

[THEME MUSIC]

SARAH BALDWIN: From the Watson Institute at Brown University, this is *Trending Globally*. I'm Sarah Baldwin.

There's one topic our guests keep bringing up on this podcast, which we've realized we haven't really covered-- the inspiring students that make Watson tick. So in the lead-up to commencement for the Class of 2019, we've got a few special *Trending Globally* episodes featuring some of the incredible students that fill Watson's halls.

Our first episode is an interview with Drashti Brahmbhatt. Drashti's concentrating in international relations. She's worked on human rights issues and has done some fascinating research on the politics of museum curation. We started by talking about her experience working at the UN in Geneva after her sophomore year and how it gave real-world context for the classes that had fascinated her back in Providence.

DRASHTI

Sophomore year-- I think that was summer of 2017-- I actually interned at the permanent US

BRAHMBHATT:

Mission to the United Nations in Geneva, Switzerland. And I received a LINK Award from the university to go and study. Geneva's super, super expensive, so that was definitely very useful.

I was interning in the humanitarian affairs division. I got to do two things at one time and both view US foreign policy-making but also the global sphere at large. And I spent three months in Geneva interning there. And I was working with a pretty small department-- about six to seven individuals who are either foreign service officers or civil servants in the US. And it was fascinating. I got exposed to so many different types of levels in this world.

SARAH BALDWIN: Can you say a little more specifically what those were?

DRASHTI

Yeah. Specifically, the people in Geneva, the US employees, were kind of reporting back to

BRAHMBHATT:

DC with their updates about what was happening in Geneva because of the time difference. So an employee coming in Washington at 9 AM, they would have all the news that was happening on the other side of the world because of these people who were working in Geneva.

So it was seeing that interaction between Washington policy experts and then those living in Geneva, interacting with the global community. And then it was also seeing my supervisors

interacting with diplomats from all over the world and seeing how they negotiate different terms and have to represent both their own opinions and the US foreign policies opinion.

SARAH BALDWIN: Does the humanitarian affairs division work on humanitarian crises?

DRASHTI Mm-hmm.

BRAHMBHATT:

SARAH BALDWIN: So what kind of crises were you hearing about?

DRASHTI So at Brown, I studied a lot from the academic perspective about the origins and the different

BRAHMBHATT: players in humanitarian crises. But it's pretty eye opening to really look at all these people working on the various issues. So for example, I kind of shadowed my supervisor at the UN HCR-- the UN High Commissioner for Refugees-- and talking about the UN's role in different policy initiatives in Afghanistan.

So for example, one big thing that was happening was discussing these cash transfers in Afghanistan to talk about how this agency can provide a lot more autonomy and agency to refugees and how they spend donations and how they spend their money. So for example, previously, a lot of policies were oriented towards you just give refugees certain rations of certain items, and you're not allowing people to use their agency to determine what they need and how much they need.

So a lot of these new policy transfers that my supervisor in the agency was talking about was providing-- and this was really at the forefront of this type of topic-- providing these kind of credit cards, in a sense, so allowing-- or not allowing but rather providing opportunity for people to reclaim that agency and go into a supermarket and kind of go back to their life that was before this big displacement wave.

SARAH BALDWIN: Instead of handing someone a ration, saying go choose the food that you would have chosen before?

DRASHTI Mm-hmm.

BRAHMBHATT:

SARAH BALDWIN: Was there a geographic region that your department was focused on?

DRASHTI So my different supervisors in the department-- as I mentioned, six to seven-- all had their

BRAHMBHATT: different areas of expertise in terms of topical expertise, as well as regional expertise. So for my own supervisor, I studied a lot about the policy in Bangladesh about refugees-- Rohingya refugees in Bangladesh.

We talked a lot with my other supervisor about Syria. And I also got to shadow the humanitarian task force in Syria and got to meet some of the leading negotiators there on US perspective. And then the other area were refugees from Central America. And so I got a lot of exposure from various world views and various regions.

SARAH BALDWIN: What made you interested in humanitarian topics?

