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SCHEDLER HONORS COLLEGE ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
Brittany Keil Oral History Interview Transcription

Narrator Name: Keil, Brittany

Interviewer Name: Clark, Lillian

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Location of Interview: Little Rock, AR (Remote Interview - Zoom Recording)

Acronyms:

LC= Lillian Clark

BK= Brittany Keil

Interview Summary

The following oral history of a recorded interview with Brittany Keil conducted by Lillian Clark on March 15, 2022. This interview is part of the Schedler Honors College Oral History Project where current students and alumni are asked to reflect on their time before, during, and after her time in the UCA Honors College.

LC [00:00:05] Do you have any questions before I begin the interview?

BK [00:00:08] I don't think so, let's see how it goes.

LC [00:00:11] This is Lillian Clark with the Schedler Honors College Oral History Project. Today is March 15 and I am interviewing Brittany Keils at home in Little Rock, Arkansas. We will be talking about student experience leading up to and during their time in the Honors College. Please state your name and age for the recording.

BK [00:00:39] I'm Brittany Keil and I am thirty two and my main name was Brittany Edwards.

LC [00:00:46] What years did you attend the honors college?

BK [00:00:50] I started in 2008 and graduated in 2012.

LC [00:00:57] What are your pronouns?

BK [00:01:01] She/her

LC [00:01:03] Where are you from?

BK [00:01:07] Texarkana, Arkansas

LC [00:01:11] What was it there?

BK [00:01:14] Kind of shitty, honestly, I'm not a big fan of my hometown. It's a fine place for people to live. I don't know. It's a small town. It's kind of lost a lot of its industry. My dad works at a factory.

LC [00:01:32] What was the education like there growing up?

BK [00:01:35] I went to a public high school and there are definitely pockets of excellence in my high school. But in general, Texarkana is a pretty impoverished area. The city is interesting because it's split between the Texas and Arkansas side and the Texas side is a lot richer with better schools. Most middle class or upper middle class people pay for their kids to go to Texas or they live on the Texas side. My family was very much working class, and so I went to the Arkansas side and I'd say I got a good education, but I don't know. I didn't know a lot of people when I was in high school who went to college. I didn't intend to go to college. Different than a lot of my friends, that I went to the honors college.

LC [00:02:24] Who are your parents?

BK [00:02:27] My mother's name is Jennifer Williams Night and my dad's name is Chris Edwards.

LC [00:02:36] What did they do?

BK [00:02:38] My mom was a nurse and my dad worked at a factory.

LC [00:02:47] How would you say your parents influenced your education as you were growing up?

BK [00:02:54] Honestly, my parents, I think my mom would disagree now, but they kind of discouraged me going away for college because they said when people went away for college, they changed and they didn't want to come back to Texarkana, and they didn't care as much about family. That was something that was actually discouraged. I knew that at one point in my life, I knew I wanted to go to college. I wanted to get out of Texarkana and live a different life than my parents had lived. But it didn't seem like a very realistic opportunity to me.

LC [00:03:28] Did you have a support system for your education growing up?

BK [00:03:32] Not really. My family had sometimes a hard time, so my dad was incarcerated at different parts during my childhood and when a family is under stress, it's hard to build those systems you need to support a child. Making time for studying and those kinds of things. We always had a hard time figuring out who was going to pick us up from school or who was going to take us to school. Now, I'm a parent, and they were just under so much stress, poverty is a hard thing no matter what, and it's hard to raise children as well.

LC [00:04:10] Tell me about some of your dream jobs you had while you were growing up.

BK [00:04:15] My first dream job was to be a country music singer, like LeAnn Rimes. My second dream job is, my great grandfather was actually an attorney, so I wanted to be an attorney so that someone would make my portrait. He had this old dusty portrait. I was like, "I want to have a portrait, too, so I should be a lawyer." Then I wanted to be a writer, which I am a writer now, so that's pretty cool. I found a list from high school of my dreams recently, and one of them was to be a writer at a magazine, which I am now. So that's cool, and I think those were my major dreams.

LC [00:04:59] That's very cool. How would you describe your high school experience?

