

## **INDIE MAJOR PODCAST**

**2/5/25 Mariam Vargas**

### **Individualized Major: International Relations**

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 with Mariam Vargas. How are you, Mariam?

Mariam:

I'm good. How are you?

Ken:

Very good. Thanks for coming in. So you're an individualized major here at UConn. You want to tell us what your individualized major is and what it entails?

Mariam:

Yeah, so I am an international relations, individualized major, and basically that just means that I go deeper into international relations classes that are across the disciplines. So we have in political science, we have a ton of classes that are related to that, but then also in human rights, wgggs, history. And yeah, just studying how the world works, diplomacy, history, just to better understand all the things that happen in politics.

Ken:

Good. So wgggs would be Women's gender and sexuality studies.

Mariam:

Right.

Ken:

So you are actually also a double major, is that right?

Mariam:

Yes, yes.

Ken:

So political science is your other major?

Mariam:

Yeah.

Ken:

Right, so you're doing a political science major, but then the individualized goes much more deeply into specifically international relations.

Mariam:

Yeah.

Ken:

And what was it that inspired you to do the double major to go even deeper into that sort of stuff?

Mariam:

Every single school that I applied to when I was applying for college, I applied as an international relations major. And I have always loved politics, so I was thinking about political science, but UConn, unfortunately, didn't have international relations major, like, an official one. But I did see on the website for the individualized that a lot of people had done, like, global studies or things that were adjacent to that. So I knew even, like, going in that I was going to apply to the IMJR program. And I just really wanted to take more classes. And, of course, I could have taken classes without having the major, but I just feel like it was important to have, like, that certification that says that, like, that was my major because initially, that's, like, the one that I wanted for every other school.

Ken:

Right, right. Now, is this an interest that you've had for a long time?

Mariam:

Yeah, so I did, like, a little bit of Model UN in high school. I wasn't the most, like, applied person, but I did have a deep passion for international relations and politics just growing up. My family was very involved in politics, and we always had a lot of discussions. So I cared a lot about it, and I just thought it was interesting. So I never

really thought about what to major in until I had to, like, pick that box when I applied on the Common App. But I think it just like it was so easy to choose because that's what I've always been doing.

Ken:

So your family's into politics? Were they talking a lot of politics at the dinner table?

Mariam:

Yeah.

Ken:

Are they actually involved in politics?

Mariam:

Yeah, so both ways and in different in different forms, right, so my grandmother, she's a marine biologist, and she worked for the Ministry of the Environment in the Dominican Republic. So that's a little bit different than diplomacy, right? Like, she was working to protect protected areas and create laws that would protect the environment, biodiversity. I recently was at, like, the climate change conference, so it was kind of like a full circle moment talking to her about it. And then my grandfather, he was in the Ministry of sports. So he would travel for the Olympics, we call them the Bana Mericanos and, like, all the, like, subcategories of the Olympics almost. So he would go to, like, all the, he's been to, like, I think, every single continent, right?

Ken:

Wow.

Mariam:

So very international family. But he was also very active in his youth. He was part of this movement, which is the popular Dominican movement at the time, when students who were, like, in their 20s in the university, they were basically defending democracy, but also demanding student rights. And a lot of them got gunned down or they were political prisoners. Just because of the political instability at the time. And then my dad, he works for the, he doesn't work for the Ministry of Culture, but kind of because he works for the conservatory of music there, which is under the Ministry of Culture. So he has done a lot of diplomacy, I would say, because he went to school in Boston at Berkeley College of Music, and he was able to make the conservatory of music in DR a partner school, which was, you know, nothing that has ever happened like that at home. And so he was able to leverage, like, all his connections to do that and fund scholarships for students who were low income musicians who, because in the DR, like, studying music is a lot of the times it's not really a way to, you know, get social mobility. So he was able to get them to get scholarships funded by the government and by the university to go abroad and study music, like he did when he was in his 20s.

Ken:

Wow. Okay. So a lot of work and politics and the arts in the Dominican Republic, specifically, and this goes back to your grandparents generation. So now, are you did you grow up in the Dominican Republic?

