

Life at Kessler Foundation - Returning for a New Job Title and Responsibilities - Stephanie Jamenez

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JOAN BANKS-SMITH: 00:04 [music] This is Joan Banks-Smith for Life at Kessler Foundation. Today, I'm with Stephanie Jamenez. She is a research coordinator in our center for spinal cord injury and outcomes and assessment. Welcome to the show, Stephanie.

STEPHANIE JAMENEZ: 00:18 Thank you for having me, Joan.

BANKS-SMITH: 00:20 I've known you for a little while. A few years back, you came to the foundation. You had your undergraduate degree. And you worked for us for a few years. So in 2017, you went back to school for your master's, full-time, and worked part-time for the foundation. And what did you get your graduate degree in?

JAMENEZ: 00:40 I got my graduate degree in social work from the New York University.

BANKS-SMITH: 00:45 Has that degree in social work helped with your job here at the foundation?

JAMENEZ: 00:49 It actually has quite significantly. I didn't think it would have such a significance because we don't do really our research directly with patients or we don't interact with them directly in the studies that I coordinate, but it actually has in the sense of focus groups. We've been doing a lot of focus groups with parents, patients, and clinicians. And I've had the opportunity to facilitate the patient focus group. So social work is a sense of feelings and emotions and how to speak comfortably through them. And I've been able to use my skill set in those focus groups.

BANKS-SMITH: 01:29 What is your role now as somebody who has a graduate degree?

JAMENEZ: 01:33 So my role now is a research coordinator.

BANKS-SMITH: 01:37 What does that role entail as a research coordinator?

JAMENEZ: 01:41 Typically, for the assessments and outcome research, I work with Amanda Botticello and John O'Neill, and we work on three studies. What it entails is managing the grants that we have received funding for and making sure that the research assistants, along with the interns, and everyone's on the same page of the project, of the project's time frame and deadline for specific data, as well as just coordinating, making the meetings, making sure everybody's on the same page, which is necessarily the most important thing about my job. And making sure that everyone's communicating their concerns, questions, or uncertainties about the project. There's a lot of moving factors in each project. In one project, we're recruiting over the phone, the other one, we're doing active focus groups, and then we have another study where we're constantly working with clinicians on how to analyze the data in a better way. Then the end result would be writing manuscripts and presenting the results in conferences and so forth. So just making sure that everything runs smoothly. So coordinating a lot of-- a lot of chasing people down and making sure that everyone's on the right page. Yeah.

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- BANKS-SMITH: 03:09 We have to make sure that we follow the protocols. That's for sure.
- JAMENEZ: 03:13 Yeah, absolutely. And the scientists are very busy people. They're constantly writing. They're constantly thinking and writing these grants. So there's a lot of balls in the air that they have to juggle. So I like to say that my role with Doctor John O'Neill and Doctor Amanda Botticello is making sure that all the balls are in the air, helping them, supporting them in their research grants.
- BANKS-SMITH: 03:41 What would you say is your favorite part of the job?
- JAMENEZ: 03:45 My favorite part of the job is guiding, is really guiding the research assistants, because I used to be one. I have a lot of insight on that role. And I like supervising and managing, but more in a way of a learning, like a mentor. That's how I see it. That's one of my favorite parts of the job, is when we get an intern. This semester, we have an intern from Montclair. And I've been able to really mentor her in the position and just help her achieve her learning objectives during her internship, and that's been pretty cool to be able to be a part of.
- BANKS-SMITH: 04:28 I just want to go back to your education. When you were at the foundation the first time, did that help prompt you to decide to go back to school for a graduate degree in social work?
- JAMENEZ: 04:40 Yes, it was actually one of the main factors that drove me to go back to school and get my master's. It was always a dream, but I never saw it as a goal. And here at the foundation, a lot of research assistants, I didn't know back then, but a lot of them start as an RA and then do a couple of years of experience so then they could go pursue a master's degree or a doctorate level degree. And the research assistants that were in my cohort at that time, they were all doing the same thing. So that motivated me, the environment and their influence motivated me to pursue a master's degree in social work. So it was about 5 of us, and 4 out of the 5 of us went off to get a master's degree and a doctorate degree. So that was really exciting, that I had the support of my colleagues at that time.
- BANKS-SMITH: 05:37 That's really good to hear because I know myself, the foundation really does give us the opportunity for higher education, also the opportunity to learn new skills, whether it be online or on the job. And that really has helped people move throughout the organization, I believe.
- JAMENEZ: 05:58 Yeah, correct. I think the same thing.
- BANKS-SMITH: 06:01 It really does make a difference in the work that we're able to produce to help people in the rehab world.
- JAMENEZ: 06:08 Right. I think the foundation strongly encourages everyone here to go a step further than where they're at. And I'm really thankful for my supervisor, Amanda, who really believes in higher education. And when I told her that I was interested in pursuing a master's degree, she was very supportive in that she worked with me in my internship hours, as long as we kept a good communication between one another. The whole department was super supportive of all of us pursuing a degree, whether we wanted

