



S U N Y College of Environmental Science and Forestry Campus Conversations: The Podcast

Episode 6

Dr. Vanessa Rojas, Assistant Professor, Ranger School

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Vanessa Rojas: I grew up in a lot of poverty. So, in that instance, it meant moving around a lot. We kind of grew up in and around Flint. But my grandparents owned a little restaurant in Flint, Michigan. And so, we're always at least that was kind of like home, like the restaurant. So, I was excited to move away and be on my own. I went to Michigan State University, and I was used to working and going to high school at the same time, and I was trying to do that and go to college at the same time. And it was honestly a huge mess. I'll be honest; I wanted to quit my undergrad a couple of times. A few times, just trying to balance it all. I'm glad I didn't. I wish I would have had a better way to balance it. Later I read all these papers about how poverty impacts education. And I saw this presentation on someone presenting about bat research, and I said, Wait! That's a thing? Studying bats?

Joanie Mahoney: Vanessa Rojas is here, and I'm very grateful, Vanessa, that you're here and that you've taken time to let us get to know you a little bit better. And I know it is a bigger time commitment for you because you had to travel to get here to the main campus in Syracuse. So, let's just start with Vanessa, what do you, what's your role here at ESF?

Vanessa Rojas: So, I am an assistant professor, and I teach at our Wanakena campus, the Ranger school. And I teach the wildlife courses up there, and I teach G I S.

Joanie Mahoney: And I had the opportunity to see you earlier this year because you for the first time, and perhaps only, and we're joking offline because it is not part of your day job, but you were very generous to step up and be the director of the Cranberry Lake Biological Station this past summer?

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah. It was a great opportunity. It was hard to kind of balance all that work with the work at the Wanakena campus. But, it was really nice to get to meet other faculty and students from main campus. So, it was a way for me to connect with the folks here as well.

Joanie Mahoney: That didn't even really occur to me.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah.



- Joanie Mahoney:** That, that that's an extra opportunity for you to connect here to Syracuse. So how about your path here? You are one of our newer faculty members, and I'm curious, where was home for you? Where do you think about when I ask you where you're from?
- Vanessa Rojas:** So, I'm actually from Flint, Michigan.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Okay. Where we've heard about in the not too distant past. How's the water in Flint, Michigan these days?
- Vanessa Rojas:** Ya, you know. I don't think anyone trusts what they're saying, but, you know, it's difficult. I have friends and family around that area still.
- Joanie Mahoney:** So, drinking water from sources other than their kitchen sink.
- Vanessa Rojas:** Yeah. Yeah. No one trusts them.
- Joanie Mahoney:** That is really terrible. I just saw something recently. There's another municipality in Michigan that is going through something similar with lead.
- Vanessa Rojas:** Oh, I actually missed that.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Yeah. So, I know there's a lot of infrastructure problems across this country.
- Vanessa Rojas:** Yeah.
- Joanie Mahoney:** So, what was your childhood like? Did you spend all of your time in one house, in one place in Flint, Michigan?
- Vanessa Rojas:** The opposite of that.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Okay.
- Vanessa Rojas:** We moved a lot. I actually have a little bit different background, I guess, than most people. I grew up in a lot of poverty. So, in that instance, it meant moving around a lot; we kind of grew up in and around Flint. But my grandparents owned a little restaurant in Flint, Michigan. And so, that always, at least that was kind of like home, like the restaurant was.
- Joanie Mahoney:** A home base. So, what kind of restaurant were the grandparents running?



