?

Janine DeBaise: So I do have a few in mind. Orion Magazine is one of the leading environmental magazines and has been for a long time. And it's a big, really pretty magazine. They do full page pictures and photographs and it's print, so you actually get it in the mail every couple months. But they have a website that anyone can go to and read some of the stuff in there. So that's one of them.

The other is an online journal, and they're actually, I think the oldest online journal that's about place that's called terrain.org. And I know when I say it fast, it sounds like train, but it's terrain, T-E-R-R-A-I-N, terrain.org. And one of the amazing things about terrain.org is that nothing is behind a paywall. You can

read everything on their site and there they've been in the business for 25 years. You can read it all for free.

Joanie Mahoney: Wow.

Janine DeBaise: Yeah. And just like Orion doesn't have ads either. So these are editors who are really dedicated to making sure that people have access. And I would throw Ecotone in there as well. They do some good, they do great work with environmental writing.

Joanie Mahoney: And do you contribute to all of those if you can?

Janine DeBaise: Yes, I have. In fact, I should have said this up front. I'm actually the education editor for terrain.org, and they're having their 25 year anniversary and they're celebrating it in Seattle in March. I'm going to be at a reading for that.

Joanie Mahoney: That's fantastic. Well, I hope you have a wonderful trip. And then if you just leave us with one final thing, and that would be your tip for somebody who's got a writer's block.

Janine DeBaise: So my tip is that so many people think, I don't know that writing is this thing you go up in your attic, and I don't know, Emily Dickinson was probably a terrible role model for us. You go on your attic and you just write by yourself all the time. And that's really not how we write. Most of us, like you join a writing group and anyone can join a writing group. Now there's even online groups so that you write as part of a community. And that's why I tell my students, well, go down to the Writing Resource Center. Go down to the digital storytelling studio. You don't have to do this alone. Right. Share your work with your roommate with ... I make students share with other people in the class. So I think that idea that you can write as a part of a community and you can get help from other people, that's how to become a better writer and to get you sort of moving along.

Joanie Mahoney: And that's good advice, because I would assume that you have to be pretty established to be in a writing group, but you're saying everybody should find their people.

Janine DeBaise: Oh, absolutely. And you can be in a writing group where one person is published like 10 books and someone else has published barely anything. And there's online writing groups, there are online writing communities. I mean, there's no excuse anymore to not be part of a writing community.

Joanie Mahoney: Well, and I appreciate what you do here for our writing community at ESF and have done for a long time. It's been a pleasure getting to know you and then to ask you to stop what you're doing and have this conversation with us today so

more people can hear your thoughts on ESF, on writing, on nature, on ecofeminism. This has been really interesting. So thank you very much.

Janine DeBaise: This has been fun. Thank you for having me.

Joanie Mahoney: And we'll see you soon.