DRASHTI So in my sophomore year, early on, I actually traveled to Jordan with one of my professors

BRAHMBHATT: here at Brown and with 11 other students. And our class's topic was mass displacement in the Middle East.

And so we learned a lot of theoretical perspectives in class, and during spring break, we actually got to travel to Jordan and interact with all types of people, so like policy experts from the UN or from the Jordanian government, from social activists on the ground, from academics on the ground, and from those experiencing mass displacement themselves. So we visited and were welcomed in by various refugee camps.

So we went to Zaatari, the largest refugee camp in Jordan. For me, the biggest takeaway was that when you talk about refugees, when you talk about mass displacement issues, you have to talk about it in a way that centers the perspectives of refugees and those experiencing displacement themselves.

So for example, there was a time when we went to a neighborhood in Amman, Jordan, which houses a lot of Iraqi refugees. And we visited one particular family in the community. And it was composed of two little girls, about six, seven years old, and a grandfather.

And their family actually had escaped the Iraq war at the time. And in that violence, they lost their parents. And they were slaughtered during the war. And the two little girls didn't even know that their parents were slaughtered and had called their grandfather Baba-- as in Father.

And so this grandfather had brought them to-- and they walked all the way from Iraq all the way to Jordan. And at the time when we were talking to them, he had applied for refugees asylum status for his two granddaughters to the US, and they were denied. And a reason that they were given was that it's a national security threat.

And so at the time, he questioned-- how are my two little girls national security threats? If it's me, OK, I understand. I'm an old man. Who knows what history I have? Take the girls, at least. Leave me here. And still, he was refused.

So in these types of things, I noticed that agencies like the UN and different government policies, they depoliticize issues a lot and think of them as just, here's a crisis, and here's our duty in alleviating the short-term impact of it without thinking about the larger political atmosphere in which it exists, like why are refugees displaced, and what are the longer-term solutions to this? And how can we, as a international community, work towards that and not just in ways that allow these types of issues to go forward and then just backtrack and say, OK, let's fix this in the short-term.

SARAH BALDWIN: So what do you want to do with what you've learned?

DRASHTI

I guess I'm most interested in the intersection between ethical leadership and democratic

BRAHMBHATT:

governance in a way that encompasses a lot of different regions. So here at Brown, I've been focusing on Latin America and South Asia. And I've noticed a lot that a lot of the problems we have, can start from a lack of ethical leadership on behalf of a government, on behalf of an international organization.

And so, for me, I'm thinking about how can we, as graduates of universities like Brown, take the knowledge we have in both the academic lens and both the experiences we've seen by traveling the world or by traveling here in the US, and forefront the stories of people and forefront social inclusion efforts from the very upper echelons of government?

SARAH BALDWIN: Was that the subject of your thesis?

DRASHTI

So my thesis is actually titled Revisiting Collective Memory and Social Inclusion Theory-- the

BRAHMBHATT:

Encroachment of Political Memory on Inclusive Memorial Museums in Chile in India.

SARAH BALDWIN: So how does that manifest?

DRASHTI

I spent a lot of time at Brown studying the Southern Cone of Latin America and South Asia.

BRAHMBHATT:

And I was trying to find a way in which to combine those two areas and study something. So this past summer, I traveled to London, Chile, and India, as part of a larger thesis project, sponsored by IR's Research and Travel Grant, as well as the Center for Contemporary South Asia's fellowship.

And so policy experts and academics typically look at social inclusion as a process in which we heighten the political dimension, so political, civil, and human rights for marginalized communities-- the economic dimension in which we improve the opportunities for goods, services, and income for these groups, as well as the social dimension, so how to increase social services like health and education. But I think one dimension that gets overlooked is the cultural dimension. How do we increase positive representation of these groups in cultural institutions like museums, like films, like all these other types of symbols?

And so I spent my summer interning at two museums-- one Museum of Memory and Human Rights in Chile, and then the Partition Museum in India. And I was examining how when these museums talk about national trauma, how do they include or exclude certain narratives of groups in their society that have been historically marginalized in various dimensions?

