

INDIE MAJOR PODCAST

8/29/25 Krithika Santhanam - Revisited

Individualized Major: Health Policy and Racial Disparities

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. Welcome back.

Krithika:

Thank you.

Ken:

I'm here with Krithika Santhanam, who appeared, I think, on our maybe third episode of this podcast. And we recorded it, I think, back in the fall of 23, and then it came out in that spring of 24. So it's been a good year and a half or so since we talked. All right, so why don't we start by, can you just remind us, what is the name of your individualized major?

Krithika:

Health Policy and Racial Disparities.

Ken:

Okay, Health Policy and Racial Disparities. And we're going to get into your thesis project, because that's a big thing that you've done

since then. Can you explain what your thesis project is, and then how you sort of decided to develop a project like that?

Krithika:

Yeah, so my thesis project is titled “Beyond Society's Labels, a Foundation on Disability Advocacy in South India.” Through the Bold Women's Leadership Network, I receive generous financial funding to travel to South India, specifically Chennai, India, and pursue a creative documentary project. It's journalistic. It's almost like an oral history project where I was documenting the experiences of individuals in different institutions, whether it be academia, health care, the general workforce, and their experiences as being a woman with a disability and how that differs within kind of like an international framework. I was learning a lot in my classes about the United States and what that experience is like. And I have personal connections in India. And I knew that experience is different where people often feel ostracized from society. And I wanted to document their successes, the challenges they're continuing to face, and the great advocacy work that they're doing. So, yeah, it overall ended up being like a 50-minute documentary that's now on YouTube. I disseminated it here at the UConn Storrs campus. and my interviewees were really excited when it came out and they've been sharing it with all their networks and it's been on LinkedIn. I actually met all my interviewees via LinkedIn. So the power of that is beyond endless, I think, if you really use it to your advantage. But yeah, that's kind of a little general gist.

Ken:

Wow, so yeah, so it's a video of you interviewing. And how many interview subjects do you have?

Krithika:

So I have three main interviewees. All three of them work with different organizations. So I have footage with their respective organizations and folks who wanted to share their stories. So my main goal was not to make any creative changes to what they were saying or portray their story in a different way. It was just to provide that space where they can share their stories. Since I noticed in the literature, like, there is not a space for them to have these conversations and share their stories, specifically within a South Indian context. And I knew that people weren't sitting around and reading academic papers. Everything's so digital these days. And I thought the best way to make their stories accessible was through this documentary style project.

Ken:

Right. So could you tell us a little bit about each person that you interviewed and what you took away from their stories?

Krithika:

Yeah. So first, when I first got to India, I had a week of kind of just figuring out my questioning, transportation and all that jazz since I had not been to most of the locations. My family immigrated from India, so I did have that type of support. However, I had not traveled beyond the one location that we usually go to on my mom's side. So after we did that, the first person I met was Dr. Aishwarya Rao, who is a pediatrician and the founder of Better World Shelter, which is a woman's shelter for women with disabilities. There I was able to chat with – it was truly an honor to chat with many women who were involved in Paralympic sports. I talked with an individual who won actually gold for India in New Delhi for Paralympic powerlifting. And

her story just hasn't been on the media. It hasn't been shared and she's been doing some incredible work, but truly is a space for women to really engage in whatever creative passion endeavors they want to, allow them to be uplifted and independent, but also create that space where it's like it's not just a shelter, but it's more of a home where everyone's kind of working together and they truly are a big family. Dr. Aishwarya Rao is one of the last individuals who had polio. It's virtually eradicated in the world now, but one of the last survivors. So she talks about her personal experience, her educational experience, and how this kind of prompted her to start the organization. I then took a plane and traveled to Kerala, India, which is a totally different area. And I got to talk with Dr. Sharada Devi, who is an assistant professor of English at University College. And there she talked about her upbringing, her research, challenges and barriers she faced there, as well as the advocacy she's doing online via social spaces and how she isn't trying to be an inspiration for everyone. Rather, she's trying to create awareness and kind of that journey that she's taken. She talks about the power of these type of social science classes and humanities classes within a South Indian context. since that's not as prominent as here in the United States, and the impact that it's had so far on her students.

Ken:

And she herself has grown up with a disability.

Krithika:

Yes, yes. She's a wheelchair user. She has severe short stature, so she wasn't a wheelchair user when she was first born. It was something that she ended up needing later on in her life.

Ken:

And there was one more?

Krithika:

Yes. Finally, we then came back to Chennai, and then we traveled to meet KVM, Dr. Sumitra Prasad, When I interviewed her, she was KVJ, which was a title bestowed to her by higher individuals in India within the government and things like that. But then she kind of increased that honor, and now she's KVM, Dr. Sumitra Prasad. And she is the founder of the Dore Foundation, and they're the specific kind of sector of that. They do a lot of awareness and a bunch of different initiatives. I was working with the SciCenter, which is an organization that helps adults with disabilities be more independent, integrate themselves within society. And that was truly, I think, the interview that was the longest, but also the one that impacted me the most specifically. I learned so much, and her story is truly so powerful. I wish I could have added it all to the documentary, but it wasn't possible. But, yeah, she had a lot to share about her personal experiences as well as the experiences of her son, who overcame many medical challenges, and was there that day with us. We got to grab a bite to eat, experience what the Psy Center was like and all the crafts and activities that they do, which was truly amazing.

