

INDIE MAJOR PODCAST

1/14/26 Izzy Rubin

Individualized Major: Reproduction and Youth Health

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. We're here with Izzy Rubin. Hey, Izzy.

Izzy:

Hi.

Ken:

Thanks for coming in. So, you are an individualized major here at UConn. Why don't you tell us what the name of the major is and what it all involves?

Izzy:

Okay. The name of the major is Reproduction and Youth Health, and I'm focusing on maternal mortality due to substance abuse and mental health disorders, and then developmental neuroscience, and basically just how the interchanging between both of those are immediate factors that I want to work on in my future.

Ken:

Wow. That sounds like a wide range of stuff in one major. So you've got some hard sciences. You said neuroscience, right?

Izzy:

Yeah. So, like, developmental neuroscience and the physiology and neurobiology behind all that.

Ken:

Okay. So you're getting most of that stuff from the physiology and neurobiology courses. Anything else where neuroscience comes in? Is there any?

Izzy:

A lot of psych, specifically with developmental neuroscience, because those classes fall under the psych department here because of psychological sciences.

Ken:

Right, right. Okay. And then you're matching that neuroscience study that you're doing up with what else?

Izzy:

Human development, family sciences, and then also women and gender, sexuality studies.

Ken:

Okay. Interesting. So it has kind of a social-sciences component as well as more of a hard-sciences component.

Izzy:

It brings the humanity into hard concepts, and it humanizes the individuals I want to talk about.

Ken:

Yeah. So where did this come from — the idea of inventing this major?

Izzy:

So I'm adopted, and I have a biological mother that was 19 years old when she had me. That's all I really know about her. But I know an additional, one other fact I know is I had a lot of physical health problems. And that was due to my mother's choice to use drugs while she was conceiving and while she had me.

That being said, I've always wanted to be an advocate for those like me. And there's a knowingness about knowing the science behind it for me personally and understanding that. And then from there, bringing the humanity to it and learning and understanding why people go through mental-health struggles, substance-abuse disorders, and then how that affects eventually future families, I guess.

Ken:

Interesting. So there's an element of it based on your own personal experience that makes you want to work in this field and help

people. But there's also, it sounds like, an element of this that has been kind of like wanting to learn about yourself.

I don't want to get too personal here, but — so do you recall then having struggles as a kid or growing up that had to do with what you've identified as your background?

Izzy:

For me, I've had a lot of health issues. And I also have dealt with protecting my food when I eat because I was in an orphanage in Russia, actually. So my entire life, my parents had to make sure, “You're safe, you're okay.”

And also understanding, like, family itself — the concept of it — is a very hard thing for a lot of adopted individuals in reality. Because it was the choice of wanted, not-wantingness, understanding, like, truth and the realistic things.

It's like, the amount of people I know who're like, “Where are you from?” And then they can say the exact hospital they're from. I say I'm from Russia and that's really all I know. And it's a lot of finding myself and learning more about myself, but also trying to stay away from the realness, the rawness, because it's so uncertain.

Ken:

It's interesting how your major approaches this topic from a very sort of wide-ranging and holistic — you know, these different points of view. So there is a kind of biological, scientific, neurological element to what makes a person tick, right, and where they come from or whatever. And then — but that's also accompanied by these different social circumstances that are also really important and

that affect who you are, how you form your identity. So it's all working at once.

Izzy: Yeah

Ken:

So now, every individualized major, within that larger concept of their major, does a culminating project — a capstone project — basically like a thesis kind of project where you dive even more deeply into some part of that concept and do some research. So why don't you tell us a little bit about what you chose to do for that?

Izzy:

Yeah. So that was actually a big decision — to decide to go into postpartum depression. Originally, like, you know, I did a paper on just maternal mortality and suicidality, and it was just all over the place, and I didn't really feel a connection to it, even though that's what I've been studying.

I felt, like, an overall connection in wanting to make sure voices were heard. But as soon as I read the book *Why I Jumped*, and then *The Yellow Wallpaper*, and looking at literature specific to postpartum depression, I decided to go into the maternal mental-health side — focusing on postpartum depression and how history with neurobiological influences plus societal influences affect maternal individuals.

And how postpartum depression is not a researched-enough topic. Because postpartum isn't even actually defined in certain places. And just identifying the importance of understanding the period of

afterbirth for individuals and how influential that time is for those individuals and their families.

Ken:

A lot of these issues — all these important issues that you're talking about — and probably there hasn't been a more difficult time, or a more important time, to be doing this kind of work. And so for you, what are your next steps? I mean, you're graduating in a couple weeks here, right?

Izzy:

I'm graduating in less than two weeks. I'm going to the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, for a master's in public health. And it's a concentration with global health, specifically. And then from there, it's med school.

And my goal is to bring a holistic viewpoint, using my undergraduate and my master's program, into a medicalization — an idealized notion of medicine — and to bring the humanity back into a world that has lost the humanness of it, I guess. And it's going to take a lot of work. I'm going to have to work really hard and just show up, be there, but also not lose my identity and myself.

And with the opportunities I've gotten here at Connecticut, the opportunities I'm going to be gaining in North Carolina and beyond — the goal is to create change in places, I guess.

