

INDIE MAJOR PODCAST

3/4/24 Joseph Annan-Kingsley

Individualized Major: Global Health and Social Inequalities

Ken:

This is Indie Major, a show devoted to the wide ranging stories and visions of individualized majors at the University of Connecticut. I'm your host, Ken Cormier.

I'm here in the studio with Joseph Annan-Kingsley.

Joseph:

Hello. How are you?

Ken:

I'm doing well. How are you?

Joseph:

Very good.

Ken:

Joseph is an individualized major here at UConn. So why don't you tell us what your major is and what it all entails.

Joseph:

Yeah. So I'm a senior here at UConn with an individualized major in Global Health and Social Inequalities. And with this major, it's basically understanding what kind of social inequalities impact global health in general. And it's kind of looking at the themes of certain past inequalities that are still lingering around and how certain health professionals or scholars are taking all those into account and how that is affecting global health.

Ken:

So, when you came to UConn, did you come with a lot of these ideas about what you wanted to study and work toward already or did you have a period where you weren't sure what you were going to major in?

Joseph:

So coming into UConn, I came in as a biological science major on the premed track. And, you know, typical premed, it's like the biology, chemistry, neurology, all that good stuff. And I was generally interested in the biological sciences. And halfway through my freshman year, I started to question, do I really want to do this major? A lot of the talks that I had with medical students were like, you want to have a stand out application when you apply to med school. And that kind of came with a lot of pressure because thousands of applicants apply each year. And it's like, how do you stand out? It's like do you have to solve world hunger or do you have to cure cancer? So like, what do you do to stand out? So for me, my interest kind of lies in a lot of issues that revolved around the world. Because with my background, coming from the Ivory Coast, emigrated here, there's a lot of things that I witnessed and a lot of social inequalities that I've endured. And kind of thinking, well, how can I merge my interest of medicine and social

inequality? So I kind of started to think about, okay, maybe Allied Health might be a good idea for me. So I talked to a couple of advisors and they suggested to me the individualized program allows you to combine different topics, different courses for you to create a very particular major. And that's how I kind of heard about the program. And taking a couple classes that I would like to include in my overall plan of study, kind of made me really see that I can do something great with that. And I guess trying to stand out and my application wasn't the goal anymore. The goal was kind of to really understand what are my goals in medicine? What do I want to add to medicine? What do I want to bring forth? What do I want to question? What do I want to challenge? So that's how I kind of came about with the whole global health and social inequalities major in my interest overall.

Ken:

So, do you have courses in Allied Health in your major that you take?

Joseph:

Yes. So right now I have introduction to epidemiology. So it's a very popular Allied Health course. And it's very interesting to, kind of especially being in my senior year to have that course to wrap it up for my major.

Ken:

Yeah, now Allied Health is one of those majors. They're located in the College of Agricultural Health and Natural Resources. And it's kind of a wide scope, right, of courses that have to do with health in

all sorts of various ways. Some are straight kind of science courses, some are more social sciences is that correct?

Joseph:

Yes, yes. So there's a lot of intertwining, so some of them are hardcore sciences or other, a little balance of social sciences, Humanities and like everything else.

Ken:

Yeah, so then, so Allied Health and then what other disciplines do you draw on?

Joseph:

So for the major I mainly draw in Anthropology and Sociology. And in a lot of those disciplines, we kind of question. We sit down and do a lot of readings. Do a lot of analyzing articles, scholars, and kind of question, what's the main topic being discussed in medicine and with clinicians, with anthropologists? What are they bringing to the table? What are we facing? What are the issues we're facing? And from these courses, it's kind of, it makes you think, it makes you question a lot of, for me in particular, my interest was how is the education in medical school changing? How is the education adapting to what we're facing now?

Ken:

So let me ask you, was there any particular course or maybe a book that you read or even like a research project that you were involved in that really stands out as something that is just a really remarkable and crucial step that you took during your development here.

