Brooke Blevins

For Dr. Brooke Blevins, assistant professor of curriculum and instruction in Baylor University's School of Education, life is a series of learning opportunities. She approaches her career with insatiable curiosity and willingness to learn from her students. At home Blevins puts her work aside and learns patience and joy from her children. Some of her most valuable learning lessons come from her husband, who works full time as a stay-at-home father. With help from her faith and her husband, Blevins is able to stay focused, balanced and committed to molding future teachers.

WACOAN: Where did you grow up and go to school?
Blevins: I grew up all over Texas. I was born in Huntsville and lived there until I was about 9, then moved to Pasadena for two years. Then we moved to Brenham for two years, then to the Dallas area, where I went to high school. My mom was a single mom who was in education, so we moved often as she advanced in her career. She began as a teacher and then moved into administration. She set an example for what it meant to be a woman with a career who put her family first.

WACOAN: Did you plan on going into education?
Blevins: I was one of those kids who lined up stuffed animals and taught them on a regular basis. I would corral all the neighborhood children and use my mom’s books to teach.
But before I went to college, I decided not to go into education. My mom was an assistant superintendent when I was in high school, and I knew I didn’t want to do that. My dad was a college professor at Sam Houston State University for more than 30 years. Then
Trinity University offered me a significant scholarship to study education, so that helped solidify my decision. Although I probably knew all along that this was the road I would take.

WACOAN: How did you meet your husband?

Blevins: I met Ben at a summer camp called [YMCA] Camp Grady Spruce [in Graford, Texas]. I'd worked at camp during high school and then again between my junior and senior year of college. While I had been gone, Ben had started working there. He was going to Oklahoma State University, so we had a long-distance relationship during our last year of college.

WACOAN: What does Ben do?

Blevins: He actually stays at home with our children. We have a reverse relationship, you could say.

WACOAN: Tell me more about that decision.

Blevins: There's a bit of a history behind that decision. I earned my master's and bachelor's at Trinity University. Then I got my teaching certificate as well as my degrees in education and economics. I decided to go back and get my Ph.D., and when I was accepted at the University of Texas at Austin, I thought I would take night classes. The school offered me a fellowship to come on full time, which was a financial opportunity difficult to pass up. So, I started the program as well as working part time for our church and the school. I commuted to Austin two days a week to do my graduate work.

WACOAN: Did you have your children while doing graduate work?

Blevins: We had our son in the beginning of the third year of my Ph.D. work, and that changed everything. That's when Ben and I decided that someone needed to stay at home. He was doing construction work then, and we both committed to me finishing the program. At that point, it was easiest for him to stay home.

We've often dealt with the question of why my husband stays home. It was interesting to see people's reaction when that choice was made. For us, it was a purposeful choice, and it works for our lives. Ben is an amazing father and is excellent at what he does. While it works for us, it doesn't work for everybody.

WACOAN: Why do you think this works for you and your family?

Blevins: I would not be able to do what I do outside the home without Ben's support. He is an outstanding father and a wonderful husband who has taught me so much about what it means to value your relationships.

Communication is key. After 11 years of marriage, we realized just how important it is to communicate in a way that honors each other.

Ben and I make a good team. When Ben and I made the choice for him to stay home, it was a difficult one and one that some people disagreed with. But my children are who they are due much in part to his parenting. So when I am at work, I never worry if my children are well cared for or if they are engaged and learning. This makes it so much easier to have a career and a family.

WACOAN: How do you and your husband share and balance responsibilities?

Blevins: Ben and I share our household responsibilities. For instance, I do the cooking, but he does the grocery shopping, I do the laundry, but he puts it up. I dust, clean the bathroom and kitchen and straighten, but he vacuums and mops. At night we share the bedtime duties. One of us will bathe the kids, the other will read to them.

Someone once told us that marriage is not 50-50; you each have to strive to give 100 percent. So, if one has a bad day or can't give their all, you are still getting it all done. Marriage takes work, and it means sacrificing. It means being a team with shared decision-making and shared responsibilities.

WACOAN: When did you and your family move to Waco?

Blevins: We moved here in August of 2011. When I came to Waco for a job interview, I fell in love with Baylor. We fell in love with the city, too.

WACOAN: What is your favorite part of living in Waco?
Blevins: It's a family-friendly town with great resources, like the Mayborn Museum and libraries. We thoroughly enjoy all of the resources for our family. And I love that we don't have traffic.

WACOAN: What does your job entail?
Blevins: I'm on a tenure track, which means my responsibilities are split between teaching and research. Each semester I teach two courses. Generally, I teach students who are studying to go into secondary school education (high school). I also teach graduate courses. I spend the other part of my time doing research, particularly in civics education. This is how we engage young people in their community.

WACOAN: What have you learned from your research?
Blevins: Two years ago, we implemented a program with Waco ISD called iCivics. It's an online civics education course that was founded by Justice Sandra Day O'Connor. We introduced these programs to different schools for six weeks at a time. Justice O'Connor came to Baylor [in April 2012], and we were able to present our research symposium. The program is all about helping students learn about civics and become engaged.