- Vanessa Rojas:** So, it was a Middle Eastern Restaurant.
- Joanie Mahoney:** That has to be an interesting thing. I don't picture a lot of middle-eastern culture in Flint, Michigan, but maybe I'm wrong.
- Vanessa Rojas:** Yeah. So, they were the first middle-eastern restaurant in town. My grandma was Palestinian, but my grandpa's Chilean. So, it's like this odd mix where they tried to have a Chilean restaurant, but no one knew what that meant.
- Joanie Mahoney:** They see Chilis!
- Vanessa Rojas:** They think it's really spicy food, but it's not the case.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Right?
- Vanessa Rojas:** So, it was failing, and they changed it into a middle-eastern restaurant. My grandma had experience cooking that food. And so they were, I think they were the first middle-eastern restaurant, just outside of Detroit in Dearborn, which has like one of the largest middle-eastern populations outside of the Middle East.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Interesting, I didn't realize that. And how far away is Dearborn from Flint?
- Vanessa Rojas:** An hour
- Joanie Mahoney:** So not too far.
- Vanessa Rojas:** Yeah.
- Joanie Mahoney:** It's some of my favorite food. Yeah. So did you learn how to cook it all?
- Vanessa Rojas:** Oh ya. Yeah, I have.
- Joanie Mahoney:** So you grew up kind of moving around, and I think that's interesting that you described it as having grown up in poverty. So how does a young girl from Flint, Michigan, with this middle-eastern home base in this restaurant, go on to become a GIS ecology, wildlife ecology faculty member at a STEM (Science Technology Engineering Mathematics) college like E S F?
- Vanessa Rojas:** Yeah, it was, I guess, anything but the typical route. College wasn't something that my family talked about me doing. I was first-generation going to college, and everyone was content with me just staying and taking over the restaurant. And



definitely, they tried to convince me to do that, and I turned it down, or at least stay and go to school locally and help run the restaurant. But I, for me, education was an escape out of poverty. And to change my pathway.

Joanie Mahoney: It's really that embodiment of what we tell people the American Dream is all about is you can come from anywhere and be anything, and it's just a matter of what you put in. So, were you a pretty good student when you were in school?

Vanessa Rojas: I was. I was definitely that huge nerd. I was told there is no college fund for me. And so, if I wanted to go to college, I would need to get grants and scholarships. And the only way I really knew how to do that was to get really good grades. And so, I was a huge nerd and got really good grades.

Joanie Mahoney: I think if you try to look for some common threads throughout the conversations that I've had with faculty that there is a preponderance of people here that describe themselves as nerds.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: And as my husband said, "Nerds rule the world." So, we're very lucky here at E S F. So, you got good grades, and then we kind of smooth over the details because we take them for granted. But as a first-generation college student, how did you even know about taking the S A Ts and filling out your FAFSA and how to apply for college. Did you have somebody in your life that helped?

Vanessa Rojas: A little bit. It was actually kind of a huge mess, and I had no idea what I was doing, to be honest. And that's like one of the things I like about teaching now. And I've even met with senior students that my friends work with and like other youth programs to talk to them about that kind of stuff because it is so difficult to navigate. And especially if you go to, no offense to my former high school, like a crappy high school without a whole lot of opportunity. There was a little bit of information there in Michigan; it's the A C Ts. So, I was told to take those early so I could start taking college courses; I took classes at Flint Community College. My high school had to pay for it.

Joanie Mahoney: Ohh. So, you put some credits in the bank.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah. So, I was able to do that and go to night school there while I was in high school still. And so that was helpful. But I didn't really know how to choose a program, how to pick things, and I knew I had to do FAFSA. And that was what



allowed me to be able to go to college, but a lot of the other stuff is difficult to navigate. I had a friend who she came from, more privilege, and she helped me a bit too. She went with her family to visit the different colleges, and I didn't even know that was a thing you could do for like orientation, and so she filled me in, and I just followed along with her.

Joanie Mahoney: Oh, that is a good friend. And she probably is aware of the role she played in your life?

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah. I don't know. We lost touch, but I did look her up, and she's a doctor now. She's a urologist.

Joanie Mahoney: Okay. So, she also did a good job with her education. So, you put some credits in the bank; you're a high school senior, graduating with some start on college through your local community college. What was the next step?

Vanessa Rojas: So, I was excited to move away and be on my own. But, I went to Michigan State University, which is a huge university. And I was used to working and going to high school at the same time. And I was trying to do that and go to college at the same time. And it was honestly a huge mess. And I see some students coming in and doing the same mess, and I wish I would have had a better way to balance that. Later I read all these papers about how poverty impacts education, and so when I went for my master's, I was like, I have to, I can't be stressed about work and trying to learn at the same time.

