

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 just graduated with a bachelor's degree in landscape architecture from ESF in May and is now a master's student in the program.

Both are passionate about the sociocultural aspects of climate change, particularly the influence of culture on society and how it affects both human behavior and climate change. Thank you for joining me today.

I was really excited to do this because this is the first time I've just had students. There've been a couple of times that I've interviewed faculty with labs that have had students that came in and joined them, but to just have a conversation with students is wonderful. So welcome to both of you.

Savannah Wright: Thank you.

Isabel Valentín: Yeah, thank you so much.

Joanie Mahoney: So I was interested when I was reading about you both and you both brought experiences into your studies, and I think that's really interesting. I wonder if it's a model, really, for people to thrive to say what matters so much to you. I imagine, and I want to hear from you, that it provides drive for you to find solutions when it's something that is so close to home.

So, Isabel, we're going to start with you. The experience that I'm referring to is that you grew up on Puerto Rico. So you and your family have really experienced firsthand the effects of climate change. I'm interested in how those experiences led you to be a student here at ESF.

Isabel Valentín: Yeah. So my first experience with climate change, I was probably 9 or 10 years old. It was when the holes in the ozone layer really started becoming nationwide news and we were talking about it in my science courses.

I don't remember who asked the question. The teacher might've brought up unprompted, but she said that because Puerto Rico is a small island ... For those who don't know, Puerto Rico is 100 miles wide and 35 miles long ... Puerto Rico suffers a bigger risk that when the hole in ozone layer causes higher heat, the ice everywhere melts, and that turns into the elevation of water which could consume Puerto Rico, which is a very real thing to say. It is completely rooted in reality. But, of course, for a young student it may be a little distressing-

Joanie Mahoney: Terrifying.

Isabel Valentín: ... which is where my brain went immediately after that. I tend to be very proactive about things that scare me or things that I'm passionate about. So immediately after learning about that, I had a couple weeks of panic, and then I just started doing things that felt helpful, and all of that in Puerto Rico. The context of Puerto Rico is very different than in the context in the United States. There's a lot of active struggles.

In 2017, Hurricane Maria hit. I had just founded an environmental organization. There was a lot of loss of steam from that project because of Hurricane Maria, COVID hit. There have also been earthquakes, more natural disasters. All of these experiences made my research focused on the now and how the past affects the now.

The combination of those two factors is what leads me to think of a future. I don't think thinking of a better future from the standpoint of the president is very helpful because the president is often putting out fires. The president is often hectic and overinvolved. You have to combine aspects of the past, present to think of the future, and I think that's how my experience in Puerto Rico

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 way in your educational experience that's really honed you in on an area of study. But tell us a little bit about yourself. You grew up in central New York or the Finger Lakes?

Savannah Wright: Yeah. I'm from Rochester originally. I originally was pursuing a degree in architecture. I was in Toronto for that. Then I ended up coming back to the States because it didn't have enough of the natural world involved in it. I found especially being in a university setting downtown, it was just heavily focused on the built world and modernizing everything. And so, I thought that going into landscape architecture where people naturally gravitate towards some different realm of it, there's usually a lot of subcategories.

I thought that I was going to choose this urban revitalization and green infrastructure. Then during sophomore year, I had personal experiences, and COVID exacerbated them. But also observing other built spaces where people with disabilities can't necessarily experience or enjoy it the same way. One of these experiences rattled me. It wasn't on campus, but it was in Syracuse.

And so, I started to shift my focus from this topic that 90% of people are studying right now, which is this urban ... How do we protect urban communities and bring green infrastructure? I shifted my focus to accessibility, and I started diving deeper into what currently exists for access, especially in design fields?

Back in the 1980s, there was the ADA laws, and that was the first sparked movement of access for people. But as time evolves, that legislation also needs to evolve, and it really hasn't.

Joanie Mahoney: So you're referring to the Americans with Disabilities Act, for those of us outside that world.

Savannah Wright: Yup, and pertaining specifically to the design fields, there are certain protocol and standards that have been created through that legislation that say, in our new builds, we have to have 36-inch doors or we have to have sinks that are X amount of inches high. That is addressing a larger percent of people that have physical disabilities.

But now as we see with mental health decline and the introduction of more conditions or chronic disease, those are all things that affect how people live their daily lives, and those need to be accounted for when we design spaces,

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 everyone unintentionally with one design.

