

LM 39 Workforce & Education Day Speaker Bios

*Thank you to our speakers for generously donating their time
and expertise to support Leadership Missoula*



Grace Decker, Strategic Collaboration Coordinator – Zero to Five Missoula County/ United Way Missoula County

Email: grace@missoulaunitedway.org

Grace Decker has been an early childhood educator and advocate in the Missoula area for almost thirty years.

As a teacher, nonprofit center director, classroom coach, and now as coordinator of the early childhood systems-change initiative Zero to Five Missoula County, Grace is committed to building a stronger community, now and in the future, by ensuring that all young children have a great start in life. In her current role she has launched several innovative programs that inform and connect services, empower parents, and strengthen the early care and education sector, including the Kindergarten Entry Assessment, the Parent Leadership Training Institute, the Early Learning Fellows, and Missoula Child Care Advantage. Since 2015, Grace has also served as an elected Trustee with Missoula County Public Schools. In her free time, she loves to camp, kayak, and enjoy Montana with her husband and 15-year-old son, and she also plays fiddle and sings with the band Cash for Junkers.

Please list any equipment needs (audio/visual) materials required for your presentation.

Missoula County Public Schools welcomes volunteers with many different interests and skill sets.

United Way of Missoula County hosts several large-scale volunteer days throughout the year.

Zero to Five Missoula County convenes working groups to address several project areas including parent empowerment and child care access.

Seth Bodnar, President – University of Montana

Email: jessica.shontz@mso.umt.edu

Seth Bodnar currently serves as the 19th president of the University of Montana. Since his arrival in 2018, he has focused on promoting inclusive prosperity through access to higher education, which has led to applicants to UM more than doubling, to the largest freshman class in 6 years, and to a student retention increase of nearly 7 percentage points. These efforts have also led to a 24% rise in Native American student enrollment and a 14-point improvement in Native American student retention. President Bodnar has expanded UM's educational opportunities to include more robust workforce development and career training programs that empower learners at all stages of their lives.

President Bodnar has also overseen the most successful private fundraising campaign in the history of UM, an increase in net tuition revenue, and the largest infrastructure overhaul in the history of the University. During this same period, the University of Montana reached the status of a Carnegie very high research activity (R1) university and topped over \$125 million in annual research expenditures.

President Bodnar is an innovative and collaborative leader who works tirelessly to make steady, tangible progress toward his vision for UM. His experience building effective teams has proven especially beneficial in strengthening UM's ability to deliver on its mission of fostering inclusive prosperity.

The son of two educators, President Bodnar believes in the power of higher education to transform lives and communities. He graduated first in his class from West Point, received both the Rhodes and Truman scholarships, and earned two graduate degrees from the University of Oxford. He served as an assistant professor in the Department of Social Sciences at West Point where he taught economics, published research on

economic development in conflict areas, mentored cadets applying for postgraduate scholarships and led field training courses on leadership.

Bodnar has had a distinguished military career, serving in the 101st Airborne Division and the U.S. Army's First Special Forces Group. As a member of the Army's elite Green Berets, he commanded a Special Forces detachment on multiple deployments around the world and later served as a special assistant to the Commanding General in Iraq. President Bodnar currently holds the rank of Lieutenant Colonel in the Montana National Guard.

Before joining the University of Montana, Bodnar was a senior executive at the General Electric Company. He served as GE Transportation's first-ever Chief Digital Officer and was the president of GE Transportation's Digital Solutions business, where he and his colleagues developed software and technology to optimize the global rail industry.

A compelling communicator and impressive thinker, Bodnar speaks at conferences globally and has been an invited speaker to the United States Congress on technology and innovation. He has written and spoken widely the role of higher education in both sustaining a healthy democracy and supporting our national security. He sees higher education as not only an engine for social mobility and economic growth but also a vital ingredient in our country's global competitiveness.