Joseph:

So I'll have to say actually recently when I took the course science, medicine, and race, a sociology course with Matthew Hughey. There's a lot of discussions about how certain inequalities in medicine came about and the long history of racism and medicine and how a lot of those ideologies are still kind of remaining. And how we're teaching in medical schools in terms of what are they teaching them in textbooks, what are they teaching them in conferences? And with that discussion, after the fall semester, I went back home and I had a meeting with my my mentor who was an intern at UConn Health, and in our conversation, a lot of her work revolved around what's called a conscripted curriculum. Which means that they have students sit in small groups, like a circle, and kind of discuss the ideas of what it's like being a student of color or like what it's like, what is race? Or in terms of what are the experiences with race And having to share that in a small group setting. And a lot of the discussions that we did in class kind of came up in a real life setting. And when we were talking, it was almost as if what we've discussed in class, it's what she's also living. So it kind of made me think, well, with this kind of major, it's real because that's what I'm living and that's what the feel that I'm going to and seeing that, that's the current issues right now, that kind of puts me on the right path. So overall, I think being able to realize that it's worthwhile what I'm doing with this major. It's something that I'm going to stand for a long time on doing.

Ken:

Okay, so you're still pre med?

Joseph:

Yes.

Ken:

And what's your ideal career? Physician of some kind. What do you picture yourself doing?

Joseph:

Right now, I'm looking at family medicine. It's a specialty that I've always looked forward to because of just how broad it is you get to see a wide range of patients and it's a very, not an easy lifestyle, but you have an understanding of medicine and how it functions throughout.

Ken:

Now, you said you came to the US from the Ivory Coast?

Joseph:

Yes.

Ken:

And how old were you when you came to the US?

Joseph:

I was ten years old.

Ken: Okay. Ten years old.

Joseph:

And the reason why I moved to the US. Was because my father had kidney failure, and he emigrated to the US in 2013. And me and my mother came in 2014. And I guess the interest with medicine kind of came with that being around him when he was sick, having to take care of him and all that. That kind of was the reason why I started to be interested in medicine and for more of like the social inequality part. At the time, in 2010, in the Ivory Coast there was a cut and there was almost like a Civil War. And with that, there's a lot of challenges that came with in terms of accessing health, being able to get the right kind of medicine, and those things weren't really available. So at a very young age, I started to kind of question, why are my oils my father not able to get what he wants or why can he not go to the Dr. so those kind of played into when I was young and coming to the US and, you know, in a new environment, new culture. It's very, it was, it was more like a culture shock. You know, coming to the US, I spoke French. French was my very first language. So, I came in the summer of 2014 and I was immediately thrown into the school system. And it was, it was challenging having to learn English, having to learn English, and trying to do assignments, and trying to make friends and all that. So I felt a little bit isolated in some sort of ways. But I knew that I was here for a particular goal. I know that the goal was for my father to get better, so he was able to get a kidney transplant in 2018, which was very much relieving. That was, I believe, my junior year in high school, and it was at the time of SAT prep and college prep. So having that off of my shoulder in 2018 was kind of great. Great.

Ken:

And that must have also contributed to your idea of how powerful it must be to be in that field of medical.

Joseph:

Absolutely. And one thing I can share is that while in the hospital, because I was with my mother, it was like a school night. I did not care what was going on. I was just in the hospital. And when the doctors went in, they were expecting like a long surgery, a long process. And they came out after 2 hours saying the kidney is working. And to me it was kind of a miracle because it's like well, of organ like rejection. What are the possibilities of that? And the surgeon was like, yeah, the kidney is 100% match, which is very rare. It's like all the anybody's match, everything is match. And it was a man from California and we're all the way in Connecticut. So hearing that was very, it was a very powerful moment for me, just kind of realizing the power of medicine and how far we've grown or how much we've learned from the past and what we can do now. So learning that his kidney now is 100% match for someone he's never met before was very powerful.

Ken:

Wow, so do you remember ever thinking of other things you wanted to be or was medicine kind of the first one?

Joseph:

The one thing I can think of is being a Disney star, you know, at a young age, just trying to sing. I see all the singing and all that. So I think at a very young age, that was my thing, trying to be a big star, but coming down to the reality of things and having life

experiences. I think that kind of made me mature at a pretty young age and like having to be independent in some sort of ways.

Ken:

Do you sing?

Joseph:

No, I don't.

