Bob: Hello and welcome to The Illinois Professional, a campaign created by Illinois Human Resources to showcase the diverse ways that employees carry out and support the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign mission. This university is a big place, can feel that way many times. That is why it's so special when a certain someone can help turn a department from colleagues to family. I'm Bob Dignan. And in this episode, we'll get to know Lana Holben who received that high praise from those around her as she was awarded the 2020 Chancellors Distinguished Staff Award. The award is designed to annually recognize civil service staff employees for their exceptional accomplishments and service to the university. Through this program, outstanding performance is encouraged in all civil service staff employees as they strive to win this prestigious award. Enjoy a few minutes in the world of Lana.

Bob: Lana, Thank you so much for joining the podcast.

Lana: Thank you for having me.

Bob: So we're going to be diving into all things you, because you won an award. Congratulations, pretty exciting. Do remember what it was like when you found out that you won the award?

Lana: I was very honored. It was very welcome. But I was just sitting at my desk working and got the phone call that I had won the award. I was notified that I was nominated via email.

Bob: And so could you maybe describe what you do and then also how long been working at the university?

Lana: So I am an administrative aid in the Department of Geology and the School of Earth, Society, and Environment. And I support students, faculty, and other staff within both of those areas. And I serve as the Assistant to the head of Geology and the Assistant to the Director of the School of Earth Society and Environment. And I have been at the university for almost 11 years now.

Bob: Whoo-hoo, that's like the same amount as me as staff.

Lana: Yay.

Bob: That's great. So I got to imagine because I'm from LAS, So I know a little bit about some of those departments. There's quite a bit of activity like different things that go on there. I know geology, they're scheduling all sorts of field trips all over the world in some cases. And I'm sure you play a role in making some of that happened and samples like coming back to the building, you had the Natural History Building go through a remodel?

Lana: Yes. We're super excited to be in this renovated building. We were out for about five years while they were renovating it and then got to move back in. And we've been back here, all of us within the School of our society and environment. It was the first time we were in the same building. Previously, we'd been in other separate buildings, so we're enjoying being together.

Bob: You were saying earlier that you interface with students to work with students.

Lana: So I work with students from the time they are prospective students until they graduate. And then beyond. So i, whether it's undergraduate students that are here visiting with their families, just kind of checking out the department or the school. Or if they're graduate students that are looking to
apply here, I start kind of working with them, even sometimes prior to them submitting their application. And then once the students are here, I work with them whether its course scheduling, build the class schedule each year we take into account all the different field trips and where they're going and try to make sure things don't overlap. And because we have students that are taking multiple courses that have, all have field trips. So, but yeah, we, every year we tend to have an international trip. So that's always fun to the students and faculty. Lots of preparation.

Bob: Where do students coming through those programs typically go on these field trips where they're doing science out in the field.

Lana: So normally are international trips that go to cyprus, ireland, Steve Marshak used to lead one to Death Valley in Arizona. So and I believe Scotland as well, they have a lot of fun.

Bob: I had a colleague of mine went with Bruce Fouke who has kind of cross appointments up to the Arctic Circle for an excursion up there. So that was that was extreme. We've been with him alone, Bruce alone, we've been to Svalbard, Yellowstone, and Curaçao.

Lana: Yup And that that was the other one. Curaçao was the other one I neglected to mention.

Bob: 11 years That's got me thinking is we're asking around what kind of excites you and keeps you engaged, working in your role. And also like, how do you see your role fitting into the, the mission here at the university?

Lana: Well, definitely I think my role fits into the mission at the University by just, you know, helping students, whether it's finding a classroom or trying to get access to a lab, or a whole host of things that we do to help students just on a day-to-day basis, that we don't even realize that we're helping them. Just being a resource for them. Whether they're needing access to resources here on campus or within the community. That, that is what I really enjoy most about my job. The students have given me a name they call me the Geology Mom. And I it's very much a term of endearment for me. I take the title very seriously and love that part of my job.

Bob: Aw that's great. Didn't realize I was talking to the Geology Mom, that's awesome.