BK [00:05:10] It was tough shit to be a high schooler, it's really hard. I worked from the time I was in 9th grade to 12th grade. I didn't have a lot of the same free time that a lot more middle class families had. There was always the juggling of school and AP classes and then going to work after school. As I mentioned, there was some instability in my home, so sometimes it was hard to focus on school. I feel that stress and that trauma colored a lot of my high school experience, but there are definitely some great times too.

LC [00:05:55] Where did you work?

BK [00:05:58] I worked at the North Park baseball arena, so it was one of those places that has 10 baseball games going on all the time. I worked as a fry cook in their restaurant business.

LC [00:06:13] Did you enjoy having that job or was it—?

BK [00:06:16] You know, I loved it, it was originally [just for money], but I really loved it. I mentioned that my family was kind of stressful, and so work was a place I could be successful. It was simple, you know, you fried chicken strips and then you pulled them out. It's not hard, but I enjoyed it, and I also enjoyed the social interactions. I was a shy kid, but like, you know, there's something about being in a tiny box restaurant with five other teenagers, you make friends. I enjoyed the social interactions and in general, I liked work and I liked the freedom that money afforded me.

LC [00:06:49] Were you involved in any extracurriculars in high school?

BK [00:06:57] Not really, I was a part of clubs, but I wasn't really into or active in things. I ran hurdles when I was younger. With work and school, I was a kid who took a lot of AP classes. That took a lot of my time, I didn't have a lot of extra time to go to clubs. I had to go to work after school. I was in the Young Democrats. We had three meetings, but one of the meetings involved Bill Clinton coming to meet us, so it's definitely a memory.

LC [00:07:31] Yeah, that's cool. What would you say you left behind when you went to college?

BK [00:07:41] I had a strong identity around growing up working class. That identity was tinged with negatives and some experiences of self-doubt. It was something that I understood and when I moved to college and I started to—most people at UCA at the time were middle class or higher. Most of the people I knew who called themselves middle class, their dads were like doctors and their moms were like scientists. They weren't what I would call middle class coming from Texarkana. I feel like that culture was something that I left behind. It still surprises people. I'm mostly vegetarian and one of my favorite foods is Totino's party pizzas. That's home food to me, that's comfort food. I think that's something that I left behind. I have really distanced myself from my family for a variety of reasons. In some ways, it's celebratory in getting to form your own identity, but I lost my identity as a part of my family.

LC [00:09:08] Can you tell me about your experience with applying to the Honors College and maybe the i squared day?

BK [00:09:21] It's one of the most vivid days of my life. I wasn't planning on going off to college. I had just planned on going to my community college and the big reason for that was so stupid looking back, I thought I was going to marry my high school boyfriend. He dumped me the week before prom, and I know, he was a bad dude. I was like, “Wow, I got to get out of this town.” My friend Garrett was applying for UCA honors, and he was like, “They give you a full ride scholarship

if you get in.” I was like, “Oh God, damn, I've got to apply.” Then I applied and they invited me to I squared day and I remember going with my mom and there was this shuttle that you parked in a parking lot far away and the shuttle took you to McAllister. This girl was waiting there and we ended up becoming friends. She was dressed in a business suit in heels and looked so professional to me, and I was like, “Oh shit, this is a dress up thing, I don't know what I'm doing.” I remember interviewing with Adam Frank and I interviewed like my life depended on it. I was like, I've got one shot, I didn't apply anywhere else. If I don't get it, then that means I have to stay in Texarkana and be afraid of running into my ex all the time. I interviewed really hard and I just remember thinking like, “I can't blow this.”

It was weird because during i-squared day, they have events for the parents and my mom was so confused on my sudden urge to leave Texarkana. I think she was weirded out, hanging out with all of these parents that are very different from her and had different expectations of parenthood. We had literally never talked about me going to college. Then there it was like, “Mom, I have to get into this college.” I remember being in the interview and I ended up knowing some of the people in my interview. I remember this girl saying in the interview that she didn't like to read books. I'm thinking, like, “Bad answer, chica, can't do that.” She asked me to be her roommate after and I was like, “Yeah, OK,” then in my head, I was like, “I don't think she's going to get in.” She didn't. I just remember it being so intensely fun but a stressful experience. I was so intimidated. I was under such pressure. I remember other kids being like, “I'm also interviewing at *naming other colleges*” and I was like, “Oh, well, I'm not doing that, so I hope this works out.” It thankfully did.