Ken:

So not a musician. What do you do outside of your interests in medicine?

Joseph:

Oh, I am a first degree black belt in Taekwondo.

Ken:

Oh, wow.

Joseph:

And I'm actually the president of UConn Taekwondo. And it's been, it's been a good journey. I've been doing it since I was seven, so over ten years now. And it's been, it's what keeps me sane almost because the attributes of a tech athlete being disciplined, being respectful, knowing what are the good leadership qualities. And I think from the time I started up until now, it has been kind of like my backbone almost that I fall back on. Because being a

Korean martial art, there's a lot you learn from that. So coming in in my freshman year, I already knew a coach who was coaching at UConn because he was also my coach in my old school. So he kind of got me into the team and that we just started because I came in the year 2020 and with Covid we weren't able to have that face to face practice time. So it was kind of interesting of practicing in the dorms on Discord, which it's not the best, it's not ideal. And you know, you're in your dorm room sitting and like having to practice in your dorm. So it wasn't the best circumstances. But as we moved on, I was able to get in contact with the team and train even more, and having the chance to even travel to Ivy League schools and compete. That's something that I've enjoyed throughout my college experiences and having a solid team that, you know, we all have the same goals we all want, always want to motivate each other. So I think outside of medicine, outside of my academic areas, I think Taekwondo is what has been keeping me sane and what's keeping me just going now.

Ken:

You're graduating when in May?

Joseph:

This May.

Ken:

Okay. So that's coming up?

Joseph:

Yes. Yes.

Ken:

So, what are you thinking then, you know, what does your immediate future look like after college?

Joseph:

Well, after college, rest, that is something I would want to do. Rest, enjoy a little bit. I'm thinking of taking one or two years off before I start my application to medical school. Just because I want to take time with it and not rush it. That's something, when I talk to my parents, you know, it's like, why don't you apply to medical school? Why haven't you taken your MCATs? Why are you not doing this? So it's kind of hard to sit down there and say, this is kind of my journey. I don't want to rush it, I know that it's the feel that's right for me. I know it, but I want to also enjoy the journey because I just don't want to rush through my medical school education and get to my residency and then now it's just working all the time. So it's kind of like appreciating the way. So kind of taking a couple of years off to really solidify my applications when I need to solidify in. And just bring up a couple of scores, taking the MCAT and also doing more things with Taekwondo because I'm thinking of competing, possibly, possibly internationally, going to nationals. Something like that. Just to, because I will be doing medicine for the rest of my life, this is something that I'm not going to stop. So kind of like tapping into a little bit before I buckle down, sit down and actually study for medicine. That is my plan a little bit.

Ken:

Sounds like a good plan to me. Now, when you think about your own career in medicine, are you thinking of a career mainly in the US? Are you thinking of traveling or operating in other contexts?

Joseph:

With family medicine, I think it's a little bit flexible in terms of traveling. So definitely starting my career here in the US. And working, but as well as what I thought about doing, working with Doctors Without Borders is something that I'm very passionate about. Something that I would love to do. So definitely doing some traveling here and there and traveling to countries where I can help, where I can provide something and doing of that sort of nature. So definitely starting in the US and then working my way to travel.

Ken:

Now I've spoken with students who have an interest in medicine but also an interest in public health. Is public health interesting to you as well?

Joseph:

Very much, very much. I'm actually considering doing an MD/MPH program, medical degree and Masters in Public Health. Because I think having those two will be very solid in terms of my background, especially having such an individualized major in like global health and social inequalities. I think that that is very unique and that will kind of like solidify what I have.

Ken:

It's so interesting and so inspiring. And your parents must be excited.

Joseph:

Oh absolutely. They're very excited. This upcoming May, so exciting.

Ken:

Very good. Well, thank you so much for coming in to talk with us.

Joseph:

Yes, it was a pleasure talking with you.

Ken:

Thanks for listening to Indie Major. If you'd like more information about individualized and interdisciplinary studies at the University of Connecticut, please visit our website at iisp.uconn.edu. That's iisp.uconn.edu. We'd also like to thank UConn Enrichment Programs and WHUS UConn Radio for their support of this show.