

Season 5, Episode 5: A Journey of Paper and Perseverance

Host: ESF President Joanie Mahoney

Guest: Isabel Valentín and Savannah Wright

Savannah Wright: I am human and as an individual, what can I do in my daily life to view a

disability in a new light or to help with the advocacy component? How are my

behaviors possibly harmful to that community?

Isabel Valentín: A lot of universities in high-income institutions, they go to places, they send

researchers. The researchers get a nice research paper out of it. But they do not

create long-term engagements or relationships with these places, very

vulnerable places, and communities they're engaging with.

Savannah Wright: I really think too that for any global issue, community and unity is always going

to be the answer.

Isabel Valentín: If all else fails and we are not successful in stopping what's coming, I don't want

to say that I spent the last time before that period comes filled with dread and

not hoping that our community can do the best things possible.

Joanie Mahoney: Welcome to season five of Campus Conversations: The Podcast. I'm Joanie

Mahoney and I have the honor of serving as SUNY ESF president. ESF is a small college with big ideas. This season, I'm speaking with faculty, students, and staff who make ESF mighty, the people working to improve our world and sustain the

environment.

I'm excited to welcome two ESF students today, Isabel Valentín and Savannah Wright. Isabel is a senior pursuing her degree in environmental studies with a

concentration in environmental policy planning and law. Savannah jpolwt TJET@0.00000912 0 61



molded my mindset as to how I'm going to tackle climate change or social-cultural issues, or all of those other big, big questions that we're trying to answer here at ESF.

Joanie Mahoney: I appreciate that. Savannah, for you, it was something that happened along the



whether they're public or private homes. Then also the protocol that surrounds that, really like how are we viewing disability and how are we creating this universal design that is optimal for people of all walks of life and all sorts of access?

Joanie Mahoney: So you're referring then to disabilities that might not be obvious to people

walking past you on the street?

Savannah Wright: Yup.

Joanie Mahoney: They are disabilities no less or challenges for folks. How can you design

landscapes that can be healing or calming?

Savannah Wright: Yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: What is the word that I want to say?

Savannah Wright: I want to say moldable, because we want to build spaces that can accommodate

the most amount of people with one design. So typically what I mean when I speak about a lens of disability in these public environments is if you see a ramp, a lot of times people will assume that, oh, it's for someone who uses a

wheelchair.

However, if you design a ramp the right way, it's also accommodating strollers. It's accommodating bikes and canes or people that are carrying really heavy stuff that can't go upstairs. So it's for everybody, it's not just pertaining to the disabled community. So when we can start to shift our spaces and the way that we design things, we start to accommodate vone unintenonally with one

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Isabel Valentín: Yeah, we were at a meeting.

Savannah Wright: But right before, we met with her and went over what we were working on. She

was like, "Mental health and disability. This is all really interesting related to climate change." So she ended up reaching out to me after I followed her and

we've been in touch, just supporting each other from afar, but-

Joanie Mahoney: I love that.

Savannah Wright: Yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: She wrote the book The Climate Optimist.

Savannah Wright: Yeah, fantastic.

Joanie Mahoney: It goes to what Isabel was just talking about. I also hear from students, and you

can let me know if this is the case for you, but coming to a place like ESF where the generations ahead of you have been doing this work for some students has been really reassuring, because the general, easy talking point was no one did anything and now your generation is left to clean all of this up. But you come to ESF and you find out there are people that have spent their entire professional careers doing the work that now the whole world is realizing is necessary to solve these problems. It created for them a sense of hope to be in a place like

this.

Savannah Wright: Yeah. I really think too that for any global issue, community and unity is always

going to be the answer. It's one thing to say I have this very valid fear, but then to turn the fear into something and rally the troops, as I like to call it, is you're going to attract more bees with honey than you will with water. And so, to bring that hope to the table and approach it from a different lens, I think, is long-term going to get more people on board with the work that we're doing and just be

more beneficial for promising outcomes.

Isabel Valentín: Yeah, right. Whereas when we've started, I ... Honestly, the reason I'm this

hopeful is because I believe in the power and the unity of our frontline communities, of marginalized communities, of our elders, all people that predeceased us that did this work and can teach us about it. So I find that being in a place where people have always been doing this work and are willing to teach it to you in such an accessible way, it really has changed the way I want to teach and the way I want to educate other people about what's happening.