LC [00:12:17] What was your reaction when you found out you got it?

BK [00:12:21] Huge relief. I had a weird experience, and I don't know if it's that weird for poor people, but I had already moved out of my parents house. In high school, I was responsible for a car payment, insurance, and a portion of my rent. I had so much of a financial burden on me. Then when I found out that I was accepted, it meant this way out. That I hadn't known would be there and I remember moving into my dorm and being like, “There's no rent? Y'all. This is insane. There's no rent at this place and we get to eat their food and they don't charge us!” I feel I had to become an adult a little bit earlier. But I got to say, I don't like adulthood, I want to be a kid a little longer and get to do that through, getting accepted. I was so excited. I was so proud. I remember running around to all of my teachers and my high school and telling them I was going to college, after all. It had been a big problem with me and my English teacher because she had told me I was stupid for not applying to college, which she was right. Just a profound sense of relief.

LC [00:13:39] Yeah, that's good. Do you have any advice for any potential applicants?

BK [00:13:48] I would say, if you're a first gen. college student, reach out and ask questions, because even though they try really hard, their expectations built into college admission are just very privileged, centric. They're designed for privileged people with the best intentions, but sometimes it doesn't work out. Like, for example, when I was applying to UCA, I actually checked that I was applying to graduate school and not undergraduate because I'd never heard either of the words. I assumed that undergraduate meant I hadn't graduated high school, and I was like, “Oh no, I'm definitely graduating high school.” Lots of things like that, and I had no idea how to navigate the system. There's so many cultural expectations built in, and it's helpful sometimes if you can find a mentor who have a similar experience. I had never heard of NPR when I walked on UCA's campus and that all of the honors you weirdo people like had so many interests I had no idea existed.

LC [00:14:54] What was your first impression of the Honors College? Either people or classes?

BK [00:15:02] I was so excited. Like I said, there were so many things, I didn't have any bills except my car insurance. I had been constantly running out of money and then suddenly I got access aid. I felt like I had won one of those resorts like a free stay at a beach. That's how I felt. Then I was so surprised because I had been warned again and again that I would lose my scholarship because people go to college and party too hard. I was like, "What? There's only like four classes. That's it. What do I do the rest of the time? I don't have to work a job." I just had all of this free time that I had never experienced in my life since I was a child. What I did with that was I realized that I didn't know who I was. I got to embark on this magical journey of self-exploration with lots of failure and learning, but I I had no idea what I liked. I had no idea what I was interested in, I had just been, I'd been surviving up to that point and it was so cool to get to meet friends and not just friends who you're friends with because they live in the same town as you and you don't have any other choices. Friends you share interests or values with, and I actually met my husband moving into my freshman dorm. We didn't date for a good long time. I wasn't interested in dating after my high school boyfriend and I was like, "No, I'm in college. I don't. I don't want to deal with that." I met him moving into Farris. He was holding a microwave and I was holding a toaster oven.

LC [00:16:45] Tell me about some of the people you met and became friends with.

BK [00:16:54] I had three roommates that I became friends with, and they were all from Northwest Arkansas, which is culturally very different from Texarkana. We became really good friends, but I learned so much from them. I met my husband, Danny. He had long blond hair and drove a Mini Cooper. Coming from Texarkana, where every single dude drives a truck and has like truck nuts, I had never experienced a man like him.

There were mentors, I remember meeting Whit [Barringer], she was a senior when I was a freshman. I remember just meeting people who I was so shocked at how developed their interests were. I was like, "Oh, I find this thing vaguely interesting, I didn't know you could like, go all out about it." I didn't know that adult board games existed. There were so many things to learn like that. I remember meeting professors and like everybody, I was really intimidated by Donna, and Doug.

When I was a freshman I started a dog sitting for Norb because I still needed money. I still had more financial requirements than the average college student without any cost. I still had to pay my car payment and other things. I started taking side hustles and the honors college professors. I feel like they were like, "Oh, this girl, she actually needs money." so I babysat Donna's kids. I house-sat for Norb and kept Sasha, his dog. I worked dredging out this stream behind his house. That was what I was doing on the side, trying any way I could to still make my bills meet. I feel like a lot of college students go to college and their parents still paid for things that my family wasn't in the position to do that.

