

Fordham Footsteps: Cat Wood, FCLC '06

Interview Transcript

Sara:

Welcome to Fordham Footsteps, the podcast that features Fordham alumni and discusses their path from their time as a student to their current career.

Matt:

Some will have a direct correlation to other majors and others will describe how they took some unexpected turns. Either way, expect an insider's guide to certain industries and some great stories from our esteemed alumni. I'm Matt Burns, associate director for young alumni and student engagement.

Sara:

And I'm Sara Hunt Munoz, senior director for strategic initiatives. With us today is Cat Wood, Fordham College at Lincoln Center class of '06. Welcome Cat, thanks for being with us today.

Cat:

I'm happy to be here.

Sara:

So it looks like when you were back at the old Lowenstein building that you were an economics major and a Latin American studies major or minor?

Cat:

Major, double major.

Sara:

So, it was a double major? Great. And what led you to those two majors?

Cat:

In elementary school and middle school and high school I always loved culture and foreign languages. My parents own a bed and breakfast, and I grew up in a bed and breakfast with people from all around the world living in my home. And I really fell in love with the stories and overlap of other connections and so I really fell in love with Spanish most. I love the Latin culture. I love how important family is and that it's just such a warm, welcoming culture. And so I traveled abroad to Argentina in high school and I did a couple service trips to the Dominican Republic with my church in high school. And I always knew that I wanted to be a Spanish major or speak Spanish and it really kind of paved the way for a lot of my decisions, both at Fordham and after.

Sara:

Do you speak Spanish fluently?

Cat:

I do. Yep.

Matt:

That's really cool. So how did you end up with the economics major?

Cat:

Coincidentally, I also studied abroad in Buenos Aires while I was at Fordham, my senior year. And I loved Argentina and while I was in Argentina, I studied all about the debt collapse and the debt default crisis and I was fascinated by this topic and it really got me fascinated in the topic of helping people hand in hand with their economic development while also kind of having the cultural context. So that's what fueled the economics side of things. And I've always loved numbers. My dad's an accountant. I grew up kind of running the money side of things at the inn or helping when I could. And I just always love kind of the orderliness of it, like it's very black and white and there's one answer and you're either right or wrong.

Matt:

It's really a wonderful double major when you think about it. I mean, there are so many case studies for anything that can happen, good or bad, in economies in Latin America, and it is so tied to culture. So what a wonderful way to look at it, not just from the numbers side but understand the language and understand the people and how those things really fit together.

Sara:

When you were a student, did you have the opportunity to merge those two in projects or papers that you were writing or were they sort of individual entities?

Cat:

So I was thinking about my favorite classes at Fordham. I don't have a good memory, but I loved the classes I took with Professor Hector Lindo-Fuentes and Professor Berger at Lincoln Center, those were two Latin American professors I loved and they talked all about both the socioeconomic side of things, as well as the cultural experience in those countries. It felt very much like a medley and there was so much overlap, it just felt like a really beautiful combination. And it's interesting how your career trajectory kind of pivots because those passions have fueled so much of my career path.

Sara:

Well talk a little bit about that, what was your first experience outside of the Fordham gates?

Cat:

I joined the Peace Corps and I actually moved back to the Dominican Republic where I had previously traveled three times, twice with my church in high school and then I found this amazing family in Manhattan that I babysat for and they took me as their babysitter one spring break to a resort. It felt like the sweetest spring break trip. But I served as a Peace Corps volunteer. I was a business volunteer in a mountainous campo in the Dominican. You asked me if I speak Spanish and I was like, "Yeah," but I kind of speak the campesina accent, like I have a nice like campo twang. And I worked with local artisans to help them really organize the business side of their artisan and craft businesses. We did a lot of cost and

pricing analysis, marketing, basic accounting principles. I helped them form a legal cooperative in the community to try to limit the price... gouging. Is that correct?

Matt:

Price gouging.

Cat:

Gouging, there we go. I think it's [foreign language 00:05:06] in Spanish, sometimes I still forget how to say words in English or Spanish.

Matt:

Oh, look at that.

Cat:

And I also worked with the National Secretary of Culture and we hosted the first annual regional indigenous artisan fair in my campo in the country. And it was a real, again, a real medley of my skills because I got to take all of my background in numbers and systems and leverage the knowledge of Spanish and Spanish culture, which definitely put me at an advantage to some of my fellow volunteers. And I loved my time there and I actually extended it after I served my 27 months. I stayed two more years and I worked in Santo Domingo and I got a job in sustainable tourism. And I worked with a USAID grant to promote ecotourism grants to women owned businesses throughout the country.