Joanie Mahoney: That's excellent-

Isabel Valentín: That makes sense.

Joanie Mahoney: ... and that was a really good example. So then just taking a little bit of a step back, you two are from a generation. Isabel, you just said you were nine years old when you were told that Puerto Rico is going to be underwater. I can't imagine what the anxiety is around climate for people your age. I wonder if this work makes that better or if this work exacerbates that anxiety because now you know that there really are big challenges that the planet has right now.

Savannah Wright: Yeah. I think Isabel and I need each other, and I say that ... Like our topics need each other because what Isabel deals with is this eco anxiety. If you look at what right now is taking over a large percent of the population, especially people our age, it's anxiety, depression, and all of these conditions that are invisible

disabilities. It makes your life harder to live. It interferes with your daily life. But I also need that work on climate change to be able to continue my work. I'm also trying to address some of that fear and that daily life that comes along with living in a climate change.

Isabel Valentín: Yeah. I know, I know. I totally get what you're referring to. It's pretty amusing because we're engaging in all this long-term, infrastructural planning, social planning, and we don't really know if anyone's going to be alive to see it. It's really terrifying when you think about it.

But in my personal experience, I spent most of my childhood and early teens just overwhelmed with anxiety about whether or not the world is ending, all that good stuff. When I finally started organizing in a serious way and I started doing tangible work ... I wouldn't say I got over the anxiety. Sometimes you have a bad day, but most days I'm filled with hope because I find that being driven by dread or being driven by fear is a lot less helpful, is a lot-

Joanie Mahoney: It's horrible.

Savannah Wright: Yeah.

Isabel Valentín: It's a lot less tolerable than any other alternative. So I lead with hope and I try to fight off every other emotion, because at least 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: We had a speaker at commencement-

Isabel Valentín: Yes.

Joanie Mahoney: ... Savannah, your commencement.

Savannah Wright: We're actually really close now, too.

Joanie Mahoney: Oh, you are?

Savannah Wright: Yeah. We've been in touch and she's actually working on new stuff too, so I'm sure you'll see about that, too. But related to this topic-

Joanie Mahoney: How did that come about?

Savannah Wright: I followed her on Instagram after and we connected. I got to speak with her ... Actually, Isabel, you were there, too.

- 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 feeling of perceived hopelessness, that the game is over, the war has been lost, and there's nothing we can do about it. That's obviously not the case. There are things that people in every step of life can do about it.

- 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, and then apply them in relation to their own experience, interests.
- That's why it's so interesting that, for example, Savannah's interests are disability politics. My interests lie within racial politics and injustices. I'm sure so many other people in ESF can say that they're interested in different topics. So we all need to put our hands to these different topics and get to work. All of this collective action is what will actually lead to the ringing of the bells of bringing solutions.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I couldn't agree more. It is a little discouraging. Savannah, you referred to the politics and the divide, and it's unbelievable how quickly the world, the United States anyhow, has changed in terms of these bright lines. There was a time when ... I used to say 10% of the population was over there and 10 was way over there and that 80% in the middle, call them as they see them and can overlap and see a lot of common ground. But it just feels like in the very recent past, we've become incredibly polarized-
- Savannah Wright:** And very little room to change your mind about anything. It's like if you fall on one side, then you are strictly adhering to all of those beliefs, where ... Every

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: That is very true. When I was growing up, we had the big networks. You had the evening news for half an hour on one of three big networks, and then you had your newspapers. We were all getting the same information. But now we're able to curate that and you will just hear those validating opinions, if that's all you want to hear.

I was really surprised and disappointed that I think the youngest person on the debate stage recently for the presidential election called climate change a hoax. I was like, "Wow, I really thought that that group of people was headed toward retirement." That's why I love talking to people your age, to say in your social groups outside of ESF, where you grew up, is it debated anymore?

Isabel Valentín: It's not debatable. It's simply spoken about ...

Joanie Mahoney: I would imagine that's the case in Puerto Rico. But how about in Rochester?

Savannah Wright: For the younger generation and even within Rochester, it's so polarized depending on where you live. If you are somewhere rural ... I grew up in a rural town called Le Roy. There were like 400 kids in my school and it was grades 7 through 12. You couldn't find 5% of that population that believed in climate change.

Then I moved to Webster, which is closer to the city, it's much larger. I found that as I moved more towards the urban area, things became a little bit more

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, geographic 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 everyone's on board. It's very much like what Isabel said. It's not debatable. Again, I think there's something in the US. There's a bug in the US or something.