Ken:

Wow. So that's so great. So it sounds like the – is the documentary – is it publicly available?

Krithika:

Yes. Yeah, it's on YouTube.

Ken:

Okay. All right. Very good. So we can put a link maybe in the show notes. And it sounds like you're already, you know, it has taken on a life of its own. It's being used and distributed for different reasons by different parties. So already it's kind of like a resource, a tool, in addition to just being your thesis project. Just, but like, you know what I mean?

Krithika:

Yes.

Ken:

Sometimes, you know, it's so great for that kind of culminating project to actually find a utility in the world, right, outside of your own academic achievement. So congratulations.

Krithika:

Thank you. Thank you so much.

Ken:

That is so great. And as I recall in the episode that we did a year and a half ago or so, you talked a lot about your major being about understanding all sorts of different perspectives, especially when it came to health, right? That health care and understanding a person's health isn't just any one monolithic thing. And the fact that, you know, maybe there are some issues in medicine where folks

need to step back and think about different perspectives rather than getting locked into, you know, tried and true methods that have been around for decades or centuries even. And then this project seems to really bring that whole concept and that whole ethic to the next level where we really have people who are sharing their own experiences, maybe with disabilities themselves, and then not only bringing that insight to their own either colleagues or patients or whatever, but also sharing their stories in a documentary like this which will again you know find other audiences to understand or maybe just to kind of enter into these perspectives that folks might not have necessarily been thinking about right which sounds sort of like the mission of your project and the mission of your major.

Krithika:

Yeah, I mean, I think you put it beautifully. I don't even think I could have articulated it like that. I think that originally my thesis idea wasn't actually what it came to be. I think in the first documentary, I talked about how I wanted to collect experiences of individuals in health care and how the experience of an individual with a disability within the United States health care system. But it truly changed when I was kind of thinking about me, my family, my upbringing, and kind of where my cultural roots are. And so it took a totally different turn. But I think it was almost for, I couldn't say it was for the better, but it made it more personal to me, kind of the product I was producing. And I got to learn so much overall about myself and what I like to do and how hard video editing is. I truly underestimated that process. And to all the people who do this on a daily basis and do it all the time, I applaud you because it's truly difficult when you have such large files. I had eight hour files from each of the interviews and I was like, great, this is going to be a blast. But yeah, so I think that in the moment, I didn't see the bigger picture, to be really honest, about what this project could do. But once it kind of came

together, I got feedback, and then I presented it. I received so many ideas on where it could go and the different, I guess, avenues I could take to present it to more folks. And I think that that's truly been special.

Ken:

Yeah, yeah, I bet. And also just to use it as a foundation for any subsequent ideas you might have, right? So that's great. So it sounds really DIY. You really just produced and you did every step yourself pretty much?

Krithika:

Yes, yeah I had to start from scratch. Before I left I went to best buy and was learning about what microphones to use, like how do I clip one on me and then also clip one on my interviewee but then I could like block off my noise and keep them going, so that was cool. A lot of youtube videos I was watching on just how to edit, and then I was also just watching a lot of documentaries to see artistic decisions they made on videography. So that was pretty cool. But yes, pretty much a learning process.

Ken:

Wow. So I remember last time we talked about the fact that you're doing a molecular and cell biology major that you're completing, obviously, and this individualized major and how those two things work together. But we hardly talked at all about media production, which is not really a part of either major. And yet you've kind of brought it in through this project. So we talked also about your, you know, imagining your life as a doctor, you're interested in public

health, obviously. Has your vision for what's next kind of been revised, refined because of some of these experiences?

Krithika:

Yeah, I think that my time at UConn, I've really been engaged in a lot of spaces that uplift like scholarly women within their fields and making sure that they have the confidence to be who they who they are, their authentic selves. And that's been kind of like my theme, I feel like. And I think because of that, I've kind of shifted my thinking on kind of like I still want to go to medical school and I still want to become a physician. But my dream and goal would be to open up my own clinic for generations of female patients, whether it be daughters, their mothers, their grandmothers, and really help close that care on preventative medicine and just kind of making sure they're getting all the testing that they need to get and take the time to listen to their stories and kind of where they're coming from. And I think that if I get to a point where I can open my own clinic and create kind of the processes and procedures that we do when it comes to that patient interaction, I think that that could be where I personally make a positive impact. Specialties sound great. I was I was always I'm still thinking about it, to be honest, but I think that I'm such a people oriented person. And this project really showed me that, like, I might not understand the experiences of everyone, but if I take the time to listen, I might be able to take one step closer to figuring out a targeted initiative or something that could bring change. It might not be overall systemic change since that takes a lot of work. But I think that all of this has kind of really shown me where I think my place is in this next step of this journey and where I think that I can make the most impact.

Ken:

Yeah, this has been so amazing to get this update. Thank you so much for coming in. Congratulations on all your great work and so great to see you.

Krithika:

Yes, thank you so much.

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.