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SPEAKERS

Chris, Michelle Vazquez



Chris 00:00

Welcome to the Autism Classroom Resources Podcast, the podcast for special educators who are looking for personal and professional development. I'm your host Dr. Christine Reeve. For more than 20 years, I've worn lots of hats in special education. But my real love is helping special educators like you. This podcast will give you tips and ways to implement research based practices in a practical way in your classroom, to make your job easier and more effective.



Chris 00:34

Welcome back to the Autism Classroom Resources podcast. I am Chris Reeve, and I am super excited for this episode because I think you're going to love it.



Chris 00:43

I am interviewing Michelle Vazquez who has 14 years of experience teaching special ed in Southern California. She was a special day class teacher with a combination of grades K through five and mild to moderate. And after 10 years of that she transitioned into her current position as a resource specialist teacher, working with students from TK to sixth grade. She's got her master's degree in Curriculum and Instruction. And I'm really excited about the perspective that she brings with her. She's had a lot of really great experiences, that she's going to share some tips about family relationships.



Chris 01:22

She's also the host of a top ranked podcast called Stepping into Special Education. And her mission is very much like mine, which is to help special education teachers with strategies and support. So I am very excited, we talk a lot about building relationships and working with

families. And she's got some great tips for how to make that relationship building be as positive as it can be. So let's get started.

C Chris 01:50

Welcome, Michelle, thank you so much for joining me today.

M Michelle Vazquez 01:54

Thank you so much, Chris, for having me on your show. Before I start, I just have to say that it is such an honor, that you asked me to be on your show. I have been following you. I know I've mentioned this to you before. But I've been following you for years, especially when I was teaching the upper grade, mild moderate autism class. And your resources are amazing. And I'm just so glad and just so privileged to be here. So thank you so much for inviting me, Chris.

C Chris 02:23

Thank you. I've been doing this longer than most. So tell me a little bit about what you're doing now. About your podcast and

M Michelle Vazquez 02:34

Yeah, so my podcast is called Stepping Into Special Education. And it's all about supporting special education teachers with any type of support or strategies that they need. And at first, I was really focusing on the newer teachers just getting into the field, you know, just not really knowing, you know, the ropes and everything, because I'm pretty sure, Chris, that you understand, when we first get into special education, it's kind of like, Here you go. You figure it out as you go.

M Michelle Vazquez 03:06

But some people are very fortunate to have some very supportive admin or supportive, a supportive team. But not everybody has that. So I just wanted to make sure that I support those teachers just going into the field. But what I'm noticing, as well is that, I'm having all kinds of different teachers from all kinds of experiences, even some admin, you know, that is in my audience now, which is awesome. And I had no idea how much people need so much of our support, you know, Chris.

M Michelle Vazquez 03:39

And so I just kind of have been mostly gearing it towards, you know, special ed teachers period, no matter what the experience that they may have, or whatnot. And so that's what my podcast is all about. And I'm so excited about it. I just started it actually just last about, it's almost

gonna be a year now. So it's been awesome, great experience, and everything. So I'm very excited about that.

C Chris 04:06

That's very great. I think we need as many voices in this area as we can get. Teachers need all the support that they can get. And I think it's been a hard really hard year for, few years, for all teachers. And I think for special ed, just because of the consistency that our students need and some of the problems that they present us with. It's it's been particularly rough. And you're right, I'm seeing the same thing. I'm seeing a lot of very varied backgrounds coming to the special ed area.

C Chris 04:38

I'm personally seeing a lot of folks who are doing this as kind of their second career and they're coming at it from a non traditional kind of education background. And so they also really need a lot of support and strategies and things like that. So I'm very, very excited to have you here and to have you sharing your experiences as well, because I think again, the more that we can share and support the special educators out there, the better.

M Michelle Vazquez 05:07

Exactly. And that's, that's so right. I am seeing a lot as well of educators coming in as their second career. I'm like, wow. And that's great, you know, to have people coming into our field, as a second career is huge. And you know, that they have those big hearts, and they want to help kids. And they, they know what they're getting into. So just making sure that we're supporting them, right is, is a big deal for me as well. So

C Chris 05:36

Yeah, that's great. So one of the things that we had talked about talking about that is a big one for me is communicating with families, and how we can build our relationships with families. Because, again, I think that piece of it sometimes is a piece that doesn't get covered in school. People don't prepare you for some of the situations you'll find yourself in with families. Even something as simple as this was not a good day, how do I convey that to the family? So do you have a way or a system or a strategy that you've used or that you find works well for you in communicating regularly with family? I believe that, that regular communication is so important, but it's also really hard, because, you know, we don't have all day to write a five page note home to every child in class. So I'd love to get your take on how you've addressed that in the past and what you think.