Matt:

So, what does that mean?

Cat:

So I got to oversee the whole grant process from the selection of grantees, to the funding, to the implementation, to eventually the sustainability of these small and medium size enterprises that were community run ecotourism companies. And a goal of this project was to spread the economic benefits of the tourism industry in the Dominican, which if any of you and any of you listeners are familiar with the Dominican, what you most know about is Punta Cana, right? It's the most largely marketed part of the Dominican, but what you don't know about Punta Cana is that all of those resorts are foreign owned entities and mostly European owned. So there's all of these tax write offs and benefits, and these high level agreements between who gets these high-level positions and the economic benefits of the tourism industry are largely isolated to that part of the country, but if you travel around the country, which it's an incredibly big country to travel through, there are equally beautiful beaches and resorts and ecotourism locations throughout the entire island. And so we were tasked with the effort of really spreading the economic benefits of international tourism dollars.

Sara:

That's wonderful. Are these are some of them still thriving? Do you know?

Cat:

They are, some of them are still thriving. And it's really like, that's kind of the end all and be all of sustainability, if they last beyond your tenure.

Sara:

Just going back to the Peace Corps for one second, when you applied for it, do you indicate your skillsets and your interests and they try to match you with inappropriate job, is that what happens?

Cat:

You do. So you can pick your region of the world that you'd like to be in. They give you, at the time, this was more than a decade ago, but at the time they gave you a first, second, and third choice, and then based on your language skillset as well as your academic background, they placed you in a country. And they typically don't place you in a country you've already traveled to and I'd already been to the DR three times, so it was interesting that I got placed there, but the Dominican is actually one of the most largely volunteer heavy countries in the world.

Cat:

I always wanted to be a Peace Corps volunteer ever since middle school. It was one of the reasons I chose Fordham because I love the Jesuit, I just really connect strongly with the Jesuit philosophy and values. I always wanted to do the Peace Corps. And interestingly enough, the week before I was supposed to go to Peace Corps, because I literally went just a couple months after graduation, I think we were sent out in September, a couple of weeks before I got a job offer from Bloomberg's office. I had applied for a position at his small business office after I'd interned for one of his offices at the UN and I turned down the job. And it's crazy to think how my life trajectory would have been different had I stayed in New York versus shipped off to the DR.

Matt:

So eventually you did come back.

Cat:

I did, so after four years in the Dominican I felt a little homesick. And initially I really felt like I didn't... I mean, this is kind of what I do now, which I know we'll get to, but at the time I really felt like something was missing for me and it sent me on this personal journey to figure out what that missing piece was. And at first I thought, "Oh, maybe if I just go back to school, that'll be the answer." So I went back to business school and I got an MBA while I was still living in Santo Domingo. And it wasn't the thing for me.

Cat:

And then I thought, "Oh, maybe I'm homesick. I've been abroad for four years. I always grew up really close to my family and maybe I just need to move home." So I came to DC, my family's in Massachusetts, but it was a much closer jaunt than Santo Domingo, and I got a job working with the federal government and I worked for the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which is the Department of Labor's federal statistical agency. And I had a fascinating job for an economics major, I worked on two of our Nation's Principal Federal Economic Indicators. I worked in the offices that so first I worked in the office that publishes the jobs total nonfarm employment count. So the first-

Matt:

First Friday of every month--that thing?

Cat:

That's it.

Sara:

Matt was an economics major, you're speaking his language.

Matt:

I'm trying not to dork out here.

Cat:

So, I wrote those reports and most of my tenure I was responsible for the healthcare and government industries, and it was my job to be educated on the industry trends in those industries nationwide and to be able to report each month to the Bureau of Labor Statistics commissioner, as well as the Labor Secretary, if there was additional questions, on those industry trends. So I did that for, let's see, three years, I think, three or four years.

Cat:

And then I felt like I needed a change and I moved over to the unemployment side of the house. And then I worked in the office that publishes the national unemployment rate. And I think probably the height of my career with federal service was the month during Obama's reelection campaign, there was one month in which the unemployment rate dropped by three tenths of a percentage point and I wrote the release that month. And I was interviewed on national media about that report because it was such a historic... It was a game changer in his reelection campaign.

Matt:

And you got to say, "I did this, this was me. You're welcome."