Bodnar's love for Montana bloomed while studying at Oxford, where he met fellow Rhodes Scholar and his future wife, Chelsea Elander, a fifth-generation Montanan and native of Missoula. Chelsea is a pediatrician and a graduate of Hellgate High School, MSU-Bozeman, Oxford, and Harvard Medical School. They have three children.

Brendan Brown, Director of Special Services - Hellgate Elementary School District

Email: brendanbrown633@gmail.com

Born and raised in Missoula, MT. Worked for 10 years for multiple organizations that supported adults with disabilities.

Began teaching in 2017 as a Special Education teacher at Hellgate Elementary.

Was hired as the Director of Special Services at Hellgate Elementary in 2021

Joined the Board at The Arc Western Montana in 2022

What speaker(s) inspire you? Steven Covey and Barack Obama

What Podcasts are you currently listening to? The Ringer–Bill Simmons

What book(s) are you currently reading? Aging with Grace by David Snowdon

Shelley Andres, Principal – Bonner Elementary School

Email: sandres@bonner.k12.mt.us

As the proud principal of Bonner Elementary School, Shelley Andres has built a track record of building a close-knit, family-like atmosphere that has led to strong recruitment, high retention, and growing academic success at this preK-8 school located in a former logging community. With high poverty, high special education enrollment, and a significant transient population, Andres has taken a relational, communicative, and collaborative approach to shoring up staff leadership and student wellbeing. A skilled fundraiser, Andres has secured funding to strengthen the school's early childhood and literacy foundations. In 2019, a \$1.25 million grant helped launch a transitional kindergarten program and implement school-wide professional development focused on reading literacy. This new preK classroom has served four year olds for the last four years, who have been shown to have an advantage over their peers in traditional kindergarten. Similarly, a statewide literacy grant allowed Andres to develop a new framework for literacy instruction at Bonner, which, after just one year of implementation, has yielded a 13 percent increase in students in Tier 1 and a 14 percent decrease in students in Tier 3. Andres takes great pride in growing the profession through networking and mentorship and is proud to have grown enrollment during her term as president in 2020-2021 of the MAEMSP (The Montana

Association of Elementary and Middle School Principals). She holds a B.A. in Elementary Education and an M.Ed. in Leadership from the University of Montana, as well as a Literacy Coordinator credential from the University of California Riverside. Andres was the President of SAM (School Administrators of Montana) in 2022-2023 and Montana's National Distinguished Principal in 2022. Andres is an active member of the Missoula FFA Alumni and she serves on the Evaro Community Center Board as the Vice Chair. Shelley and her husband Tom have been married for 33 years and have four children.

Stephanie Thennis, Principal – Sentinel High School

Email: sthennis@mcpsmt.org

Education - BA; Marketing, Central Washington University

MAEd; Secondary Education, University Phoenix

EdLd; University of Montana

Work History - LA Dodgers minor league systems;

Yakima, WA, Bakersfield, CA (4 years)

Milwaukee Brewers; Helena, MT 1996-1998 (3 years)

Education; Teacher, Helena High School,

Marketing, Small Business Management;

DECA (9 years) Principal, grades 4-8 Montana City, MT (5 years)

Principal, grades 9-12 PAL Alternative High School, Helena, MT (2 years)

Assistant Principal, grades 9-12 Helena High School, Helena, MT (6 years)

Assistant Principal/AD, grades 9-12 Sentinel High School, Missoula, MT (1 year)

Principal, grades 9-12 Sentinel High School, Missoula, MT (current)

Please list any volunteer opportunities within your organization or those you serve that may be available.

Career & Technical Education Advisory Board/Community Partners

Activities/Event Workers

Guest Speakers for variety of content areas

Paige Judnich, Senior Consultant Human Resources, Cascadia Management

Email: Paige@cascadiamg.com

Paige joined the Cascadia Management team as a Senior Consultant in 2020 to provide ad hoc HR support in partnership with the rest of the Cascadia team. Paige offers almost a decade in corporate Human Resources and Talent Acquisition. Her specialties include HR leadership training, HR infrastructure development and support, employee relations, and culture building.