Joanie Mahoney: You know that perspective that you bring is so valuable to the whole college. And I would imagine life-changing for some of our students because you can relate to that balance in that pressure. I know myself that I was a waitress when I was in college at Cosmos Pizza, for people around here that are familiar with what Marshall Street used to be like. And I remember those days. I mean, I would work until two o'clock in the morning. Then, we stayed open and sold slices of pizza to people on their way home from the bars. And then, trying to get up for an eight or eight-thirty class in the morning. It was tough!

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah, it was tough, and I thought that was normal. I thought that was what everyone was doing. I worked at Tower Records, and they stayed open until midnight, and then I worked at the university post office, which so I could work before my eight A M class, too. And so, I remember going into the exam and talking to someone next to me, and I'm like oh, my gosh, I haven't had any time to study, and she's like, what do you mean like? And she was like, oh, I don't work. And I was



like, you don't work, what do you even mean that you don't work? It just didn't occur to me that people didn't have to work like that, their friends or family, whoever it was helping them.

Joanie Mahoney: And what a leg up? Yes. So, it says even more about you that you did this in large part on your own, but Tower Record? You yeah, I didn't think you were old enough to say something like Tower Record.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah, that closed while I was in college. So, I lost that job.

Joanie Mahoney: That was a really fun place. Tower Record. I remember traveling as a young person and always looking for the Tower Record store. That had to be an interesting place to work.

Vanessa Rojas: Ya, that was fun. I've always loved music, and it was a fun break from school. Although it was stressful, balancing all of that.

Joanie Mahoney: Especially, you're a first-generation college student. And you know, you are a female, and you're a minority. And that isn't what at that time especially was typical for what you saw in STEM classes at the college level. I mean, that's really extra impressive.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: How did you get into the STEM field?

Vanessa Rojas: I've always had a love for, I guess, science. But like as a young child, it was animals. I just really was fascinated by animals. And, and then when you're really young, you don't realize all the options you can do with that. So I wanted to grow up and be a vet.

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah. I knew you were going to say that.

Vanessa Rojas: That's about classic for little kids.

Joanie Mahoney: That's what Stacy McNulty said when I had the opportunity to talk to her, I thought I wanted to be a vet. It's so true, though. I'm interested in animals. Ask any young person who's interested in animals what they want to be when they grow up, a vet, because they don't know that there's a million other options, right?



- Vanessa Rojas:** You don't know. And then somewhere in middle school was, I was just, I was fascinated by like how the human body works, so that's still an interest of mine. I got to teach anatomy at some point too. So, I guess like all these aspects of science, I was really intrigued by it.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I would describe myself as a good science student when I was younger, and I was definitely interested in science. But if you were like me, know, no one was really saying go teach G I S, go become a wildlife ecologist?
- Vanessa Rojas:** Yeah, definitely not. My undergrad's in Environmental Science, and while I was at M S U, I took my first GIS course, and I almost switched to getting a G I S degree. And then instead, I just took a bunch of G I S courses then. By the time I finished, I hadn't really done wildlife stuff, so I didn't really know how to pick that major. And I see a lot of our students feel like I don't know what to do. Which one should I pick? And so, it gave me the foundation to then go into more wildlife-specific areas.
- Joanie Mahoney:** When you started college, did you think I maybe want to be a teacher?
- Vanessa Rojas:** I don't think I did, no, it was, from what I could remember. It wasn't something I did do a little bit of tutoring while I was there with the younger, like K through 12. And that was really fun for me. And maybe that like sparked something in me. So, I did that for work as well in teaching like math and reading.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Do you have faculty from your undergrad days that you think back that helped mentor you?
- Vanessa Rojas:** Yeah. Dr. Paul Nickel from my undergrad. I was really struggling towards the end to finish and just getting kind of frustrated, balancing everything. And I remember the first day of class with him, and he wrote "Question authority" on the board. And I was just like, "Yeah!"
- Joanie Mahoney:** This is going to go well. That's great.
- Vanessa Rojas:** Yeah, and it kind of re-sparked my wanting to learn.
- Joanie Mahoney:** That's fantastic.
- Vanessa Rojas:** And it's that junior year where you start to get the take the classes you really, really like. And so we kept in touch for a while after that, my other friend I went to school



with, we tried to meet up with him for lunch periodically. Now, I've lost touch. He was an older gentleman, so I'm not sure where he's at right now, but...