SARAH BALDWIN: And what did you find?

DRASHTI I found that a lot of this exclusion still exists. Even these museums that propagate an image
BRAHMBHATT: that they are inclusive and they're using peoples' and cultural history and memory-- so using oral testimonies, using people's language to narrate a history-- even these museums themselves systematically exclude certain narratives.

So in the Chilean museum, I found that the museum has no permanent exhibit or ways in their structure itself that show the indigenous experience during the Chilean dictatorship, which is very, very detrimental. Because people like to think that the Chilean dictatorship was after every type of leftist, which is true, but I think indigenous groups, their experience is fundamentally different in that they're landholders, which automatically puts them in tension with a nation-state's ideals, which is different from another non-indigenous Chilean resisting the dictatorship.

And in the Partition Museum, I also found that there's a lot of systematic exclusion of Muslims who fled India to Pakistan during Partition. Because of over 100 testimonies in the museum, there's only about 10 that show interviews from Muslims who fled India to Pakistan, which means that if a visitor goes to the museum without any ground in historical context will see that, and actually hear that, a lot of interviews are from the perspective of Hindus and Sikhs, who mention the main perpetrator of violence as a Muslim, which is a horrible imbalance that the museum propagates itself. And I think it's more important for us, or for communities, to not

only imagine themselves as the victim but also as a perpetrator of this national violence.

SARAH BALDWIN: To take responsibility, in a way.

DRASHTI Right.

BRAHMBHATT:

SARAH BALDWIN: Do you think that those museums have a political agenda, or are these omissions oversights?

DRASHTI Yeah, so I'm talking about how the encroachment of political memory influences this inclusive

BRAHMBHATT: process because of two things. One, if the museum itself is narrating a political history of trauma, that's highly contentious. Because trauma is chaotic. Trauma isn't organized.

So if someone goes into a museum and sees that they start off narrating about the Chilean dictatorship from the 1973 coup without examining that that's not exactly how people remember it-- so if you ask someone who's experienced the trauma of a Chilean dictatorship, they're not going to start off and say, oh, yes, it started in 1973 from the coup. They're going to start from their own personal experience of trauma.

So I think these museums have a duty to not chronologically order this history. Because it seems as if it's sanitizing trauma and presenting it as orderly, in an orderly fashion.

But I also think some museums fall into the trap of maybe having a political agenda because of its origins. If there's a specific government that created the museum or had a fundamental role in creating the museum, then those who oppose that government will think that, even if the museum doesn't have a political agenda, they'll associate it with it and not come to the museum, which I think happens a lot in Chile.

SARAH BALDWIN: Tell me what you'll miss most about Brown.

DRASHTI I think what I'll miss most about Brown are the different events at Watson. I always go on

BRAHMBHATT: watson.com and look at all the events and add them to my calendar. Because I think it's so fascinating, learning about a new topic or region from a person who's devoted so many years studying that. There's no way I'll be able to study everything in the world.

And I think, for me, comparative politics is particularly important. I love studying these huge issues and transnational issues like migration, like democratic governance, and seeing them apply to different regions in the world and learning best practices from leaders or civil societies

from different regions who have kind of come to terms with it or combated these different challenges.

And so, for me, at Watson, I get to go to so many events with academics, with policy experts, with rappers, with so many different people coming from their own world view and their own lenses and interacting with these different theoretical subjects we've been discussing and tearing apart in our classes. So I'll definitely miss going to all these events. But I hope that, in graduate school, I'll continue being able to do all this.

SARAH BALDWIN: Drashti, thank you so much for coming in to talk to us.

DRASHTI Thank you so much. I really appreciate the opportunity.

BRAHMBHATT:

[THEME MUSIC]

SARAH BALDWIN: This episode of *Trending Globally* was produced by Dan Richards, Babette Thomas, and Alex Leferrière. Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield. I'm Sarah Baldwin. You can subscribe to us on iTunes, Stitcher, or your favorite podcast app.

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