M Michelle Vazquez 06:36

Yeah, and before I jump right into that, I just wanted to let everybody know that, you know, my experiences, I know, you mentioned, I have been in the classroom for 14 years, have been a special day classroom, and resource specialist teacher right now. And majority of my

special day classroom, and resource specialist teacher right now. And majority of my experience is working with families in the low socio economic classrooms or communities. And so I mostly the demographics of my families are Latino American or African American. So just letting everybody know, that is where my background is coming from. So a lot of inner city kids. Yeah. And but I think a lot of the strategies that I'm about to talk about can be applied to anybody, you know, but just wanted to let everyone know, you know, where I'm coming from.

M

Michelle Vazquez 07:21

So definitely, I know, you're talking about systems and strategies that I do use, I feel that it's really important to make sure that we contact the parents first, as in just introducing yourself at the very beginning of the year. Either it can be when the child is being dropped off by their families, and just saying, Hi, just giving that handshake, that eye to eye contact, and just really genuinely showing that you are going to be their child's teacher, you know. You want to make that great first impression. If you can do it face to face, that will be awesome.

M

Michelle Vazquez 07:57

In other situations, you know, they're being dropped off by another family member. So what I would suggest, if at all possible, I know our special ed roster isn't very big compared to Gen Ed, from 10 students to maybe like 20 or so. So I would recommend at least the first couple of weeks taking the time to call each parent just to do a quick introduction. Like hey, you know, I'm Miss Vazquez, I'm going to be your child's teacher this year, especially when it's those new when they're just coming into your classroom for the first time.

M

Michelle Vazquez 08:32

You know, students that have been there in the past, you know, they know who you are. But it's still nice to just say like, Hey, it's a new year, you know, we're starting little Johnny's coming in as a third grader now so these are the expectations. This is the type of support I would love from you parents, you know, and just letting them know, all of that. And just creating that first impression in the beginning is so, so important. And you want to make sure you start off on the right foot.

M

Michelle Vazquez 08:59

I've also seen teachers do like an all about me type of newsletter that they like to do that you can create real quick and just send it home to your students at the end of the day. So the parents, hopefully they check their backpacks.

C

Chris 09:15

That is such a great idea though. You don't always realize that families don't know about your background or where you come from, we don't know.

M

Michelle Vazquez 09:25

Exactly. And especially those quick phone calls, you can only say so much. So having that quick All About Me Teacher letter would be great.

M

Michelle Vazquez 09:33

And also I do want to recommend, especially for the new students coming in, is to do like a quick background check as with the student as in, what is their living situation. You know, I have had parents that are single parents or their parents are working two to three jobs or I have the guardians are their grandparents. I have many kids that that are living with their grandparents. And I've also had students in the foster care system as well. So really getting that foundation first to make sure that you do that quick review of your student and their background and their living situation is key. And then you can check this, whether you know, within your child's IEP or maybe their student records as well.

C

Chris 10:19

That's a great idea.

M

Michelle Vazquez 10:20

And another thing that I really like to do, I've done this in the past, I need to do it more often, though, but what has been awesome is sending home a parent questionnaire, or some type of survey for the parent. And some of these questions can be, it's questions that are not pertaining to the IEP, you know, not the general standard that we always know about the student that we can easily grab off of their records.

M

Michelle Vazquez 10:20

But questions like, their likes, their dislikes, what are their favorite characters, you know, their favorite color. And that will give you the information as a teacher to know what key points to relate to the student. But not just that, the parent will genuinely feel like you really care about their kid. You know, it's like all they really want to know these little insight things about my child. So I think that's a really good way of really getting in, as well. And it'll benefit both parties for sure.

C

Chris 11:20

Yeah, that's a really great idea. I love that. What do you do when you need to contact a parent, and it's not so good news that you need to share with them? What tips do you have for that?