Joanie Mahoney: So here at ESF, you're surrounded by people that are passionate about this topic

and working on these things. But outside of here, growing up, I guess, Isabel, it's different for you in Puerto Rico than it is for you in Rochester where the effects are a little bit more distant. But is it true that this is front of mind for young



people no matter where they are? Have young people really tuned into issues about the environment and climate change?

Savannah Wright:

I think it's hard because the direct divide that I've seen correlates to political beliefs. And so, I feel like that very polarized view of things is making it really challenging to sway people or get them on board with whatever action we're trying to take. But I do think especially in people my age, many of us, if not the majority of us, are leaning towards, okay, we're facing a problem and now we have to do something about it.

For the most part, people, especially at ESF, are some of the most eager to learn people that I've ever met, and our students are never afraid to stand up and say something-

Joanie Mahoney: I've seen that.

Savannah Wright: ... and I love that.

Joanie Mahoney: I love it, too. Yes.

Savannah Wright: It's like the passion that we bring is what inspires other people to come here.

And so, I think this is a really good place to start with any sort of action because you very easily get a community of, what is it, 2,800 people that we have here, something along those lines. You get a pretty large community of people that

have your back. And so, yeah.

Isabel Valentín: Growing up in Puerto Rico is definitely a very different experience that has very

tangible effects. Even the most conservative of people, the people whose political belief in party politics, do not engage at all with a general perspective of

people that agree with climate change or disagree with climate change.

I'd say that most people in Puerto Rico have some sort of awareness of what's going on. There have been so many hurricanes in the past couple of years, the rapid escalation of natural disasters, their intensity, their length, how often they're happening. No one can deny that it's real. If you're living it, there's

nothing else to say.

But I would say that the youth has mobilized substantially in Puerto Rico, but nowhere near enough. It's not really because people don't believe in it, because they don't believe that they can do change. I just find that, especially ... I don't know if this is your experience, Savannah, but in Puerto Rico, there's just this



Joanie Mahoney: I find that easily believed because you're a small island in the ocean. For young

people growing up and just experiencing disaster after disaster, threat after threat, because you hear about the hurricanes coming, some hit, some don't. But you're constantly in this fear. I get how that leads to the hopelessness there-

Isabel Valentín: Yeah ...

Joanie Mahoney: ... that would be very different than Savannah and I have growing up in central

New York, which is a place that is less likely to feel those effects. I hope it's not going to take everybody experiencing what Puerto Ricans have experienced for the bells to be rung and for people to all coalesce around leadership that's going

to get us out of this.

Isabel Valentín: Well, I would say the bells have been rung long ago, and the problem is that

there's not an alarm going off, kind of how it sounds like in my head is just the constant fire drill alarm from high school. It's just like it's always there. It's

happening. It's bap, bap, bap-

Savannah Wright: Mm-hmm. Nothing ahead.

Isabel Valentín: ... nothing I can do about it. But I've learned to balance it out with the other

sounds because I find that students need to feel like they're helpful. Everyone needs to feel like they're helpful. Everyone needs to feel like their work is making an impact, which is why it's so important in local organizing,

international organizing, community organizing for people to find out what their

goals are when it comes to organizing what they want to help in, g0 G[5(n)4la G[5(n)4lW*30 1 180



time I've been posed questions or new thoughts, it's like I will take those thoughts, I will think about them, and I'll weigh it out. If I'm presented with enough facts and enough scientific information, yeah, I'll change my mind.

Joanie Mahoney: Exactly.

Savannah Wright: It's okay to change your mind.

Joanie Mahoney: That is such a wonderful thing for you to say. It is so disappointing. You can

predict what so many of our elected officials are going to say because that's the

team they're on and that's the team line.

Isabel Valentín: Yeah. Something that definitely adds to that is the creation of social media and

the engage ... The levels of engagement that people are reaching with each other right now has become substantially limited by access to social media by COVID 2020 and so many other factors. I feel like that adds into this echo chamber that everyone's in, where the information that they know and the ideas that they have just keep being repeated back to them from different sources. So people not only have these, excuse me, whack opinions, but they

also feel incredibly validated in them.