Since then, we've hosted iEngage Civics Camp in the summer. We teach [fifth through ninth grade] students what it means to be involved in the community. Students pick an issue in the community and research it, so they see that they have a voice and can make a difference. That has been a big, fun undertaking.

Research shows that this type of exposure to civics education makes them want to be engaged in their community. It's amazing to see young people think about what it means to be civically involved beyond voting. They're thinking about the challenges in Waco and how to restore the city itself. Last year, we focused on national issues. This summer, the focus is on Waco.

WACOAN: Describe your experience at Baylor.
Blevins: I have loved Baylor. I have no desire to go anywhere else. Having come from UT, a non-faith-based institution, I
find it amazing to have colleagues who care about what you’re doing. They are collaborative and collegial. You don’t find that in a lot of institutions, but it’s the standard at Baylor. Family is valued at Baylor, too. You don’t find that in a lot of higher education institutions. Here, there is a value on faith, family and being a community.

**WACOAN:** What is the best part of working with future teachers?

**Blevins:** Teaching is a calling, and teaching teachers is a calling. I believe Jesus and the way he taught his disciples was an awesome example of what it means to be a teacher. He asked a lot of questions and presented hands-on scenarios. He centered his instruction around his disciples, his students. I hope I model that in my classroom.

Good teaching practice means putting students first and developing relationships with them. Teaching is thinking about students’ role in an ever-changing world and how our teaching can impact that. I think about helping students understand the importance of their calling but also giving them skills to be successful in responding to that calling.

**WACOAN:** From your own education, how do you think Baylor differs from other schools?

**Blevins:** Trinity University is a small liberal arts institution, so professors know your name. I lived on campus all four years.

At UT it was a totally different experience for me. I encountered people who were super intelligent, but it’s not a place that you see people balancing work and family. Out of all of the females I worked with, only one was married and none had children. I didn’t see people who were married and had a family. Fortunately, my chair, although she was not married or a mother, encouraged me to have a family. She told me she was sorry she missed that in her life and supported me.

At Baylor, family is an important part of what we all do. I had my second child the very beginning of my second year at Baylor. I had her the day after class started in August. At Baylor I was
at a place where my colleagues threw me a shower, and they were excited for me.

WACOAN: In your experience as a student and a teacher, how have you seen the field of education change?

Blevins: We have seen a change caused by several different things, especially by the No Child Left Behind Act. That’s been my reality for the past few years. It’s changed what we do in schools. Students are preparing for a test that, in my opinion, doesn’t indicate how much they know. But I think we’ve seen a pendulum swing of people starting to resist these tests. People are saying that test scores are not indicative of a student’s learning.

With standardized tests, civics education is pushed to the side. Students aren’t learning what it means to be good citizens, which is what education was established for, because we’re spending time testing math and reading.

However, there has been a change. At Baylor, we are committed to creating teachers who are agents of change. Our students can say, ’We are going to take this test at the end of the year. But if I teach you in an instructive way and give you hands-on activities, you will do well without test prep.’ It’s my hope that teachers can do that. There is a big voice saying, ’This is not the way to do education. It has to be different.’

WACOAN: Aside from the curriculum, what do you hope to teach your students?

Blevins: I hope that I model to my students what it means to care about doing good work, but also prioritize faith and family. I can model that by always having an open door and by sharing my own experiences with them. Teaching is about more than transmitting the content — it’s about investing in relationships.

I also want them to understand that every student matters, even if they come from a background different from their own. I want them to recognize that if a child doesn’t look like you or come from the same place, they are still valuable.

WACOAN: What have your students taught you?

Blevins: They continue to inform my
passion for doing what I do. They have the energy and enthusiasm that you sometimes lack in the education field. They want to go into the classroom and change something. It's great to see this because if you've been in education for a while, you can become cynical.

They teach me what it means to be passionate, invested and excited. And they teach me how to have a passion and pursue it with your whole heart. Sometimes they remind me what my own children will face when they enter college. I think about how I talk to my children now and how I can prepare them for college.

**WACOAN:** Tell me about your children. What are their ages?

**Blevins:** We have Elisha, who we call Eli. He will be 5 in September. My daughter's name is Adiya, and we call her Adi. She will be 2 years old this month. Hopefully, we will have more children someday.

**WACOAN:** Where does Eli go to school?

**Blevins:** Eli will be at Waco Montessori School. This past year, he was at Wooded Acres Montessori School three days a week. He loved it and thrived there. I love the Montessori school of education, and I think this is how school should be.

**WACOAN:** What principles do you try to teach your children?

**Blevins:** The biggest statement in our house is, 'Love God and love others.' We try to instill kindness and respect. We talk about sharing a lot and what it means to be caring.