LC [00:19:09] What kind of impact did that have on your college experience

BK [00:19:16] Working or meeting friends?

LC [00:19:17] Working.

BK [00:19:19] It's so big and I need to talk to Donna about this. I had no idea how middle class people lived. Getting to hang out in their homes and see how they interacted with their children was totally new to me. I think about it all this time, I have a two year old now. I think about babysitting Katie Gray and Archer all the time because I think about how gentle parenting was something I'd never experienced until I saw Donna and Noel do it. It was just a totally different thing, but also it was so important for me because this is going to sound so capitalist crazy, but I didn't know how to be a part of a place that wasn't work. Work helped me feel like I was a part of the community and I learned to feel like I was a part of the community in other ways too. I had a really interesting experience, so my mom actually moved out and I didn't have a room at home. The first year I was

there, I stayed Christmas break at Farris and it was me and three other kids. We played the whole time and we had so much fun. But the next year, UCA decided to make the decision and not allow the residence halls to be open over Christmas break. So I had to live in my car. I know, looking back, I mean, I'm laughing, it's not funny, but you know school is not made for poor people and or at least when I was there. There were those kinds of things, I was like, "Where do I go? Like, I'm getting kicked out of my home" and I didn't have somewhere to go.

LC [00:21:07] You said earlier you went through a bunch of self-exploration and developing your interests. What did you find was the most successful way to figure out who you were?

BK [00:21:23] I had this advice that was given to me by this teacher that I didn't like. That was to leave my room and say yes to everything. I think there's probably a tangent on the other side, like "Later, I learned how to say no to things." Somebody would be like, "Hey, we're playing ultimate frisbee." and I'd be like, "I've never heard of either of those words, let's go." I was just really brave looking back. I remember feeling like I was a blank canvas where I could like anything I didn't know. In the honors college it was for me a very safe space for that exploration. I made so many friends and so many of them were so weird. There was this guy that made opium tea in his dorm and we would play chess. All kinds of characters and just saying yes and making those friendships. I couldn't sleep, poverty leaves its marks on everybody, and I feel like sleeplessness was one that I had in college, I was so anxious I'd lose my scholarship so I would just walk around the UCA campus over and over again. I met so many people on those walks, other people who couldn't sleep for various reasons. That was a way.

LC [00:22:55] Did you ever walk with other people, or was it usually just by yourself?

BK [00:23:01] I would walk with other people sometimes. I remember walking with people and not being that close friends with them. I would be like, "Oh, I see you out here, what do you do?" I've always been a curious person, so it was a way to learn people, too. I wanted so badly to know how to be successful at college. Those kinds of interactions are where I learned what kind of people are at UCA.

LC [00:23:36] Coming from a poor background, did you feel disconnected from peers in the honors college or did you feel like there were other people that could relate to you?

BK [00:23:46] I felt so disconnected. I remember I felt like we didn't come from the same culture. We didn't understand the same references, we didn't have the same interests. I ended up finding other poor people at UCA honors, it was mostly the kids who stayed in the dorm over Christmas break. Because they didn't have anywhere to go or maybe their families— a lot of working class families, when you're 18, you're an adult, so you get out of the nest. That was a weird place for some people. But no, super disconnected like I just remember being feeling like people were such children. I was like, "you don't know how to do laundry. Like, are you serious? Who's doing it for you?" On the other hand, I felt like I was so grown up that there were decisions I shouldn't have made or I should have come to someone to talk about. I just did it. I had a cat in Farris for a year.

LC [00:25:07] Was it an ESA?

BK [00:25:10] No. It was a kitten I found on the campus and I trapped her, and I brought her into my dorm and I actually had one roommate who didn't know that I had a cat. She saw the kitten one time and she was like, "I had a really weird dream last night," and I was like, "Yeah..." I thought of myself as an adult so I didn't like any infringements on my freedom or whatever. I wasn't always as good a community member now. Looking back, I'm like, "I shouldn't have had a cat. Someone could've had an allergy," I didn't know, you know

LC [00:25:54] You did it.

BK [00:25:57] I had to study abroad. So I rehomed the cat with my friend's mom, and she is still living a great life.