Isabel Valentín: I think it's really interesting that you spoke about Rochester, rural people tending to be more anti-climate change and urban people being pro-climate change, especially considering how climate change and its effects are affecting specifically the northeast. Rural communities have not really felt the consequences of that tangibly in the way, for example, Puerto Rico has, where the crops are destroyed and they're arid. It's impossible to grow on them.

But people in urban areas are feeling it a little bit more because of the concentration of heat, the way that gentrification has completely affected the structure of buildings, how failing infrastructure doesn't support water drainage, concerns about what's going to flood.

We then see recently, I think it was a couple of weeks ago, New York City completely flooded because of a random rainfall. So that infrastructural deficit is one of the reasons, I would say, that urban people in areas that are experiencing less climate change effects are more concerned about it, because they do have the tangible, "Something's off."

Savannah Wright: Yup. I think things are definitely more noticeable in urban areas. But I also wonder too ... And this would probably be a great thesis topic to study correlative to public space usage and ... Human behavior, if we look at the activities and the work that people are engaging with in downtown urban areas where a lot of office headquarters are, there's big business down there. You look at the attitudes of the people who are living downtown, they're young, they're active, they're engaged with the environment. They don't mind walking or they're commuting.

And so, I think there's also a personality shift that happens between living in an urban area versus living rurally and what that different environment provides. Obviously they house different activities. So I think that would be an interesting study to do, is find out that correlation, like what it is that these people are engaging with downtown and how does that activity lifestyle differ from ...

Joanie Mahoney: And also informs their opinions, not only what are they seeing and what are they doing, but how is that informing their opinions?

Savannah Wright: Yeah.

Isabel Valentín: That ties in into environmental education and interpretation, because whatever these people are learning about ... Actually Environmental Education and Interpretation is a new major at ESF, a new program that you can join if you're interested in this. But the way that people are educated can definitely be modified to what we find works.

So, for example, urban areas are learning a lot about climate change because of programs, because of specific life experiences, because of different educators' implementation methods or how they choose to phrase it. We can take those as models and apply them otherwise to other places, and it's necessary because if in places like urban Rochester people are hyper aware of climate change, why can't we take those tools that we've gained from that education and apply in places that don't have the knowledge?

A lot of times lack of knowledge is due to lack of accessibility. I find that shaming people for not being educated about climate change is contradictory to what we're trying-

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah, it's counterproductive.

Isabel Valentín: Counterproductive. We need everyone on board. The way we need to do that is bolstering our education systems, and the only way we can do that is listening to people that have worked on, listening to the people that hasn't worked on, and combining those perspectives.

Joanie Mahoney: So let's take it backwards just a little bit and talk about what the work is that you're doing here. What is your area of study and what are you working on that is reflecting this passion that you have?

Isabel Valentín: You mentioned I'm an environmental studies major focusing in policy and law. My minors are in food studies and indigenous peoples and the environment. I'm in the honors program as well, which means I'm developing a thesis. That's mostly what my research is based around, though I have a few other projects going on I won't take up all the mic time with. My thesis is about marginalized communities engagement, specifically with university and academic institutions.

So as a Puerto Rican, I had a lot of experience with people, researching upon Puerto Rico, starting projects, launching ideas, and then it falling through the cracks, never getting actually proactively done after a couple of years because people become frustrated with the infrastructural challenges, with the lack of movement, with the bureaucracy.

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 Vieques-

Isabel Valentín: Yes. Vieques, Puerto Rico.

Joanie Mahoney: ... which was hit so hard by Maria.

Isabel Valentín: Yeah. Vieques is an island that is external to Puerto Rico, but it's still part of the Puerto Rican archipelago, which actually does not just consist of Puerto Rico but consists of three different islands, Vieques, Culebra, and Puerto Rico.

Joanie Mahoney: Thank you very much for that. The students that we heard from did talk about the fact that people showed up, and then they were gone. Then different people showed up, and then they were gone. It made me really proud to sit at that table to know that ESF has been showing up in Vieques since Hurricane Maria and has consistently had students and staff that have gotten to know people on the island. There's a level of trust and there's some real work that's being done. But it didn't sound like that was generally the case.

Isabel Valentín: No, not at all.