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to work here or just leave completely because we had a full load of courses and whatnot. They were all available, and I know we all left with an open door. Yeah, here I am again. I came back. I think God had a different plan for me. I specialize in hospice care and palliative care. But at that time, when I graduated, I had to get a certain certificate, a certain licensure. So I couldn't work on the job right away. So in that temporary time, I reached out. Amanda and I, we still have a nice relationship and we caught up with one another, and I told her what I was going through. I was working at a community college, but it wasn't really what I wanted to do and the environment wasn't where I wanted to be. I really didn't feel appreciated as an employee of the community college that I was working for. And I was doing college advisement. So Amanda saw it in my face that I was unhappy. So she offered a position and I said yes.

JAMENEZ: 08:01

And she was a bit apprehensive because she didn't want me to think that it would be like a step down from where I want to go. And I'm like, "Absolutely not. It's a research coordinator job. I love the foundation. I do feel appreciated as an employee at the foundation."

BANKS-SMITH: 08:17

How do you challenge yourself day to day?

JAMENEZ: 08:19

I love that question, because as a research assistant, we started the return to school study and that focused on patients at children's specialized hospital. So basically, a child who was well, 7, 8 years old. Let's say they had a traumatic spinal cord injury because they had a car accident. So now they're hospitalized for a month, two months, maybe six to seven months, and then once on this charge, they have to reintegrate into the community, but this time, they have an injury. This time, it's different. So this time, they may have to have accommodations or specific resources for their medical condition at school. So now they're working with the school district. And the return to school study started in 2014 and it was just a pilot study. We just wanted to know what happened to those patients that went back to school, what was that process like? And we were doing a lot of medical abstractions. When I came back, I heard that that study flourished a lot and that we were doing a phase two, which is the focus groups. And that has been my favorite study because I really have seen the trajectory of where the study has gone, from just like a grant to now data to now meeting some participants online during these focus groups and actually listening to their experience about going back to school. And it's pretty cool because not only are we interviewing the former patients of children's specialized hospital, but we're also interviewing parents that have gone through this return to school experience and the clinicians that also helped with the return to school experience.

JAMENEZ: 10:17

So we're no longer reading it on paper and seeing the medical abstraction, the medical record information. We're now listening to a person go through it. So that's been my favorite study with the return to school process. And it's been really nice to be a part of it because I've seen it unfold.

BANKS-SMITH: 10:37

Do you also do any tele studies?

JAMENEZ: 10:39

We do. So phase one, that is the first phase before the focus group phase. We do telephone consents, and basically for that study, we already have a list of participants

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because the hospital sends us their information. So what we do, we follow up on that information and we just ask the parent or older patient, who's 18 years or older, if we could use their information for data analysis.

BANKS-SMITH: 11:16

Well, that's good to know that there are tele studies that people can look into. We're going to just wrap this up. I have one last question for you. What motivates you to want to do the work that you're doing here?

JAMENEZ: 11:29

Helping people. Like I said, it may not be indirect help, a participant or patient in front of me where I'm doing therapy or anything like that. But it's still we're behind the scenes and we're helping connect or know what the discrepancy is between, for example, I'll stick to the return to school study, how can we help make that process a bit easier for both patient and parent and clinician as well? So research really digs deep into what that disconnect is. And then from there, hopefully doing an intervention or some type of a program where we can fill in the gap between going back to school from being hospitalized overnight. So necessarily what motivates me is I still get to help people in a different way. I get to hear people's stories and that really changes my day to day life. It gives me a different perspective, and I could teach others of what I've been taught here at Kessler.

BANKS-SMITH: 12:46

It's always nice to be able to see, and it may not be today or tomorrow, but how the work that we do here at the foundation does make a difference in people's lives.

JAMENEZ: 12:57

Right. Yeah. Exactly. It's not right away, but it is over time. And the best thing, Joan, about this is when we do the patient focus groups or parent focus groups or clinicians and we ask them, "Why did you want to volunteer?" And they say because they want to help. They want to help the community. They want to share their experience, and we give them a platform for them to do that and it's pretty awesome.

BANKS-SMITH: 13:25

Well, that's great. I wish you the very best as you continue your career here at Kessler Foundation.

JAMENEZ: 13:31

Thank you so much for your time and this has been great. Thank you.

BANKS-SMITH: 13:35

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