LC [00:26:07] How did you choose your major?

BK [00:26:10] I had never heard of majors. Looking back, I sound like such an idiot. I just didn't know. I went to this majors fair and someone had asked me, "What do you want to major in? And I was like, "What does that mean? I don't understand." They're like, "Well, what was your favorite class in high school?" I said English, and that became my major through inertia. I loved my classes, but I don't know if going back I would do it all again the same way. Maybe I would have. You know, I spent eight years as a special education teacher before I was a writer, and I feel I would have enjoyed studying education or other things like that.

LC [00:26:58] Did you have any other minors besides the honors minor?

BK [00:27:03] I had a minor in philosophy.

LC [00:27:15] Were you involved in any extracurriculars in college?

BK [00:27:22] I was involved in UCA Green Week, which was an environmentally friendly push where we talked about things happening on the campus. I was a mentor for the Honors College and I was a part of Sigma Tau Delta. It's not a sorority, it's an honors group for English majors. I was pretty involved in honors, I was an honors HCOL moderator, but it was dying when I joined, so it was nearly dead.

LC [00:28:21] Tell me about your experience as a mentor. How did you decide that you wanted to do that?

BK [00:28:26] I wanted the better room. They got the corner rooms. Then there was this girl, Kate, who really wanted me to do the mentor program. I was like, "Yeah, sure, it comes with a \$500 stipend." Like I said, I was always on the hustle. I was like, "OK, sure, I get a better room. I get paid. I will help some freshmen, sure." I work with my mentee. Like, she's here, her desk is, I'm at work right now. Her desk is a couple of rows away.

LC [00:29:05] Were you close with her during honors?

BK [00:29:08] Kinda, not really I remember her. She had a really bad breakup, the first month of college, as many freshmen do. I was sitting with her and I was like, "Yeah, I know it really sucks." She was like, "I don't think you could possibly understand." I remember being like, "Oh man, are we all like this?" She and I laugh about it now. Yeah, we were close. I feel like a mentor is the kind of thing where you find your people and then you move on.

LC [00:29:41] Yes.

BK [00:29:44] I didn't actually meet my mentor. I can't remember her now that I think about it.

LC [00:29:49] Did you have someone you looked up to in honors college?

BK [00:29:59] Yes, so many people. There were peer mentors too, I feel like I was pushed so much by people. I remember this girl named Amber, there was also this guy Isaac Jones. He had struggled with houselessness and I had to and so we both had similar experiences around that. I had a really phenomenal friend group, and looking back I should have sought out mentorship a little bit more.

LC [00:30:52] Do you remember where you went for a freshman retreat?

BK [00:30:56] Yeah, so I went to the Winthrop Rockefeller Institute on Patogeni Mountain. I would later apply to work there and I actually worked there part time. My sophomore, junior and senior year.

LC [00:31:13] How was that during school that you worked there?

BK [00:31:16] Yeah, so I arranged my class schedule so that I took my classes on either Monday, Wednesday, Friday or Tuesdays and Thursdays, and then I drove up to the mountain to work the other days. See, always on my hustle.

LC [00:31:31] Do you like being busy?

BK [00:31:33] I do. My New Year's Resolution is to get better at resting. I'm now 32 and my husband is such a chill person. I'm trying to get better at resting and it's difficult because I'm a busybody.

LC [00:31:57] Yes. How would you say the honors program has changed your perspective on education or on the world?

BK [00:32:08] In so many ways it taught me that mentorship and careful attention can change your life. I remember when I started honors I didn't understand Core I and Core II, and I thought Core II was a total wash. I was like, "I had so much fun focusing on myself, I don't want to focus on this community," but those early readings that I return to again and again as an adult. I was just talking with my team about the Doubting and Believing game. I work with a team of writers, and I feel like one of our problems sometimes is we're too quick to go in and point out the problems of a piece and not try to understand how the logic is carried out. Those are fundamental ideas that impacted the thoughtfulness with which I regarded the world around me and I took a class when I was a senior because my friends were taking it. It was Doug's decision making class and it was one of the best classes I ever took. I still return to the principles of decision making that we discuss all the time, and I feel like they've changed my life for the better.

LC [00:33:33] What are some of those principles you think about?