Our son's name means 'God saves.' Adiya means 'treasure of God,' and her middle name is Grace. We try to try help our kids live out what their names mean. We prayed that Eli would have a heart for God and others, and he is the most compassionate child. We hope Adi will show the world the beauty of God's grace.

**WACOAN:** What do your children teach you?

**Blevins:** Patience and what it means to be in the moment. Eli will hug his sister when she is upset. They truly love each other. They also teach us what it
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means to be happy and excited about little things in life.

WACOAN: How has your background in education affected you as a mother?

Blevins: I see the importance of doing things early. Early literacy is the biggest indicator of how your child will do in life. Research traces third grade reading levels to how many prison cells the state will need. Reading early is incredibly important.

WACOAN: What is your advice to fellow mothers of toddlers?

Blevins: I am not sure I am someone who should be giving advice. I think those of us with toddlers are working to figure this whole thing out. Parenting is a growth process, a process of learning with and about your children. They aren’t all the same, so what works for one family may not work for another.

I think the key is spending time with your kids, really trying to understand who they are. In doing so, I think we uncover the nuances of our children and are better able to understand how to parent them in a way that makes sense for them.

Finally, what I try to remember on a daily basis is to speak words of life, not words of death, over my children. This means when we talk to them or about them, we should always seek to be affirming, to help them understand they are deeply loved despite their mistakes.

WACOAN: With children and a career, how do you find balance?

Blevins: I have an amazing husband who is committed to our family and children. That is first and foremost how I can continue doing what I’m doing.

Also, my family comes first. If one of my children is sick, I will cancel class or find someone to fill in for me so I can take care of my family. I also work for an institution that values family, which is helpful. Family members are invited to [Baylor] events. Baylor has had a significant impact on our lives in that way.

Another way I find balance is not taking work home. I work when I’m at work — not at home. My kids deserve my full attention when I’m home, so I don’t take my computer home with me.
I’ll work at home one night a week, usually on Sunday evening, to prepare for the week. Most of the time I try not to work while I’m home with my family.

I also try to work a half-day on Friday or not at all on that day because I teach night classes. Friday is my day at home to catch up with my family and spend one-on-one time with my children. This way, I can spend more time with them during the weekend instead of doing chores and catching up on things I can do on Friday.

WACOAN: How do you make time for your husband?

Blevins: We put our kids to bed early and share that time together. From about 7:30 to 10:30 p.m., we have our time together to watch shows or go on a walk. That’s when we can debrief the day together. And we try to share hobbies together. But we like our kids a lot, so we don’t spend a lot of time away from them.

WACOAN: How do you cope with stress?

Blevins: There are moments when I’m much more stressed than others. This is one part of my life where I rely on faith. I think I can do my best, but God has it under control. If I work diligently, I know everything will be OK.

I used to lie awake at night wondering if I could get everything done. Now, I pray each morning and think about what I need to do that day or month. When I make huge lists, I get overwhelmed. I need to think one day or one week at a time.

WACOAN: As a wife and mother, how do you make time for yourself?

Blevins: One thing I do is garden. My husband and I have had a garden for about eight years. When we built our new house, one of our first priorities was getting a garden built. We currently grow tomatoes, squash, peppers and herbs.

Gardening is therapeutic in a lot of ways. It’s an opportunity to get your hands dirty, to work hard and see the efforts of your labor. There’s nothing more peaceful than standing in the garden early in the morning or in the evening and hand-watering the plants.
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It’s also a great to see my kids exploring and ‘working’ in the garden. It’s a great opportunity to teach them about food production.

WACOAN: What are some other ways you ease stress?
Blevins: I also lead a small boot camp in my driveway two nights a week. I started that about a year and a half ago because I need the motivation and because it’s a great way to see friends and be healthy together.

It’s important to make time for friends. I just read an article about the need for girlfriends and why they are important. However, that takes an investment to nourish friendship and relationships.

WACOAN: What would you do with a free afternoon to yourself?
Blevins: Getting a pedicure is always something I enjoy. I love visiting shops in Waco, like Sironia and Spice. I also love to do crafts. Of course, I wouldn’t have time for all that in one afternoon.

WACOAN: You were involved with the Centering Pregnancy groups for Waco Center for Women’s Health. What are these groups?
Blevins: It’s a group approach to maternity care. About 10 women meet for monthly appointments together. We have a two-hour appointment each month that checks your belly size and everything else but also includes education. You talk about the labor process and discuss what you’re going through.

WACOAN: How did you get involved with the Centering program?
Blevins: My pregnancy and labor with Eli was awful, so I was terrified when I was pregnant with Adi. I knew I wanted a different birth experience, and I had friends who had used midwives associated with a doctor’s office. So, Adi was born with a midwife. I love this approach to pregnancy and the birth process.

WACOAN: Were you drawn to the educational aspect of the program?
Blevins: I look at everything as a learning opportunity. I’m the first to admit when I don’t know something, but I always want to learn.