M

Michelle Vazquez 11:32

Yes, oh, this is like the dreaded phone call, right? That we are all sweating like, oh my god, we're more nervous about talking to the parent, if anything. But this is why I do want to go ahead and highlight again, you know how important it is to make sure that you introduce yourself to the parents first at the beginning of the year. Because you do not want that first phone call to be a negative one. You know, what kind of first impression will that be? Right?

M Michelle Vazquez 12:04

And also, it's important to make sure that, I know you talked about communication earlier, constant communication with the parents, but also, not just before this even ever happens, but giving positive phone calls to the parent, or a note or quick note like Hey, little Johnny did awesome today, or he does so good helping a friend today. You know, giving those little notes.

M Michelle Vazquez 12:30

I actually had great advice from one of my colleagues. And what she does is she says every week she tries to contact at least two parents per week to just give some positive words, you know?

C Chris 12:44

What a great idea.

M Michelle Vazquez 12:46

Yeah, just just two! It doesn't even have to be anything big, you know, like they got an award or anything like that. But like how I was saying, like, Hey, little Johnny helped their friend today, you know, pick up all their books off the floor. And I just want to commend, like, that's such a good character for your child to have. You know just feeling that. So when it does come time to call that parent with the not so good news, then this parent already feels that you're very supportive with them already. You know that that this teacher is not a bad teacher, they really not only see the bad things in my child, but also the good things.

M Michelle Vazquez 13:23

So when you do need to call that parent or guardian with not so good news, we have to make sure that we call that parent the same day.

C Chris 13:36

Very good point.

M

Michelle Vazquez 13:38

Yes, I always, I don't know who advised me that before, but it's always a good point to make sure you get to the parent first before the child does. Because you do not want an incident happening, and I know Chris, you know, being an admin yourself. Yeah, that if you make sure that you get to the parent first versus the other way around, little Johnny's gonna go back home, tell his parent or guardian the version of what he felt happened, right. And all of the sudden, the next day in your office you have Mama Bear Papa Bear knocking down your door, like what is happening? You already know, the irate parent happening coming in.

M

Michelle Vazquez 14:22

So I always try to make sure to make a point that we get to that parent first. Even if it's just leaving a quick message hey, please give me a quick phone call back I need to let you know about a situation that has happened. So they are they are more open to listening to you. Right.

M

Michelle Vazquez 14:40

And when you do talk to this parent, I do want to just advise too, make sure you just state the facts, not a lot of feeling words as much as you can, but put it in an empathetic way. Don't come at it, oh you know Johnny he did this and that. Because automatically, you're calling parents now you calling about their babies, right? Their child.

M

Michelle Vazquez 15:07

Parents are can be very defensive, right? Very defensive, their walls will go up and if you have that pointing the finger type of tone in your voice, or anything like that those defenses and walls will go straight up. But if you have that empathetic tone, just talking to them like you really care, you know, this is what happened. But, you know, parent, what can we do? Or maybe give them advice on if you could just helped me support, you know, Johnny, with maybe talking to him about the situation?

M

Michelle Vazquez 15:42

Or maybe they are the victim, maybe something happened with them? And just letting the parent know, Can you just speak to them for a little bit? And just giving them that that okay to be like, okay, it's okay for you to support us as well. Because I feel it's just so important.

M

Michelle Vazquez 16:00

And I do let parents know what I have those situations, because I do see, you know, some parents do get defensive still, I do let them know, in, you know, my 14 years of experience, what I've noticed is that when the school the teacher, the parents all communicate together, and we all work together, I only see the students skyrocket even more in their improvement in behavior, academics, you name it. And these parents and kids we're in sped now, they're not with us, just one year, they gonna be with us, minimum, two years, three years, I've had four

years. Students with me for so long. So you want to make sure right, that support is established. And the parents know that you are all on the same team, not against them. Right, but for them.

C Chris 16:54

Yeah, and I think going along with that, you make a really good point that you want to be empathetic. And you also want to avoid, I've had a lot of people come to me recently of teachers or people that they're meeting that are saying, you know, what are you going to do about it? It's like, well, he was in class, they're asking the parent, and it's making the parent feel like, if I could fix this behavior, I would have fixed it a long time ago.

M Michelle Vazquez 17:20

Oh, you mean the admin, the educators are asking the parents, what are they gonna do about it?