BK [00:33:36] There's this idea of affectionate interpretation, and it's based on Jane Addams, the social reformer. She has this idea of interpreting everyone's actions through the best possible lens. It's the very extreme end of giving someone the benefit of the doubt. It's so easy to project your feelings on someone, and it's so easy to misinterpret how people's actions are calculated. I feel like it's made me a better manager and a better mom and a better teacher. It's just to think of everybody through the best possible lens and sometimes it feels a bit doofy like, "Oh, you say you had a rough night? Again." I wanted to push that. If our world needs anything, it's more empathy. That's something that has really pushed how I interact with other people. Even with my toddler, there's almost always a reason that she's doing what she's doing, I just have to think about it.

LC [00:34:42] Did you have a community service project in Core II

BK [00:34:51] I think we did. I don't remember it.

LC [00:34:57] Do you remember you had Adam Frank for Core I, right?

BK [00:35:06] Yes, I had Adam Frank for Core I, who did I have for Core II? It might have been Cindy.

LC [00:35:12] Possibly, I know I have it somewhere written.

BK [00:35:17] I want to pull up my transcript and look at it. I don't think I have it.

LC [00:35:26] Mm hmm.

BK [00:35:28] Yeah. I can't remember.

LC [00:35:31] It's okay. Do you remember your favorite honors class that you took?

BK [00:35:40] Yes, so I took Norbs religion class.

LC [00:35:46] Right.

BK [00:35:48] I knew by that point that I was an atheist or I knew that there was something wrong with how I had been taught religion or the religion that people believed around me. There was just too much pain and hate. Norbs religion class was very exploratory and discussion based. I had not known how to articulate feelings around religious confusion and also a desire to respect other people's religions. It was such a great discussion based class, and it was his last class he taught so that was really special.

LC [00:36:52] Can you tell me about your relationship with Norb?

BK [00:36:59] Yes. I said I house-sat for Norb and I kept his dog, Sasha and his daughter's dog, Rocky. I remember Rocky very specifically because it was a little pug and it had this snorting problem. So I'd have to watch him sleep. Norb really recognized that it would have been so easy for me to become lost and adrift. I didn't have the same ingrained expectation of college that a lot of my peers had. He was so open to including me in that work. I remember having so many discussions with him and his wife, Carol and I actually went to his funeral and saw her and we got to reconnect a little bit, you know, not the time for talking. Looking back, I'm so grateful for his kindness and giving his time and looking back, I feel like my professors recognize that I felt most comfortable and I was working. I could do my best work while working. SI'd help him work in the yard and I helped him dredge the stream by his house and we would just talk about things. He opened the world so much for me in helping me understand how big the world was and what I could do in it. I would house sit for them, which I hated staying in the dorm. I always did, I've never been good at those "everybody follows the same rules," just too used to my own freedom. I would stay in his house and watch his house for him. He was always trying to encourage me to have my friends over to his house while he wasn't there. I was like, "I can't do that Norb. That's not allowed." Then he's like, "No, you need to work on your social relationships, invite the people over." I remember I had friends over and we had sangria in their beautiful garden, it was so nice.

LC [00:38:43] Which Professor impacted you the most in college? You can have multiple, if you like.

BK [00:38:56] That's so hard. I feel like I was very impacted by Donna's parenting. She was such a badass in school, she was so professional, she probably still is and very guarded. Seeing her melt away with her children really modeled for me what motherhood can look like. Also what being a working mom could look like because I didn't know what it would be like to be a person and also a mom. I find myself thinking so much about her, that's something I should tell her. Doug's beautiful kindness. He was always such a good listener. Then there's, of course, Norb, he would always make fun of himself in a way that would let me know it was OK, and he always made fun of himself and called himself a narcissist. They helped me understand that the world was so much bigger.

LC [00:40:06] That's very cool. So tell me about your travels abroad.