Joanie Mahoney:



liberal and the belief's geared more towards supporting action against climate

change.

Isabel Valentín: That's really interesting when you think about the infrastructure.

Savannah Wright: Yeah, graphic location has a large impact, at least where I'm from, about

people's views. But I also went to school in Canada as well for a bit, and



Savannah Wright: Yeah.



It never develops into something tangible that benefits people's quality of life. So it really is a drain. It's an energy drain. It's a time drain. It's a resources drain.

When I came to SUNY ESF, I found, while I was researching for other classes, that a lot of universities and high-income institutions tend to do the same. They go to places, they send researchers, the researchers get a nice research paper out of it, but they do not create long-term engagements or relationships with these places, very vulnerable places, and communities they're engaging with.

So my thesis is about creating a set of guidelines for the educators that are traveling to these different places to do their research, be it on climate change, be it on any other topic that they should follow in order to a model to that sense.

Joanie Mahoney: Oh, I absolutely love that idea. You and I just spent time together in Puerto Rico.

Isabel Valentín: Yeah.

Savannah Wright: It was very applicable.

Joanie Mahoney: Yes. We had an opportunity to hear from some students who had gone to

school in Viegues-



Isabel Valentín: And there's unbiased ... There's hidden biases, subconscious biases, that affect

every researcher that they also need to unpack. There are so many factors.

Joanie Mahoney: There's also the reception that the next researcher is going to get and what





Savannah Wright: No, I didn't either.

Joanie Mahoney: ... that, as Isabel just pointed out-

Savannah Wright: Yeah.

Isabel Valentín: [inaudible 00:32:56].

Joanie Mahoney: ... your goal is to teach people.

Savannah Wright: Yeah, it's a change theory. It's like a-

Isabel Valentín: But unintentional, harmful methods of conscious bias. We're really on the same

topic, just different sides of the spectrum.

Savannah Wright: Yeah. We talked about that in our debrief before. It was like we're essentially

doing the same thing for particularly minority communities. It's difficult because people will say that, "Well, we've already had the ADA laws and landscape

architecture has already been involved in that."

You could build the most inclusive, beautiful, accessible design outside of a building, but if the protocol that's taking place inside of those buildings, or those spaces, or the way that they view disability is still operating under a harmful model, that's pointless. Nothing's accessible about it because the people who need the access that are visiting these spaces are still engaging socially in

conversation.

Disability doesn't just exist in physical space. It doesn't just exist in a doorway or on a stair. It exists in conversations and it exists in protocol and stories and experiences. So in order to be able to be progressive as a field of landscape architecture, somebody has to make that sacrifice and say, "Hey, we can't do what we're supposed to do to make things accessible until you all shift your lens

and start changing these protocols."

Joanie Mahoney: If you rewind the clock 30 years ago or so to when the ADA came into being,

there was probably someone similarly situated to where you are, and meeting with all this pushback and barriers and disbelief, but they pursued and they made things better. Now that's 30 years old. When you say all the things we've learned, but also the huge epidemic in mental health issues, and going back really to a nine-year-old being told that her home was going to be underwater, I

mean it's hard for those of us who didn't grow up like that to believe.

But all of that begs now for the next step. I just love that it's an ESF student that's pursuing this. Even though you're getting some of that pushback, that's what it's going to take to make the change, and I hope that it will be codified.



I don't know where you would start, if you would start at the municipal level or the state level or the federal government, but the ADA needs to be amended to

include psychological and mental health issues.

Savannah Wright: Yeah. This book that I made in undergrad is essentially that amendment. If I

were to give it to the legislators and say, "Hey, you can put this in writing and amend it to the ADA," like it's already done for you. Why wouldn't you amend it? Somebody else has already done the work for you. I welcome that pushback.

I love the pushback because-

I was about to say because that means you're doing a great thing.

Savannah Wright: ... it reassures me that I have done my research. I mean I had to give a

presentation the other day about the capstone proposal, and it's like we get questions at the end. I left there feeling like, "Wow, I really have done my

research. No wonder I don't



towards vulnerable communities because of this and this and this, why is your face hot? Unpack that.