Mariam:

I did. I grew up in the capital, Santo Domingo. I was born in Boston while my dad was studying in Berkeley and my mom was working. And then we moved back after, I think, I want to say three years, and then I grew up there ever since, moved back to the States just for college. So technically I still live there. I'm going back home for winter break on Friday.

Ken:

Wow. Wow. Now, you actually are engaged with a topic around the Dominican Republic for the research project that you're doing for your individualized major. Do you want to just give us, like, a brief assessment of what it is that you're looking at there?

Mariam:

Yeah, so for my capstone project, I'm looking at the lack of transitional justice in the Dominican Republic, and I'm doing that by comparing it to the theory of what is transitional justice, but also how has it looked in different countries in Latin America, looking at Argentina and Chile as well.

Ken:

So transitional justice, why don't you go over, what is transitional justice?

Mariam:

Transitional justice is basically the process in which a country kind of rebuilt itself after facing human rights atrocities, right? So, in

Rwanda, after neighbors and friends were killing each other, how do you, you know, have a society that can still thrive after that? Because at the end of the day, you still need to coexist with the people who like the victims still need to coexist with the people who were the perpetrators, right? And this can look differently across societies. So in Germany, that was very punitive, right? Like the Nazi collaborators and the heads of the Nazi government, they were all just put away. Um, in Rwanda, that was more restorative justice. So it was asking questions, like, why did you feel the need to commit the crimes? And like in the Balkans, as well, it has been both punitive and restorative. So it's just how can a society reckon with its past?

Ken:

And you said the Dominican Republic is still sort of struggling with that process and haven't really gone through it?

Mariam:

Yeah, yeah. So I went to Kosovo and I studied the transitional justice that happened in the Balkans after the Albanian genocide.

Ken:

Wait, wait, when was this?

Mariam:

This was Summer 2002.

Ken:

Was it a UConn program or..

Mariam:

It was I was just, like, a thing that I applied to, but UConn did fund it, the Human Rights Institute. So it was really cool to see that. And basically, I just learned about the Albanian genocide, what happened there, how the UN got involved, NATO. And then also how that society reckoned with its past. I even met, like, the first president of Kosovo, so that was really cool.

Ken:

Wow.

Mariam:

And so there, it kind of sparked my interest because I was thinking, like, wait a second. Like, we had all these truth and reconciliation commissions for a lot of countries, but knowing the history of my own country, I was very confused. Why didn't we have this going on, right? Like, it wasn't necessarily a genocide that happened there, but it was still a gross human rights violation. So I just questioned, when I went back home, like, why?

Ken:

Can you give us just a brief outline in the Dominican Republic, what's that history of sort of human rights abuses or government irresponsibility?

Mariam:



The DR, since, like, the 1900s or I want to say, like, maybe, like, super late 1800s had back to back to back dictatorships, right? So we had Trujillo who was like, he's known as one of the bloodiest dictators in history, and just basically oppressed everyone and everything and owned everything, disappeared, a lot of people, assassinated Haitians. I think it was around like 30,000 Haitians. And instilled just, like, like, a state of terror in the country. Um, and then he was assassinated or as we like to say, as Dominicans like to say, brought to justice in 1961, and we have our first free and fair elections. And so we elect Juan Bosch in 1962, but he only will only be president for seven months because then there's a coup 1963, and this is part of the better Dead than red, like this whole, communist scare that the US was having with the Cold War, and they did it in different countries. And so, after the US backed coup, we get Joaquin Balaguer and that basically splits the country into two. And there's just, like, more gross violations that were happening because Balaguer was basically through his right-hand man, and he's known as that. So it was basically a continuation of that dictatorship. There wasn't free and fair elections. I think he was president, quote on quote, like four times across like 24 years, maybe like six times.

Ken:

Wow.