BK [00:40:14] I feel like people who grow up in repressive environments that either have two tendencies. They either lean into it and become one of the flock or they bolt so far that they just take off running. I was always the take off running kind and I wanted to study abroad the farthest away I possibly could. I went to the study abroad office and they're like, "Oh, we have a sister school in Thailand." I was like, "Thailand, that's in Asia. That's all I know about this country," and I decided to go for it. I remember being really worried because I built such close friendships that I would have FOMO that my friends would get to do things while I was gone. I'm glad I went ahead and did it, and I studied women's studies in Thailand. It was really cool. I was actually just talking about it today, we interviewed owners of GooGoo Bars and discussed sex work in Thailand. It was so illuminating to me and I'd kind of mentioned the food thing. One of my biggest holdovers from the way I grew up is I was a very picky eater, and people find that out about me now and they're so surprised, but I spent my first two months in the heartland exclusively eating tropical fruit and potato chips. That was it. I felt such a huge change that I wanted to latch down on what I could understand. Then once I started to feel safe, I started to explore other foods and I fell in love with Thailand, which I think was a surprise for me because I had always had a reflexive need to try and be in control of situations. Thailand is a place where that doesn't happen. It was fun to learn about myself through getting lost in Thailand. Thailand is not a work oriented culture. I got there and I couldn't legally work. Schools in Thailand are only four days long, always a three day weekend every weekend. I had to learn to have fun and I had done that a lot in college. To live a life of fun where that was the most important thing. I fell in love with Thailand and I loved it so much I ended up deciding to apply for a Fulbright to go back to Southeast Asia, which I did. I had a Fulbright in Malaysia.

LC [00:42:48] That's very cool. When did you go to Malaysia?

BK [00:42:53] 2013.

LC [00:43:03] Those are the only two places you studied abroad?

BK [00:43:06] Yeah, so after my trip to Thailand, my husband and I backpacked through Europe, so we flew to Moscow and then Rome and then backpacked our way through there. I think that's it. I had this big hold up about applying for TAG grants, I was worried about wasting the Honors College money. Looking back, I wish I had applied for more and done more. My husband studied abroad in New Zealand as well. I had this weird hang up, and I wish I hadn't had it.

LC [00:43:45] Right. Were there any particular readings that sparked your interest and that you continue to think about as you look back at Honors?

BK [00:43:56] Yeah, I mentioned Peter Elbows, The Doubting and Believing Game. I recently returned to one. I have this bag that Norb gave me, it looks like a giant bank bag that has all of our readings on it. I also really identified with a Marx reading and I had never before. I had never

encountered ideas of socialism when I was in high school and I had been raised in a culture, as you can probably tell through this conversation where work is king and work ethic is king. I was like, "What if that wasn't the case?" That was definitely something that planted a thought in my head and our reading on pacifism. I thought pacifism, when I heard of it was like the silliest thing I've ever heard was like, "How could that work?" But the older I get, the more I find myself leaning into pacifism.

LC [00:45:05] Did you go to graduate school?

BK [00:45:08] Yes, so I got my education masters at Johns Hopkins University in Baltimore.

LC [00:45:15] That's cool. Then you lived in Baltimore?

BK [00:45:18] I lived in D.C.

LC [00:45:25] Were you there with your husband?

BK [00:45:27] Yes, he got his masters at the University of Maryland and I got mine at Johns Hopkins, and he is currently considering a doctoral program at Melbourne University in Australia. We're actually traveling there next week.

LC [00:45:41] Are you excited?

BK [00:45:46] I'm so excited. I haven't gotten to travel much with the pandemic. Travel was such a huge part of my early 20s and I went on a trip two and a half years ago to Belgium and Amsterdam, and that was really nice. I'm excited. We're going to Melbourne next week and then in September, we're going to Helsinki for another university tour.

LC [00:46:10] What is your job right now?

BK [00:46:15] I write for an education magazine called School CEO. It's a magazine targeted towards superintendents, and so it's about all things superintendency.

LC [00:46:26] Are you hoping to continue working there?

BK [00:46:33] I'm sorry, can you repeat that question?

LC [00:46:35] Are you hoping to continue working there?

BK [00:46:39] Yeah, I really like it. We'll see with my husband's plans and everything, but I definitely decide I intend to continue as a writer. We're actually hiring if you know anybody.

LC [00:46:ou59] Can you talk about any opportunities that you had during college or after college because of the honors college that you wouldn't have had without it?