Joanie Mahoney: I would imagine he's somewhere in your brain when you're teaching and trying to inspire students. And I don't know how we can do a better job of letting students know how broad their choices are. You know?

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah. Yeah, it's not just this one path you have to take or this one route. And it's okay if you don't fully know where you want to go and...

Joanie Mahoney: Absolutely. I feel so bad for students. They're 18 years old. And we're going from, you know, get your hat, get your Coke, get in the car. Like I'm taking you to school and dropping them off at the front door to okay, what do you want to do for the rest of your life?

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah

Joanie Mahoney: How are they supposed to make that leap? From high school to okay, the rest of my life. And I just don't know how I want E S F to play a role, certainly locally and in exposing careers to young people. I think they will have a lot more interest, but it's just this kind of big unknown.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah, exactly. And I think if you take a class or find something like kinda like sparks in you and you wanted to know more about you. It's fun to learn about that thing, and it's not like this huge task, that maybe, maybe that's where your passion is, right?

Joanie Mahoney: And I think the experience you've had working and especially tutoring, I mean, who knew, who knows how you will feel about trying to teach people until you actually do it. That would be advice that I would have for young people is just do everything, try it.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: This is the time; this is the safe time. I mean, you're not going to have the flexibility to change careers as often as you can jump around in different experiences as when you're here at college.

Vanessa Rojas: I think that's super important. I took a couple of years break between each of my degrees, and that changed my path a little bit.



- Joanie Mahoney:** So, you graduated. And then what?
- Vanessa Rojas:** So, I moved back to Flint, and you know, Flint has this bad rap, but I loved it. It was such a great community. It used to be a larger city, and a lot of people left when the jobs left, and so it left this core group of people that really love it.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Passionate
- Vanessa Rojas:** Or couldn't get out as well. But I moved back and had a good friend group there. And at some point there, I saw this presentation on someone presenting about bat research, and I said, wait a second, careers, studying bats? And I kinda just rerouted.
- Joanie Mahoney:** That is interesting. So, when you made your way back to Flint, is the restaurant still a going concern?
- Vanessa Rojas:** No. After like my first year of college, my grandparents retired.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Oh no. They were holding out for you to take over.
- Vanessa Rojas:** Yeah.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I hope somebody has picked up the baton and is making some good baba ganoush and hummus in Flint, Michigan.
- Vanessa Rojas:** Oh, there are some really good restaurants.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Okay. Yeah.
- Vanessa Rojas:** That I always go to when I am back.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I'm kind of curious as somebody who loves Flint; what was the reaction for people in Flint when Michael Moore came to town and decided to make a movie about your city.
- Vanessa Rojas:** I think a lot of people actually live in Flint. Maybe Michael Moore was trying to, I don't know, let people know what was going on. But I think for Flint, it gave us a really bad, like the people there, a bad rap. Like everyone's like, Oh, you will eat, you eat rabbit ears, rabbits in your backyard, which is, you know, that's fine. Some



people have that. But it really gave Flint this bad rap and made people not want to go there, which I don't know if that was his initial intention.

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah. So maybe the unintended consequence wasn't great for the residents of Flint.

Vanessa Rojas: No, it really wasn't. I don't know if I'm the only Flint person that thinks that way, but I'm not like a huge fan because it was so negative, and there are negative things about Flint, but it didn't really focus a lot on the community aspect there.

Joanie Mahoney: It didn't really do a service to the city of Flint. I totally can see that. And then you had a little bit of a 1 2 punch because you have that reputation, and then you have this water situation, and the whole world focused on Flint for not positive reasons once again.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah. I actually, when I moved back to Flint, I got an Americorp job through the Michigan State University Extension on water quality of all things. But it was before the water crisis too, so I did that for a year.