Joanie Mahoney: I think having a best practices for you to be able to share with other institutions that want to be helpful, but have to recognize the effect of showing up, as you said, writing a paper and then leaving-

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 you're doing to the ability for people to continue to show up, when locals maybe will get fed up because they put a lot of time and effort and they invest in these people that come here that say they want to help. They're there for a short time and then they're gone.

Isabel Valentín: So future researchers tend to get hostile reactions from the communities, which are understandable based on the circumstances. The biggest issue with the way information is researched in academic institutions is that a lot of academics believe that you can just be different than the people around you just by thinking different thoughts.

If you are not actively fighting and unlearning systems of oppression that were built into us the second we were born, then you are perpetuating them. So what I'm trying to do is teach people that have not had to awareness or access to this information how they can not only unlearn, but actually free their thought process from these colonial, racist narratives that were imposed upon us since our youth.

Joanie Mahoney: Interesting. Interesting. How about you, Savannah? What is the work that you're doing here? I know you finished your undergraduate here, and I was very happy to hear that you chose ESF for your master's program. I've seen you out and about and I've been able to interact with you with some of your designs. But specific to the accessibility and the components of that design that might not be obvious to us when we walk around, what kinds of work are you doing?

Savannah Wright: So grad school was not in the picture originally, but once I finished, I like to call it an undergraduate capstone, because my last two years or so, I really focused on a project called mental health accessibility, which came up with six categories of design solutions and physical elements for built spaces that accommodate psychological conditions and invisible disabilities that are cognitive or psychological.

As I studied the ADA laws and what currently existed, I found myself saying, well, this is great. This is accessible for people who have physical disabilities. But for those of us that have cognitive or psychological disabilities, there's a lot lacking in public space that could be there.

So I took 31 DSM diagnoses, which I ... The DSM is tricky because it promotes the medical model of disability, which I don't support. However, to get people on board, it's a piece of literature that's universally recognized between many people, so it's easy to quantify and categorize and things like that.

So I used the DSM-5 31 diagnoses and basically went through and listed the symptoms of those diagnoses and found the opposite. So if you experience hot flashes, what is the solution to that thing? Well, it's to provide areas of coolness or natural breeze or things like that.

Those become design elements that you can incorporate into public spaces in many different categories. A lot of times these solutions address multiple conditions with one go.

So that was undergrad. Over the summer, before I decided to go back to grad school, I was trying to introduce this to Syracuse Parks and other firms and designers, and it very quickly dawned on me that there are still people who, number one, don't know what an invisible disability is or they're using the medical model of disability in healthcare practices and things like that, and that the people who I'm going to design things for are practicing harmful methods of viewing disability. And so, how can I design something that's accessible when the person who's going to be utilizing the space, number one, isn't going to support my design and, number two, doesn't even understand the complexity behind the reason for the design?

So in order to implement any sort of progressive thinking in landscape architecture or design ... And this is where I've gotten some pushback in the LA department specifically, because a lot of people will say, "Well, what does this have to do with landscape architecture or design?" My capstone is actually not directly landscape architecture related. I am breaking down the two most prominent institutions, which are education and healthcare, finding all of the ways the protocol, the physical environments, the unwritten protocol, and the norms that are harmful for the disabled community, and then rewriting those in a less harmful model, so that at the end of this, I could basically take this capstone project, hand it to the leaders of these institutions, and say, "Okay, here's what you need to do to make this an accessible and inclusive space."

Isabel Valentín: That is hilarious. I did not know that was your research.

Savannah Wright: Yes.

Isabel Valentín: We were doing the exact same thing but about different things. You're giving instructions to people that do not have access to the knowledge-

Savannah Wright: Yeah, it's basically like a guide book.

Isabel Valentín: ... but it's a hiring topic.

Joanie Mahoney: I had no idea coming into this-

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-

Isabel Valentín: 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 sleep because all I do is research this and I study this and I work some more." But I feel really good about it. I feel like I welcome that challenge and I don't really care what challenge I'm going to face because I probably have an answer or a rebuttal for you that's backed by a peer-reviewed article instead of just your little Instagram screenshot.

Joanie Mahoney: That is fantastic.

Savannah Wright: Well, it's hard with social media because ... We were talking about that earlier. But people can post anything and then it can get shared as many times as people want to share it.

Isabel Valentín: No one fact checks anymore either.