BK [00:47:09] Everything. Oh my goodness. I wasn't going to college otherwise, so I'd probably still be in Texarkana. Maybe if I was a teacher. I got introduced to Winrock, where I worked and met my mentor, Johanna Campbell. She's a writer and she still lives on Petit Jean. All of the potential was unlocked for me. In a study abroad, I did a tag grant in D.C. where I interned with the Peace Corps. Thousands of micro opportunities.

LC [00:47:57] So tell me about the Peace Corps.

BK [00:48:00] I interned there with their returned education policy, and that was really cool. I actually got my writing started there. One of my coworkers, who was like my boss, had a travel blog that she arranged writers for, and so she started paying me by the article. Then that led to a lot more writing that I've done until now. I'm writing full time. It was so cool. I'd never been to DC and I lived in DC in a little house in Georgetown that was part of the program, and it was just so cool. I got to interact with legislators and it was the whole D.C. intern kind of thing. If you ever get to do it, it's really fun. Then I later decided to move to Washington, D.C. and I used the Peace Corps to get my first job outside of college, which was at the American Association of University Women. I worked in communications at a women's organization for two years.

LC [00:49:05] I'm going to ask about your thesis. Do you remember your thesis?

BK [00:49:13] Yes. I think I told you, I later was like, "Oh, that was really colonialist." I wrote about the immigration experience as presented in literature of Muslim women. I had originally become interested in that topic while reading for Southeast Asia and a good chunk of Southeast Asia is predominantly Muslim. I became interested in that immigrant experience. Looking back, it was just so complex, I honestly wish I had just done an oral history of people who own diners in Arkansas or something that, something rooted that I understood. I wanted to do something that I knew almost nothing about and I thought of that as a challenge. I should have dug in and tried to understand other things.

LC [00:50:09] Who is your advisor for this project?

BK [00:50:14] It wasn't an honors person, so my honors adviser was Ellen Stengel. I had a lot of her husband's classes, so I knew her pretty well, and then there was another adviser who was this guy in the writing department. I don't remember his name, and he gave me really creepy vibes. He wrote books about students who liked their professors. I was like, [grimace], but he had already agreed to be my advisor, and so I just sucked it up.

LC [00:50:50] You said if you went back, you might do something different.

BK [00:50:54] Yeah, I wish... Well, you know, in some ways it was really helpful, since I ended up living in a Muslim country. That touch point gave me a better understanding for the life that I would be living. Womanhood is different in very conservative Muslim countries and living in Malaysia, I had the experience of being unmarried. Everybody just wanted to get me married. I was told not to discuss anyone I was dating, to be very secretive about it and my boss asked me to be his third wife. That's not something that's common, I would say. If I would have done something different, I wouldn't have been as prepared to live a full year by myself as the only American in a city of— and Malaysia is a very diverse country. There's an Indian subset and Amala subset there and then Chinese and Malaysian. I think it prepared me for the cultural differences I experienced.

LC [00:52:17] It's great. Did you come out of Malaysia having a different opinion on your thesis?

BK [00:52:26] Absolutely. I just read so many more books. When I lived a UCA, everybody had a handful of friends who were Muslim. I lived in a Muslim community, I worshiped with Muslims, you know, my Muslim friends. I learned so much about loving them and their religion that I don't think I had when I originally started my thesis. I wouldn't say that my thesis was Islamophobic, but it just it certainly wasn't like— I don't know, I learned to love Islam when I was in Malaysia, even though of course I didn't convert to Islam. I feel that love is a different lens.

LC [00:53:11] All right. We have about four minutes left, and if you have anything that you want to say or ask right now, I'm going to let you just speak your mind.

BK [00:53:24] I don't think so. I mean, I'm just really excited. The Honors College was such a huge impetus for me becoming the person I am and I hope that the Honors College continues to grow and develop, and I have former students who are in honors now and I love to see them thrive.

LC [00:53:46] Yes, it's very exciting. Where did you work as a teacher?

BK [00:53:54] I worked at Friendship Public Charter Schools in D.C. and then ESTEM, then Easter Seals

LC [00:53:58] I wanted to say thank you for this interview. I had a really good time.

BK [00:54:07] Thank you for listening to me. I don't normally like talking that much.

LC [00:54:10] No, that's great. I really appreciate you giving up your time and letting us pick your brain. I'm going to stop the recording now. OK.