Ken:

Yeah. Well, congratulations on getting into that public-health program.

Izzy:

Thank you.

Ken:

That is very exciting. And what a great way to approach it, I think — doing that public-health work first, and then bringing all of that to bear as you go to medical school.

Izzy:

Yeah. So, the public health really is the understanding of disability and marginalization, institutionalization, and really working to provide better for the public in the greater name of health.

Ken:

Yeah. And access to health care.

Izzy:

Yes. Access to health care, understanding the differences in structures, and understanding aging and growth and development — but also understanding the importance technology and advocacy and implementation has. Especially health policy, too — like, working into that role as well.

Ken:

Yeah. And you said there's a global focus?

Izzy:

Yeah. So I got into a global health concentration. So I'll be focusing my studies on looking at global health on a scale. And then we have to do a practicum in between our two years. And I can choose to go across the world and look into different areas, or I can come back home and work in smaller communities, or stay in North Carolina and do rural environmentalism.

It's all based on the global aspect of health as a whole, but in reality it's serving the public and understanding what society needs, especially during this time.

Ken:

Yeah, yeah. I mean, I've been personally — since I actually did a little work in a global-health company that was technical writing and stuff for a while, for a company that relied on USAID contracts for most of its work in 40 different countries — developing countries around the world — and I've been personally shocked to see the complete dismantling of the USAID institution.

And, in some ways, if you think about the timing of the work you're doing, you know, maybe you'll be there just in time for when we need creative people to think about how to rebuild some of these things. Because it's so important for a country like the U.S., a big wealthy nation, to have that sort of global presence in helping people, right?

Izzy:

Yeah. It's like, we have money, we have power, we have the ideas — hopefully — we have the research. And it's really a lot about policy

and advocating for those voices that have been going unheard and silenced, really, in reality.

And I'm actually doing an internship before I go to North Carolina this summer abroad, and I'm actually going to Israel and Greece and in the Mediterranean to work specifically with youth health and population health as the goal. And I'm going to be able to experience all different things, but also with the crisis going on in the Middle East, understanding women's rights and women's health is one of the experiences I'm able to go do.

And I have to book my flight because I have to leave in, like, three weeks.

Ken:

Wow. Yeah, I saw you looking at your watch.

Izzy:

I'm like, "What's today?" I'm leaving, like, a week after I graduate. So the week after graduation I'm going down to North Carolina, looking at apartments, signing a lease, putting my stuff in a pod, and then I fly out — probably from Boston or New York City.

I'm gone for two months, and then I come back, take a week to set up my apartment, and then I start classes in August.

Ken:

Wow.

Izzy:

Yeah. And that all just came together about two and a half, three weeks ago.

Ken:

Boy, what a great opportunity.

Izzy:

Yeah. And it's just — an opportunity to be able to travel and go experience — is one of the best parts about this. And I can also — this influences where I want to do my practicum too, because if I can create relations and opportunities and build, like, a repertoire — especially in the Middle East as a woman, and knowing that women themselves have been marginalized and continue to have been marginalized within these communities — it's really, like, influential.

Like, I'm actually, after this, heading to an event specific to antisemitism, anti-racism, and it's happening at the Dodd Center. And I've been talking to so many individuals from different universities across the world, across the U.S., and understanding the complexity and intersectionality — and some of them, most of them, are women.

And it's really incredible to hear because I'm focusing on maternal mortality. And the main reason I wanted to do it is because Black women are disproportionately affected within the medical system. So learning experiences from these women that I've been talking to within the last couple of days — I've just grown within 24 hours. And I'm about to go two months exploring the Middle East and Mediterranean. So I'm excited.

Ken:

Yeah, I bet. I bet. Wow — to say the least.

So let me just — maybe we can wrap up here by thinking about — let's try to picture, you know, you've done your public-health program and you're done with medical school. How can you imagine yourself working as a doctor? Are you thinking you'll be working outside of the U.S., inside the U.S.? Are you going to be traveling? What kind of medicine would you ideally like to do? How do you see your career developing?

Izzy:

So my goal is to do pediatric trauma surgery or pediatric medicine, specifically working with oncology or trauma in some nature. And as of right now, I know I want to do residency in the U.S. And then from there, I don't mind traveling. I don't mind staying in the U.S.

I'm going wherever it takes me — where the people need. And then also, I know there's certain places where I want to go because I want to go, but sometimes the best places are the least expected. And I'm ready to go where I'm needed. It's not where I should be wanted — it's where I need to be needed. And I'll feel wanted there, if that makes sense.

So, you know, hopefully somewhere warm. But I don't mind somewhere cold — but preferably warmer, but not too hot, I guess.

Ken:

Well, this is all fascinating and inspiring — to hear about your whole trajectory from developing this concept of a major, and then all the stuff you've been able to do already, doing so much work in the field, really, and learning, and all these great plans you have coming up.

Izzy:

Thank you.

Ken:

Including this summer.

Izzy:

Oh my gosh, yeah. No, I'm so excited. And, like, the opportunity to come speak is, like, really rewarding and fulfilling.

Ken:

Well, likewise. So, thanks.

Izzy:

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. That's iisp.uconn.edu. We'd also like to thank UConn Enrichment Programs and WHUS UConn Radio for their support of this show.