Joanie Mahoney: Interesting. So how did you make the leap as I'm imagining that you came again with no college fund?

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: How did you maneuver the move into a master's program?

Vanessa Rojas: So, I read a lot about, like I was saying, poverty and education, and it's not the best role. But because my grades ended up not being that great for my undergrad because I had a lot of family stuff going on and another lifestyle.

Joanie Mahoney: Working, yeah.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah, working. And so, I ended up having to take out loans and really hoping that public service loan forgiveness keeps going. But, I did that, and I was able to pay my rent for the whole semester and not be stressed about paying rent. I lived pretty cheap. It's actually really cheap to live in Flint, surprise. And I didn't have to be so stressed; living in Flint was a lot cheaper. So, I went to the University of Michigan, Flint, for my master's. So, I got to stay right there, and it was a lot more affordable than being in a college town.



- Joanie Mahoney:** And we have a lot in common because I stayed at home with my parents when I was in grad school also, and I know that savings, and it's a luxury to be able to do that.
- Vanessa Rojas:** Yeah. I have my own, well, I had roommates. I didn't live with my mom, but I had to help her out a lot as well.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And what is your master's in?
- Vanessa Rojas:** My master's is in biology with a focus, you could either choose like wildlife or kind of more like the genetics routes. And I took wildlife.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And is your interest in bats at that point something you got to further expound on?
- Vanessa Rojas:** Yes. So that's where I got to actually start researching bats, and then I also worked for a non-profit part-time, and we did like bat education, and they had bats, they're the kind of the leftovers from zoos.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Aww
- Vanessa Rojas:** And so we did education programs for K through 12 and other groups with that.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And brought them bats?
- Vanessa Rojas:** Yeah
- Joanie Mahoney:** And I bet you took away some of the fear of bats.
- Vanessa Rojas:** Oh, yeah!
- Joanie Mahoney:** And when you get to see them up close. They're kinda cute.
- Vanessa Rojas:** They're super cute. We had big fruit bats that look like, more like dogs. So that helps to ease people in. And then you show them the little ones that we have around here. So they start to think they're cute. And we had to deal with people that were absolutely terrified of them, but by the end, you could turn them.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And have you had experience going in the caves that have thousands of bats.



Vanessa Rojas: I don't do a lot of cave work. I do more like forestry bat work, but I have experience to go in this cave that a colleague of mine found, and it had this endangered Virginia bigger bat in there, and I had to crawl in there and go in, and there's like mom and her little pup, and it was really cool. I got to pick up some temperature sensors they had in there and count like 400 and some bats flying out of it.

Joanie Mahoney: How cool! And you stop and think about, you know, you just told me about being a student living in Flint, and then fast-forward, you're crawling into a cave of bats and getting monitoring equipment. So, then you took time off again after you earned your master's?

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah. After my master's, right near the end of my master's, I met this person who ended up becoming my P h D advisor. But I met her at a conference. And so, this is, I was a little terrified, but I think I'm going to find people at this conference that do bat research. I'm just going to go up and talk to them. I was finishing my master's. And I went up to this woman, Joy M. O'Keefe, and I said, Oh, hey, you're here with doing bat stuff as well as the MythBusters Fish and Wildlife Conference. And she's like, Oh yeah, are you you're doing bats? And I go pretty new. I have a poster here on my research. Maybe you ought to check it out. And then later she did and said, Hey, I'm hiring. She was doing her post-doc at the time, and she's like, I'm hiring a field technician, and it looks like you have some of the experience I'm looking for. Here's my email. Please send me your resume.

Joanie Mahoney: Ha. Was she also in the area, or did you have to move away now?

Vanessa Rojas: No. I moved away. Yeah. So she was down in the southeast, like Tennessee, North Carolina area. And that's my first like pretty intense field season, and I worked down there for I think was three months, two or three months. And it was in the Smoky Mountains, in and around the Smoky Mountains tracking endangered species of bat.

Joanie Mahoney: And where was she that she became your major professor?