Lana: Yeah. So it's in one of our students started it started as like the Geo-Mom and then it morphed into Geology Mom. And for me, it's so important that students know that I'm here for them, whether it's related to academics and their experience in our classes. Or if it's just that they need to know where a particular restaurant is or what's something that's fun to do in the community. I tried to get to know them and find out what their interests are and then connect them with other students that maybe have the same interest or something like that.

Bob: That's great. That sounds like you're out there helping students on the front lines, especially like finding a classroom. But then you're also behind the scenes laying out that schedule, making sure all of your students and majors and minors are all taken care of and they can go through that. So I kind of like hits all the spectrum. So it sounds like you do quite a bit of different things.

Lana: I do. One of the things that I do previously I was talking about from the time of admission until graduation, are graduate students. I work with them all the way up until they deposit their dissertation or thesis. I format check that. I'm so honored to be just a little part of that.
Bob: That finish line work is always very rewarding to see people cross. That's excellent. So why did you end up wanting to work at the university?

Lana: Well, I'd always heard really great things about the university just in terms of the work environments and the opportunities for advancement. And, you know, as far as learning new skills. And I just always heard really great things about it. And I have some friends that had worked here as well as family members too. So that's why I decided to apply.

Bob: Excellent. Well and as you described, can you fit right into the big mission and how students kinda play a role there. I'm wondering, we've been asking people how you would describe if you could think of a day that you felt kinda most proud to be a professional working at the University of Illinois. Can you think of one?

Lana: Sure. I can. So my favorite day each year is when we celebrate convocation on commencement weekend. So that's our own school ceremony where we get to acknowledge each student who's graduating, whether it's bachelors, masters, or PhD. And, you know, they, they're seated on stage and their families are in the audience and it's just such an important day for them and for their families. And again, you know, I'm just so honored that I get to be such a little part of their big experience here on campus and and their day, you know, there's there's just my favorite day of the year.

Bob: Yeah, I really like that time too, and I was with quite saddened that it had to be so different this past May. I don't know if you guys try like an online version or?

Lana: We did. We actually so normally I coordinate our on-campus ceremony. So, this year, we, instead of having one big ceremony for our school, we had department ceremonies. So, I got to coordinate two of them. And yeah, it was different. But we gleaned some information from that that we can actually take to our campus ceremony, hopefully the spring, and maybe use a little parts of that. We had students submitting videos, we had family members submitting videos. So, it was a really great way to hopefully incorporate some new things into our on campus ceremony as a result of the COVID.

Bob: Yeah. Yeah, I know that sounds like an excellent spirit of problem-solving and being creative and not just, you know, this is yours, a throwaway. And it sounded like some special things came out of it that can keep being special into the future and they don't have to be relegated to you know, that weird 2020 year.

Lana: Right. No we, we, we were able to do some really unique things. I think one example is we actually set up Zoom Rooms for, or Zoom meetings for each of our graduates. And then it allowed the faculty and staff and current students to hop into everybody's room and congratulate them and meet their parents. And so that was really cool.

Bob: Yeah, that's a nice way and it's virtually, it's impossible to do in real life like an orderly way. So virtual kinda makes, makes it possible. That's great. Anything else you'd like to add just about your role in the school or what you're reflecting on now that you have this award after 11 years?

Lana: Well, I just, you know, one of the things that I really like and like I said before, I get to work with students when they're prospective all the way through graduation and then they become alumni. And so we still get to maintain our connection and relationship. It's just different because they're not
students and now their alumni, but they’re still part of our family and they forever will be. So I've really enjoyed that since I've been here so long now some of our students, I've watched them go through their whole schooling and now they're alum's and I get to still continue to communicate with them and work with them.

Bob: So you're still their geology mom, even after they leave.

Lana: That's right. That's right.

Bob: Well, that’s great because having done a little bit of my work with geology in the past, I know geology is going to be around them. That that work is going to be around them for the rest of their lives.

Lana: Absolutely!

Bob: Unless, I don't know, they're in the vacuum of space without any actual earth around them. So, yeah, thank you so much for taking some time to chat with us and tell us about what you do there in the school and for geology.

Lana: Well, thank you. I appreciate your time.

Bob: Thanks for listening to this episode of the Illinois professional. If interested in nominating someone for a campus staff award. There's a link in the description with more information. And be sure to follow @IllinoisHR on Twitter for informational and inspirational posts.