Starting with her Bachelor of Arts in Communication Studies from the University of Puget Sound, Paige has always had a passion for effective and productive communication in the workplace. She provides expert guidance through difficult situations and offers accessible frameworks for her clients to use for future situations.

Paige has provided HR support to Montana businesses since 2003 and is proud to raise her two daughters with her husband in Missoula.

When Paige isn't supporting clients; she can be found running her two kids around town, substitute teaching, walking her dog around the neighborhood, or coordinating her church's youth group.

Rex W. Balentine, Safety Director - Jones Brothers Trucking

Email: rex@jonesbrotherstrucking.com

Born and raised on an island off the SE coast of Georgia. At 23 yrs. old (2001) accepted a job with Jones Brothers Trucking, as a driver. Spent 10 yrs. transporting freight and began learning trucking from the ground up with a total of 1.7 accident-free miles. Transitioned to driver trainer in 2011 and began learning the "behind

the curtain” day to day operations of a fleet. Accepted the position of Fleet Safety Director (2017) at which point I began to need to educate myself more, read more, ask more questions, and work smarter.

*Meet my wife in 2005, while she was attending classes at UM

*Married in 2011

*Two Children (15 daughter / 9 yr little man)

*My family enjoys Judo, Taekwondo, Jujitsu, board/card games

*Bought our home up Skalkaho in 2013

Laura Marshall, Blackfoot Communications – CSKT

Email: lmarschall@blackfoot.com

Laura Marshall is the Vice President of Human Resources of Blackfoot. Mrs. Marshall joined Blackfoot in February 2002 as the Human Resources (HR) Manager and moved into an executive role in March 2016. Prior to joining Blackfoot, Mrs. Marshall’s experience includes working in labor relations for a Fortune 500 electric utility in northern Illinois and overseeing the Human Resources operations for the City of Billings (MT) and City of St. Charles (IL). Mrs. Marshall has over 38 years of HR experience. She has a Bachelor of Science degree in Business Administration from Valparaiso University (Indiana) and a Masters in Human Resources Management from Keller Graduate School of Management (Chicago).

Please list any volunteer opportunities within your organization or those you serve that may be available.

Treasurer – Missoula Kiwanis

Substitute driver for Meals on Wheels

Board Member – Montana Cooperative Development Center

Dave Zinke, Knife River, Mountain Region President

Email: dave.zinke@kniferiver.com

Dave is a native Montanan growing up in Whitefish and moving to Missoula after college. Dave is currently the Mountain Regional President for Knife River; and has worked for Knife River 23 years. Dave is a Montana State University graduate with a BS in Construction Engineering. Knife River is a national company with focus on aggregate materials supply; and is the 9th largest aggregate producer in the nation. Knife River services the community of Missoula with aggregates, ready mix and asphalt. Knife River believes in sustainability with recycling asphalt, concrete and using its waste oil products to reduce their carbon footprint. Dave’s wife Laurie is a teacher at Hellgate Highschool and has two grown daughters Libby and Lacey.

What speaker(s) inspire you? Lou Holts and Rob O’Neil

What book(s) are you currently reading? I like books that have characters that are in Black Ops.

Andrew Lowney, Pre-Employment Transition Services Specialist – Montana Vocational Rehabilitation

Email: alowney@mt.gov

Andrew has a Master of Science in Clinical Rehabilitation and Mental Health Counseling, as well as a CRC certification. Andrew has been with MT Vocational Rehabilitation since 6/2015, starting out as a general Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor, then shifting into the role as Pre-ETS Specialist for the Missoula Region. Andrew has experience working with students with various disabilities, as well as schools of all sizes. Andrew has assisted with various pre-ETS programs and projects in school settings, and out of school that have included partnerships with local businesses and providers. In his free time Andrew is a volunteer little league softball coach, and a coach for a local travel softball organization.

Please list any volunteer opportunities within your organization or those you serve that may be available.

Office administration

Internships