Vanessa Rojas: So, she was doing her post-doc then and then she got an offer at Indiana State University to become a professor. And she asked me to be her first P h D student, but I wanted more work experience before just jumping right into a P h D. And I ended up working for her for two seasons. Like I said, I worked the following year for like a 10-month project with her as well.

Joanie Mahoney: And still loved it?



- Vanessa Rojas:** Yes, still loved it. And I took a little time off, traveled to South America. I just wanted to do all this stuff before going back to school.
- Joanie Mahoney:** What an interesting life. Oh, my goodness. It's because you made it all happen.
- Vanessa Rojas:** Yeah
- Joanie Mahoney:** Like I'm going to find a person doing bat work, and I'm going to approach them. I mean, that takes a lot.
- Vanessa Rojas:** It's stepping out of your comfort zone. For sure.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Yeah.
- Vanessa Rojas:** But I've always been a really determined person, and you know, I have to puff myself up sometimes, but I am pretty determined.
- Joanie Mahoney:** It sounds like it. Did you have brothers and sisters?
- Vanessa Rojas:** I have a brother.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Is he older or younger?
- Vanessa Rojas:** He's two years older.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And does he have that same independent "I'm going to advocate for myself and do what I want."
- Vanessa Rojas:** We are pretty different.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Yeah. So, this is maybe a personality you came cooked with?
- Vanessa Rojas:** Yeah. I don't know where it came from. Maybe a little bit from my grandma. She was a very strong woman.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Yep. Yep. So, then you just traveled in South America, or were you working?



Vanessa Rojas: Yeah. I mostly just traveled. My grandma had passed, and my grandfather went down to Santiago. So, he and my dad, my grandparents and my dad moved to the U S when my dad was 11, so my grandpa went back down to spend some time.

Joanie Mahoney: To Chile.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah. And I wanted to. I've never been there at the same time. We could never afford where we could all go. So, I'd saved up money working this field job for ten months and not having to pay rent because this is all included.

Joanie Mahoney: Nice.

Vanessa Rojas: I went down there and got to meet a lot of family down there. So, I had to spend a couple of months down in South America.

Joanie Mahoney: That's terrific. How about the other side of the family, where you along the way ever able to spend time in Palestine

Vanessa Rojas: No. But actually, a good amount of my family that's in Santiago is Palestinian. So, a lot of Palestinian people, when they left, they went to Latin America. And so, originally, I have some family in Honduras, and I have some in Santiago as well. So, when I went there, it was really getting to know all the Palestinian side of my family as well. And some of them do like political science work over there.

Joanie Mahoney: They're interesting. Is that where your parents met?

Vanessa Rojas: No, my parents met in Flint, actually.

Joanie Mahoney: My goodness. That is an interesting story, too, I'm sure.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: So, you know, sometimes I talk to people, and I think "you should write a book." But you strike me as somebody who should just write a whole bunch of bullets. Like, you know, you can grow up in poverty, and you can get to college, do this thing, and follow your passion, and advocate for yourself and kind of make it happen.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah.



Joanie Mahoney: Work hard would be on your list of tips for people, I am sure.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah. And I think too, I think there needs to be more support for students that are coming from that as well, because it was hard, and I want it to be honest, I wanted to quit my undergrad a couple of times—a few times just trying to balance it all. And I'm glad I didn't.

Joanie Mahoney: You know, Vanessa, that's something that you can help me with. If we were trying to diversify our student population, as I'm sure a lot of colleges are. And it's a particularly heavy lift in the STEM world. There haven't been in some underfunded school districts, there's not the labs, there's not the opportunity to do the field experience. There's not the whetting your appetite for this kind of work. But I would love for you to say, as president of the college, what could I have done to help Vanessa as a young person get here? And we can put some of those supports in place here at E S F to help students?

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah, definitely. I think they're doing some of that. I know I just signed up to help be a mentor for some students who are in the STEM program.

Joanie Mahoney: Terrific.

Vanessa Rojas: I know. I think they just got a pretty big grant to help with some of that. And, I think for professors realizing that not everyone came from like a good school, and that's okay if the students don't know how to use a microscope yet, and you know not everyone had a microscope they could learn. Are they heard there was one crappy one that everyone got to take turns on for like a minute.