Savannah Wright: People will make these claims or they'll be like, "Well, disability has already been studied." I'm like, "Well, that's funny because where's your peer-reviewed article? Because my four peer-reviewed articles said that there's X, Y, and Z still missing."

Isabel Valentín: I always find that the pushback is a sign of success, because if there is a pushback against you changing a system that is so ingrained in people's way of thinking that it's not even conscious, that means ... Oh, there's a saying in Spanish. It doesn't exist in English. It's like if it itches, it's because you identify with it.

Savannah Wright: [inaudible 00:36:55].

Isabel Valentín: It stings. If the person you're speaking to is stung by what you're saying, and all you're saying is the way your research may or may not be slightly predatory

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 watered down.

Isabel Valentín: Instead of being detail-oriented, it's more broad picture, which, of course, we need a lot of broad-picture perspectives and initiatives. But if an idea is broken down into several segments, subtopics, differing perspectives, and there's no one disagreeing with it, it means that it's too generalized. It's way too generalized. There should be people that feel strongly about it. If there are no people feeling strongly about it, what is missing? What makes people feel strongly about it?

Joanie Mahoney: What's making the itch?

Isabel Valentín: So that ties in why personal experiences matter so much to the climate supporter, to the ... Every single person that exists in the world, if you don't have something that's driving you, if you don't have something making you itch, then you're not going to give the same energy that people that are itching are going to give. Then you won't-

Joanie Mahoney: That's such a good analogy as well.

Isabel Valentín: It really is a great analogy. I just find that you need to be passionate about it on a personal level, and so many issues are being spoken about in such an overgeneralized way that no one can identify with them, that people just feel every experience is distant to them and it does not.

Joanie Mahoney: That's interesting that you're saying that because I have been saying recently too, in line with your thinking, that ESF needs to recognize its role as an educator and bring the information to people. People who have fear and a desire to be helpful in this space around climate change and ... they don't know what they can do because everything is so big and it's like, "Well, what can I do in my space and what can I model for people?" In my experiences, people want to be helpful, generally speaking. But what can they do in their own homes that makes us more sustainable and more environmentally friendly?

I want to ask you just both a couple of questions before we finish. One is what's next? So you, Isabel, you're going to have this information for institutions about really best practices for engaging in research in communities like the one you grew up in. What are you going to do with that? Who's your audience and how is that going to be dispersed?

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 you were saying earlier, Joanie, a lot of people can't even fathom living in a reality where climate change is already affected, where all these realities are intersecting.

So what I am seeking to do is make these people that have no reason to feel identified with these communities, empathize for them in a way that applies to how they research, how they engage with them, and their potential for long-term commitment and resources provider.

Joanie Mahoney: That's excellent. How about you, Savannah? What is this culmination of your work?

Savannah Wright: My project's actually right now called the Three Scales Project because it's aiming for human, institutional, and global implementation of new protocol. Naturally the global implementation will come with the mass replication in human and institutional scales.

So my final product of my capstone will essentially be this book for institutions and also for humans. So when we talk about the human scale and harmful protocol, I'm going to give you a really easy example. The norm to shake somebody's hand upon meeting them, or you see someone and you greet them with a hug. In what world did anyone ever tell anyone that they could touch me?

But there are these protocol for someone who has OCD, PTSD, autism. These are negative sensory experiences or they might be flashbacks or traumatic experiences. And so, there are harmful protocol that humans do day-to-day to each other, one, two, three people, not even on the institutional scale.

So there will be a human component of this, of I'm human and as an individual, what can I do in my daily life to view a disability in a new light or to help a disabled person or to help with the advocacy component and how are my behaviors possibly harmful to that community? Then we'll look at the institutional scale, which is a little bit more complex, but these will be able to go to administration of hospitals, healthcare, education.

When I deliver these to the institutions and also say, "This is the human component and it's going to go with it. If you can deliver these to your employees," that's for everybody. The human component is for everybody. The institutional component is for people who are creating protocol that lots of people have to follow.

So that will be the primary outcome is just two separate documents, one that focuses on human behavior and then the other one that focuses on institutional and more of the policy side of things.

Isabel Valentín: Once again, it's very similar to what I'm doing, but I combined them both into one big document because I found that engaging with people personally may cause this interest, whereas engaging with people on an institutional level and letting it trickle down might be more effective. But I'm interested to see how both of our ideas develop.