Mariam:

And then we get our first actual presidential election after this whole deal went through, and Balaguer is like, Okay, I'm not going to do this again. I'm not going to steal the elections in 1998. But then after this, it's like, Oh, well, Tujia is dead, and then Balaguer is like 100-years-old. We can't really prosecute him. And then after that, we've

just been having, you know, free and fair elections. But no questions have been asked, you know?

Ken:

Yeah, yeah. So the process of transitional justice can be, like you said, prosecutions of people who have committed war crimes and other things. On the other hand, it can be just trying different strategies for coming to terms with some of these really big issues that have caused, you know, multigenerational suffering right through terror and all sorts of stuff. And there's a lot of different viewpoints about like, you know, which methods or strategies are actually valid or actually healing or restorative. You obviously have a lot of passion for these issues, for the histories that you're researching. And recently, you've just won a big fellowship. You want to tell us about that?

Mariam:

Yeah, so I am a 2025 Charles B Wrangle fellow. That's part of the again, Charles B Wrangle Graduate Fellowship is a mouthful. But basically, what that means is this summer, I'm going to be doing a congressional internship in DC, and then I'll be starting grad school in the fall, a fully funded master's in international relations or adjacent programs. And then I'll be doing a US Embassy internship 2026. And then after I graduate, I'll be joining the Foreign Service, which is just a really fancy name for being a US diplomat.

Ken:

Right. Wow. Now, how much of that did you already have sort of mapped out before this fellowship happened? Were these ideas

that you had or how much of this sort of fell into place after that fellowship fell into place?

Mariam:

I already knew I wanted to go to grad school. I value education a lot, and I love being at school. So, I already knew I wanted to do that. But it was also kind of putting all my eggs in a basket for the Wrangle fellowship, because if I didn't get it, probably would have still gone to grad school and then maybe done, like, the traditional route of joining the foreign service. But I definitely since, like, summer 2023, knew that I wanted to be a diplomat and had just been working ever since just to get this one fellowship. So yeah.

Ken:

Wow. Well, congratulations.

Mariam:

Thank you.

Ken:

That's awesome. Also, I like to ask sometimes, was there a particular moment or a course you took or a professor or mentor that you've had during the course of your individualized major that kind of stands out to you?

Mariam:

So many moments. I've had I have never complained about a professor. I've had so many great experiences. I think upon returning

from Kosovo, I took this class introduction to genocide studies with Michael Brand. I don't think that he teaches anymore because he's doing some field work. But that class was really interesting because after Kosovo, I realized like, Okay, it was not only, like, the Holocaust, right? Um with that class, I was able to understand, like, no, there's a lot of genocides that have happened before the Holocaust, after the Holocaust, and currently, right? So I learned a lot about Ethiopia, Sudan, and Armenia and all those different genocide that or conversations because a lot of people don't want to admit that is what's going on. So it was very interesting to see and that it was such a large field. And it wasn't like this old thing from World War two. Um, and I would also say, Dr. Hurtel she's my current advisor, and she teaches this class, which is comparative perspectives on human rights. It's a mouthful. But it's basically every single major treaty and convention, and you have to learn it. Like, the exams are super hard. And if you don't know, like, what Article 3 from, like, the Convention on the elimination of violence against women is, like, you're not going to pass. So it was really great, like, being passionate about human rights law. And just understanding my rights, but then looking at it. Like, how does this play out in the real world, right? Because it was looking at the UN. But then also like other conventions and treaties. For instance, like the Convention Against Torture, and now I'm taking this class, the politics of torture. And so it's kind of like a full circle moment, and I'm able to understand and click, but I also, like, know all of this law because of this one class. So it was super, super interesting.

Ken:

Well, that's great. So it sounds like a lot of these things are all connected, of course. And, you know, you created your own major plans, so it's probably no coincidence that you're seeing all these connections among courses. Well, this has been awesome.

Congratulations on all your successes, and thanks for coming in and sharing all this with us.

Mariam:

Thank 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](http://iisp.uconn.edu). That's [iisp.uconn.edu](http://iisp.uconn.edu). We'd also like to thank UConn Enrichment Programs and WHUS UConn Radio for their support of this show.