C Chris 17:25

Yeah, yeah. Okay. And they're not even, I don't know that they're really saying it that way. But when you were talking, it made me think of it because it, the parents do get so defensive. And I completely get it, like, I'm fine if you want to criticize me, but you know, criticize my best friend or my family, and you're going to hear from me. And it's the same kind of thing. And I think sometimes it's really easy for us to come across as, we're calling to tell you this, so you can fix it. And that's how parents sometimes take it.

C Chris 17:59

So I love the idea of really making sure that you're emphasizing that we're doing this as a team, and the empathy of hey, you know, it happens, we know it happens. We still love your kid, we're still excited for him to come back tomorrow. We just are trying to figure out, you know, if you have any suggestions about what we could do, these are some things we're thinking about trying. I think that's a really, really good point and a way to approach them, because I think these are just huge issues that are really hard. That and separating the emotion is another really big one, that's also really hard.

M Michelle Vazquez 18:36

Yes, yes. And we can't help it, you know, we're human, right? It's gonna happen, you know, the emotions are gonna happen. And going back to the suggestions, you know, asking the parents for suggestions, or giving your suggestions like, Hey, this is what I'm thinking for their consequence, right? Maybe I'm going to have them sit down for some type of activity, or have them go to another room when this activity is happening or something like that. Parent, what do you feel about that? You know, getting their input so they do feel like they're being a part of that decision making, right, and making them feel more that they're part of the team also.

C Chris 19:12

Yeah, I love that. I think that's a really good point. How do you work with families? Or what do you suggest for teachers? I know, especially in elementary school, but it happens even in middle and high school. A lot of our students come into special ed for the first time. Sometimes they're coming in as young kids, sometimes they're coming in a little bit older. So like, I work with a lot of individuals with autism, and often they don't get diagnosed, if they're on standards, until later in elementary, so suddenly, this kid is getting special ed services. And this is a new transition for the family.

C Chris 19:50

How do you work with families when the kids are just getting qualified or even during the qualification process, since you're working in a position where I'm sure you're probably involved with that with the kids that you're working with?

M Michelle Vazquez 20:02

Yes, I think being a resource specialist teacher has given me the opportunity to be working with the families, for sure, just coming in to special education just being introduced to it. And not only that, Chris, I don't think I told you, but I'm also the SIT coordinator, which is they call it different things across the nation, right, like SIT student intervention team, or maybe SST, the Student Support team, right? There's a lot of different names for it. So I have been the SIT coordinator at my school for the past two years.

M Michelle Vazquez 20:38

So I'm seeing those parents, I'm going into those meetings and seeing those parents and students that are still in Gen Ed, that the teachers possibly or the parent, maybe might be requesting, or maybe have some type of concern with the students academics or, or behavior that they feel that needs needs to be addressed.

M Michelle Vazquez 20:59

So going into that situation, I see all kinds of parents. I have parents that are completely in denial, completely. I have parents that are pushing to find out what is going on with their child, wondering, you know, they know something's going on, and they just need answers. And I have parents, when the student does actually qualify, the parents knew the entire time something was going on. But to officially hear those words, Chris, that your child is eligible, is huge for the families. It'll completely turn their world upside down.

M Michelle Vazquez 21:45

And it's so important to have a gauge on your parents to be like Okay, this, this, you can bring

And it's so important to have a gauge on your parents to be like, okay, this, this, you can bring the emotions in. But you know, how do I feel this parent will react if their child does qualify? Or if their child doesn't qualify? You know, either or. How do we feel the parent might react?

M Michelle Vazquez 22:06

So sometimes I have the parents that are in denial, or that just doesn't want to believe it. So I like to make sure that I have like a quick pre meeting. I know, sometimes it's called a staffing meeting, right before we feel that a parent, you know, might need extra support. Sometimes you do a quick meeting right before I just mentioned it before the meeting that, you know, this parent may come off, you know, angry or this parent might come off very emotional. So sometimes, sometimes we would bring in our school psychologist to make sure that all of their special ed questions are answered.

M Michelle Vazquez 22:44

I've had staffing meetings with we requested the program specialist or program coordinator to be there. Depending on the situation. Sometimes they have an advocate, right, they bring in, and we want to make sure that we do contact the school psychologist and higher up to make sure we're supported in that situation. So having them there has been huge.