Savannah Wright: Yeah. I think for the human side of things, it doesn't necessarily have to be like this, "You're a terrible person. You're doing this wrong. Fix it."

Isabel Valentín: Still fix, yeah.

Savannah Wright: It's, "Here's the suggestion. Let me plant the seed for you, because there's a chance that maybe you just aren't fully educated about the topic or maybe you're doing things- "

Joanie Mahoney: Which was Isabel's point.

Savannah Wright: "Maybe you're doing things-

Joanie Mahoney: We shouldn't be shaming people who don't know.

Savannah Wright: ... that you're not aware of." Like my example with the hand shaking, I have so many people in my life who are like, "I don't like hugs. I don't like shaking hands." I'm one of those people. I don't want hugs. I don't ... Unless I know you and I'm comfortable with it. Typically I'll say, "Oh, I'm not a hugger."

But these protocol, they've been ingrained into people's brains for how many years where it's just become a natural social practice, and sometimes those practices aren't wanted or desired. So there's just ways to be more cognizant as a human being about how you're engaging with these people, and slowly but surely, these human behaviors in the way they were able to change this perception of disability just creates more room at the table for people. It creates a positive outlook on other people. It makes you be more empathetic and more accepting.

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, of course, I feel like it's really important to know that this is a learnable skill, even if you're not the type of person that is able to ... Or that really struggles to engage with people that have different life experiences to you. If you find it difficult to open your brain to other perspectives, and you're aware of it, it is a learnable skill.

Savannah Wright: Absolutely.

Isabel Valentín: I think what both of us are trying to do here is teach a very learnable skill that people don't even find to be learnable. They're so ingrained in them.

Joanie Mahoney: It's very interesting, and I love the way you said it. Running in my head through a whole bunch of examples. But introspective people are able to hear the changes both of you want to make and listen and agree that they want to do better next time and learn from what you're talking about.

I think if people could hear that, I think everybody wants to be known as introspective, but really it is a pretty clear line of demarcation, is if you're immediately defensive and right and not listening and not thinking, that there is possibly a better way, or that not everybody feels the same way you do.

Savannah Wright: Everybody wants to say that they're an honest person or, "Oh, I'm accountable. I'm honest." Well, honesty and accountability is also recognizing the views of other people or allowing them the space to step in there with their factual evidence.

Joanie Mahoney: I love that you keep coming back to science and facts and data. That's like ... The world would be a better place if more people were.

Savannah Wright: Yeah, the numbers don't lie.

Isabel Valentín: That's that ESF education kicking in. If you're not citing your sources, what are you doing?

- 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?
- Isabel Valentín:** 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.

Isabel Valentín: Brave is one word for it. Some people say insane. When I got here, I was scared. I was terrified. ESF is a very different place. So a lot of what stereotypes or normal in an academic institution sounds like. But if I had to tell a student that is passionate about the environment, where to go, I wouldn't hesitate to tell them to come here. I know ESF gave me the resources and education I need to continue my field in the environmental sector.

And not even just stopping there, the connections, the mentors. ESF is such a small, dedicated community that I'd have to recommend it to any student that's passionate about environmental issues.

Savannah Wright: Yeah, I like what you said about it being a small, dedicated community. It's interesting because I lived on campus. And so, I was here all the time. Being on campus, you're protected from the outside world.

Isabel Valentín: Yes, a little bubble.

Savannah Wright: I feel a little bubble of protection when I'm at ESF. Then I leave and I'm like, "Oh, my goodness. Downtown is crazy. I want to go home."

Joanie Mahoney: "... is scary."

Savannah Wright: But I think that level of protection, knowing that people have your back, there are so many resources, and the intersection of so many points revolving around climate change. If you're in landscape architecture and you're passionate about climate change, if you are environmental science or environmental studies, there are so many different routes to get connected to other people in different disciplines. I as a landscape architect, I've talked to people in biology, I've talked to people in chemistry. I've talked to so many people.

Isabel Valentín: Shout out to biotech, yeah.

Savannah Wright: Yeah. There are so many great resources. We all understand here that climate change is not just one pin on a map. There are so many things that go into it. And so, the studies that you can do surrounding it are endless.

Joanie Mahoney: And you're surrounded with people like-minded, which I think is a very interesting way to go to college.

Isabel Valentín: It's an echo chamber, yes, but it is a factually correct and verifiable echo chamber.

Savannah Wright: Oh, yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: Very good.

- 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.