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah. I'm so happy to have you say that because there is a tendency toward this kind of elite; if you can't hack it, then maybe you don't fit here. But actually, there's a lot of potential and people that just haven't had the opportunity.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: And if we can help them be exposed and teach them how to do things like use a microscope. I would imagine that a lot of superstars are turned away for the most basic of things.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah, I totally agree because I think the students get this belief from people around them that they don't belong in science, so they don't belong here. It's going to be hard to get them to stick around.



Joanie Mahoney: Yeah, I think those are very wise words, but my door's open, and I read my email. And if there are things that you experienced along the way that you think I could be doing to make things better, I hope that you'll shoot me a note and let me know.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah, definitely. I think that you're willing to talk about this and not pretend it doesn't exist. I think is a really great start.

Joanie Mahoney: I appreciate that. So, before we wrap up, I'm kind of interested to hear what's it like to live up in the Adirondacks after all of these different experiences that you've had, you're living in a pretty remote community now.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah. Should I tell you that I took yesterday off and went on a 13-mile hike in the High Peaks?

Joanie Mahoney: Really.

Vanessa Rojas: I don't like hiking on the weekends because it's usually busier, so I'll work on the weekends, and then I took yesterday off to go hike another high peak.

Joanie Mahoney: Where? What did you hike?

Vanessa Rojas: I hiked Dix Mountain. A 13-mile trek.

Joanie Mahoney: Are you headed for a 46er?

Vanessa Rojas: I think eventually. I'm not like a super competitive person, but eventually, I just kinda want to see them and do different stuff.

Joanie Mahoney: I'll tell you, earlier this year, I'm just getting to the age where I'm starting to feel like, oh wait, I'm getting older like it never occurred to me before until recently, and my son is climbing the high peaks. And so, I was thinking, well, I'll just do one or two a year. And then I started to do the math. I was like, oh, no, no. I have to do more than one or two a year if I'm going to get all these in, but I haven't climbed a high peak, but I've climbed Blue Mountain. I've climbed Owl's Head. I absolutely love being out there. If you catch me in that last part where I'm trying to scramble over boulders...

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah.



Joanie Mahoney: I might not be telling you how much I love it. But when I get up to the top, and I see the vista and sometimes with the fire towers up there, it's just a spectacular place to be.

Vanessa Rojas: I totally agree. Yeah. I love being able to walk out my door and go for a hike and be able to live out in the woods. I love city life too, but I like being able to live there and then go visit cities, eat good food and then go back to the woods.

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah. And you know, I've been struck a few times in this conversation by how much we have in common. But I would say the same thing, like, I love visiting other cities, but I just love living where I do. And it's a really good feeling to just be so content. I feel like I have everything I need. My family is here. I'm very happy. But if you pick me up and bring me to New York City or Chicago or Miami, I'll have a wonderful vacation, but I'll be very happy to come back here.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah, exactly. And I think growing up in the cities, my friends and I always had this like escape. We'd go up for the weekend and go up north as it's called in Michigan and spent all weekend up there and take any minute we could to get out of the city for a bit, and I think that influenced me wanting to live up here.

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah. No, that's great, and I'm very glad that you're here. We're lucky that you're here, and I appreciate you taking time so that, as I said, we could learn a little bit more about you. I enjoyed spending the day with you at Cranberry Lake. But sitting down and kind of hearing your path here has been very valuable to me. And I'm sure it will be to others. I'm sure it's inspiring faculty to say, maybe I need to spend an extra minute with the student who is a first-generation college student, who doesn't know the things that we just all take for granted.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah, thank you so much for having me here as well. And I really love being a part of the E S F community, and I like getting to have opportunities to come down to the main campus and meet folks here and run into some of my students that came down from the Ranger school as well.

Joanie Mahoney: Nice, enjoy your afternoon here, and I'll see you again soon.

Vanessa Rojas: Yeah, thank you so much.

Joanie Mahoney: Thanks.

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