M Michelle Vazquez 23:06

And also maybe you just need some admin backup with the general ed situation and also how they've seen the students transfer from Gen Ed to special ed. So having that. I've even had the school counselor come and attend the IEP meetings if it's okay, of course permission from everybody from higher up and the parent if it's okay, for extra personnel to be coming in. But whoever we feel that needs to be there that can answer more questions that we cannot. I think it's very supportive and great to have those extra people come in so the parents, whatever emotions that comes out at that meeting, at the end, you know, that they're getting their questions answered.

M Michelle Vazquez 23:48

I've had parents break down crying, you know, at the end, that something is they knew this was happening, or maybe it wasn't what they expected. But having those extra personnel or that extra information from whoever you need to talk to, to help guide this parent with what they need to do next is definitely very helpful. So that's what I would do. And if I do have a student coming in, for their first time, the first few years is really key for the parent, because a lot of the times at that first initial IEP meeting, there's so much information that's being thrown at them.

C Chris 24:30

Right.

M Michelle Vazquez 24:30

All the reports the cognitive levels or the deficits that your child has. This is all

C Chris 24:37

Just the jargon alone.

M Michelle Vazquez 24:39

Yes. Thank you! The things that we talk like me, and you would talk about with me it's a whole nother language, Chris. And just that alone is huge. And it's great when you have a school psychologist that is able to break things down a little bit more. But even if they do understand what's going on at that meeting. I don't care, Chris, you always have to make sure as the case carrier or special ed teacher, please do a follow up right after that meeting.

C Chris 25:11

Very good thought, yeah.

M Michelle Vazquez 25:13

You know, do a follow up almost 110% Every single time, I call a parent, like a couple days later, just to remind them, hey, you know, did you review the IEP or anything like that? Or do you have any questions about it? Do you want to come in? And, you know, let's sit down, if you have any questions. Every single time, they do have concerns like, Hey, I didn't understand, you know, when the psych was talking about this, or when the admin was talking about that every single time, they have way more questions.

M Michelle Vazquez 25:43

And it's just good for you, as the case carrier sped teacher, to be that extra support for the parents to help them guide through this thing called Special Education, which, just to have, just to have that supportive person to help guide them, especially the first few years, until they kind of get used to it. And then they learn how to educate themselves, or we educate them, that having that support would help them as well.

C Chris 26:08

And I think that's huge for their school career as well. I mean, I've, I've seen when those beginnings start off positively, and you've had people who build a positive relationship with the family, how much stronger that how how that gets you through some of the bumps that we all

are going to have, you know. There's always going to be a year where, you know, the teacher went on maternity leave, or, you know, things like that, that are just part of school, but sometimes they can be bumpy for our families.

C Chris 26:38

And when they've had someone like you've described, who can really build that positive relationship, and just takes that little extra time to do that, then they feel like they like the district is supportive. They're not as scared of things that are different, because it's hard, it's also hard when they have to then leave that first special ed teacher and go someplace, you know, go to the next grade, or whatever the next step is. So I think that's a really, really good point.

M Michelle Vazquez 27:07

I just wanted to mention, too, that, you know, I've had parents, I actually just had one recently and still have them right now that, you know, they came in, their child was already in sped, they came in as a second grader. And they completely did not like the school system, like from their past experience. And then coming in already having this idea of what school systems do, what how, you know, how we are being run and everything, they already have that guard up way before, you know, they even come into your classroom, you know. So slowly, it took years, it really did take years. But gaining that trust again, and breaking those walls down for the parent, I'm really, really happy to say that, you know, we're at a good place now. But being patient and just being that listening ear to the parent helps.

C Chris 28:00

Yeah, and that that really runs into kind of my next question, which was just how do we address families when they when they have had that bad previous experience, or, like I worked with a lot of preschoolers who came in and families had been told by their communities, oh, they're not going to do what they need to do for your child. And it's like, but you haven't even been here yet. Like you haven't even met us yet. And you already got those walls up. How do you make those relationships? How do you build that when they're coming from such a negative place?

M Michelle Vazquez 28:35

Well, we have students coming in, that's like you said, you know, just already had a bad experience with special ed, and they're coming in already with their child having an IEP, it's really great that we do have to do those 30 Day IEPs. When the student first comes in, right? So we can first establish everything that was happening or, you know, whatever information the parent has gotten.