Joanie Mahoney:

I will say the opposite, too. I was in a meeting yesterday where somebody was saying this thing passed unanimously, and a faculty member said, "Well, then it probably doesn't say anything." If you get unanimous support for something, it's probably pretty



Isabel Valentín:

Yeah, that's a great question. I'm engaging mostly with academics that represent university institutions or colleges, because I want to speak to the people that feel defensive about this. I'm being very, very careful with my phrasing, which is very unlike me.

But my phrasing throughout the whole thesis is it's delicate. It's a very introductory way to present these people to these big scary topics. So I would say that unlike most of my organizing that panders to the vulnerable, marginalized communities and their experiences, I'm trying to actually make these academics resonate with the experiences that they have not felt. Like



When I think about ... Talking about pushback and people that are very firm in their beliefs, I feel like because so many topics are so ego-driven and/or they trigger people's egos, there's a lack of introspection. Anyone I've ever met in my life who has the ability to be introspective has no problem welcoming a new idea, or being given a document, or even somebody saying, "Hey, you did this thing and it really upset me or it hurt me."

Anyone I know who is able to emotionally process and be introspective is like, "Oh my gosh, I'm so sorry. I didn't realize. Let me act on that differently next time."

Isabel Valentín: But, o this



Savannah Wright: Yeah, or people will make these large blanket claims about things that are so

complex.

Isabel Valentín: It's a fallacy.

Savannah Wright: Yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: "I saw it on Instagram."

Savannah Wright: Part of what I'm dealing with is ... Like my topic, even just healthcare alone, you

can't talk about healthcare and try to dismantle it until you address big pharma

and the model of disability-

Isabel Valentín: Intersections.

Savannah Wright: ... and the patient protocol and the intersectionality. There are so many things

that go into one thing. And so, for you to deny that these issues occur in every

single place or that these are simple issues that can have a yes or no

perspective, that's dishonest and lacking accountability.

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah, that's one of the things that's really disappointing to me is people saying

it's black or it's white. There's no nuance.

Savannah Wright: Sometimes it's yellow, sometimes it's blue.

Joanie Mahoney: Yes.

Savannah Wright: On certain days, it's green.

Joanie Mahoney: I totally agree. So you're bringing me to my final question. I will say before that I

love this conversation. I really love ESF students generally, and specifically I've gotten to know both of you. I am big fans of both of you and I'm so excited to watch where you go in your lives. But what would both of you, what would each of you tell a student who's considering where they want to go to college? What

would you tell them about ESF?

I'm going to have to start this one. When I came to ESF, I was not

knowledgeable about anything relating to American institutions. I came to ESF because I knew I wanted to do environmental law, and ESF was just the best program that showed up in Google. I didn't even get to visit the campus. I

showed up here blind in the middle of COVID.

Joanie Mahoney: How brave.



Savannah Wright: A legit echo chamber. I do think it's interesting, though, because it is still a state

school, so there are still policies and things that we have to follow as students here that are ... Like some of the more passionate, outspoken people, and the students here at least, including some of the faculty, are early action adopters. So we'll go into these things with our full hearts and chomp away at the bit and get things done. Whereas I feel like other institutions are either fact-based or

experience-based adopters.

Isabel Valentín: Reactive rather than proactive.

Savannah Wright: Yeah, or even just hesitant adopters. They don't want anything to do with the

progressive thoughts or studies or protocol and things like that. I feel like here, we tend to have a student body and a faculty body that is a little bit leaning

more towards the early action and science-based adopters.

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah. So if you want to be on the cutting edge, you want to be at ESF.

Savannah Wright: Yeah, absolutely.

Isabel Valentín: Oh, yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: I absolutely love that. That is a very good note to end on. Thank you. I know

you're both busy with school, and taking time to sit and talk to me is very

generous of you.

Savannah Wright: No, this was so fun.

Isabel Valentín: Yeah, thank you so much for your time.

Joanie Mahoney: So, Savannah, Isabel, thank you very much. See you around.

Savannah Wright: Thank you.

Isabel Valentín: Thank you.