M Michelle Vazquez 28:59

So having those 30 Day IEPs or even just having some type of conference, if you feel that the

So having those 30 Day IEP's or even just having some type of conference, if you feel that the parent is irate or upset. I got the best advice from my current admin. And what she has told me is that parents, they just need somebody to listen to them. They just need somebody to sympathize with them and just listen, because that's all they want is to be heard. You know, even if they're mad, screaming, let them do it. Let them do it.

C Chris 29:32

That's what most of us want, I think it's just to be heard.

M Michelle Vazquez 29:35

Yes, yes. And just let them get it out of their system, you know, even emotional crying, whatever, but they just need somebody for them to listen to them. So you know, try to get as much information as you can. I know, the past couple years I actually have been asked to be admin an admin designee so the very first time ever, so I have been in situations where I had to call, you know, parents with not so good news. And you know, I'm helping Gen Ed out, and I'm like, this is out of my element.

M Michelle Vazquez 30:09

So after contacting the parent, letting them talk, or maybe giving that information, just like how we were talking about earlier before, you know, just making them feel that they're being supported themselves, and just, you know, whatever information that you don't know what the answers are, please try to just take note of it, you know, I've had, even myself and I've had other educators or other people just be like, Oh, well, this is why what I assume is going to happen, you know, try not to do that, because you'll get yourself in trouble. Right? Or maybe get your school or admin, you know, in hot water, right?

M Michelle Vazquez 30:50

So whatever information that you don't know about, for sure, just let the parent know, you know, let me go ahead and take note of that. Let me talk to admin about it. As soon as I get to them, you know, I'll either have them give you a phone call, or I'll get the information and I'll get right back to you about that. So I think that's really important.

C Chris 31:08

Yeah, no, I think that's great. I think, you know, I've worked with a lot of families like that, because as a school consultant, my job was sometimes to come in because of that, you know, the school is way on one side, and the parents are way on the other side. So everything you said, fits exactly with that. And I think the comment you made earlier, too, about when you call home, really being able to separate your own emotions from the situation as much as possible. And it is very hard, because we all take our kids really seriously, and we take them to heart,

and we want what's best for them. But it's sometimes hard to step back and not like, really push. Sometimes we just need to give some space. And I like that idea of they really just want you to listen, and to feel like they've been heard. It's a really good point.

C Chris 31:59

Thank you so much for being here today. I think all that you have shared are really great messages for teachers to hear. Because I think working with families and building those relationships in the situation in which you're also dealing with that, you know, times 15, or 10 or 15 people. That's a big piece of what we do. But it's a really hard piece, because people don't always give a lot of information about that. So I really appreciate everything that you've shared.

C Chris 32:28

Where can the listeners find you because I know that they will be interested in your podcast and other things that you have to offer?

M Michelle Vazquez 32:35

Yes, definitely you can, you can find me on the podcast, it's entitled Stepping Into Special Education. My name is Michelle Vazquez, so you can go ahead and search that up on any platform, podcast platform, whatever is your favorite.

M Michelle Vazquez 32:49

Also, I do have a freebie that I'd like to share with your audience also. It's for special educators of course. It's an IEP meeting checklists before the meeting. So it's really quick, you know, those items that you sometimes forget, when those IEPs are coming up, this checklist is really good just for educators to make sure that you're going through these documents before that IEP meeting even happens.


M Michelle Vazquez 33:16

And I am I am in the works of creating a course right now. It's called IEP 101, from Understanding to IEP Organization, to help teachers just understand you know, what an IEP is, those basics, those foundational skills, and then how to organize that for the upcoming school year, especially if you're new or veteran teacher, this can help anybody. So I will give you the link for that to be on the waitlist, if anybody would like to be on that, too.


C Chris 33:45

Awesome. That's great. We will make sure that both of those go into our show notes as well as your podcast and where they can find you. So thank you so much for sharing your time and

your ideas. I'm a strong believer in the idea that we just gather up all the ideas, and then we find things that work in our specific situation. So I'm always open to more, more ideas. So thank you for sharing yours and sharing your experience. I really appreciate it.

 Michelle Vazquez 34:14

Yes, of course. And again. Thank you, Dr. Chris Reeve, for inviting me. I really, really appreciate your time and it's been an honor. Thank you.

 Chris 34:28

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