Cat:

My words, I didn't do anything else, but these are my words and they've been fact checked and thrice. And while I was there, I also was a subject matter expert on Latin American labor trends. And so coming back to this kind of passion for Latin America, I started out researching kind of the trends in the Hispanic labor force versus the non Hispanic labor before, so I was really passionate about that data set.

Sara:

You still had an itch to do something else.

Cat:

I did.

Sara:

And when did you realize that?

Cat:

So back to this personal, this sense of feeling like something was missing that I mentioned earlier, after being in the field for four years and seeing daily on a daily basis the impact of my efforts, being stuck behind a computer monitor or two of them and a sea of data was just not for me. And I spent six years with the federal service and I'm proud of my service, but I really felt like that personal connection, that commitment to be of service and to be with people was really missing for me. And it was... Really, I'd say my life changed the day that a friend of mine who was becoming trained as a life coach started sharing with me about her own personal journey, all these personal development books that she was reading and these post-it note reminders that she had posted all over her house and these insights and breakthroughs that she was having about her relationship with herself.

Cat:

And I was just infatuated with her story and I was jealous. And I think most of us have a real disempowering relationship to jealousy, but I think it's a real strong indicator, especially for those in career transition, because typically when you're jealous of something, it's just a sign of something you want. And I took that, I took that sense and I followed it and I pursued a year long life coach training program and I have been an executive and business coach for, I'm going on my seventh year now.

Cat:

In the beginning, I did it while I was still a federal employee. And then when I got to that liftoff place where I felt like, I have to jump, I have to give up the pension, I have to choose me. I jumped and I've been full-time for over five years now.

Sara:

And you founded your own firm?

Cat:

I did. I founded my own firm. And full circle I now work with women entrepreneurs, helping them to get out of their own way and start their own businesses and to really learn how to believe in themselves and to not let imposter syndrome or self-doubt or their inner critic hold them back from following their dreams.

Sara:

Wonderful.

Matt:

It's so interesting because none of what you just said there is a major Fordham, the career coach, executive coach, all the things that encapsulate your work there. But I would ask you, how do you think you use what you learned while at Fordham, whether it's in the classroom or out in what you're doing now?

Cat:

So much so. I am so grateful for my liberal arts background because it's those skillsets of English and writing and some of the extracurriculars. When I was at Fordham, I was student body president, I was on the board of trustees, I was a RA, I worked in the alumni affairs office. All of those positions-

Matt:

Good job experience, quick plug.

Cat:

Absolutely, for sure. But they were. That ability to learn how to communicate effectively, being with people who are far more experienced or older than me in age and learning how to stand in my own values. I mean, that alone was invaluable for me professionally speaking. But I would say the background in English and communication and writing that has helped me invaluablely and being a business owner and that ability to communicate. I published three journal papers when I worked in my tenure at the Bureau of Labor Statistics and I don't think I ever would've gotten there had not been for some of my just amazing English professors while at Fordham and in high school too.

Sara:

What does a typical day look like for you? Or isn't there one?

Cat:

There is, it's all by design though, thanks to my practicing, what I preach. I am an early morning riser. So I usually wake up between 5:00 and 6:00 and I have a morning routine that takes me a couple hours that I have not stopped talking about during the pandemic, because I think we all need one.

Matt:

Tell us your secrets.

Cat:

Well, it starts with you. It starts with taking care of you. And I think there are a couple of components of taking care of you. I think that there's that coming back to the Cura Personalis, I think that there's taking care of your spiritual health, your physical health, your mental health, your dietary health. My morning routine includes reading and journaling and meditating and exercising and having lemon water and I love it. It's probably the highlight of my day, which to be honest, allows me to bring the best of myself to all my clients. And then I see clients from 11:00 to 5:00, three days a week, Tuesday through Thursdays, I see clients.

Sara:

What are some of the challenges that they bring to you?

Cat:

So I'm an empath and I'm a highly sensitive woman and I'm also a high achiever. And so those things I see all the time. The higher we expect things of ourself, the higher of a performer we are professionally speaking or personally speaking, the louder the voice of our inner critic. They go hand in hand. And so helping people to really learn how to distinguish the voices that are speaking, whether it's the voice of their intuition or the voice of their ego, whether it's the voice of what's possible versus the voice of fear, really learning how to delineate what part of them is making choices and showing up. Whether they're you're being proactive or reactive, whether you're being empowered or whether you're really showing up as a victim to life. And helping people to reclaim that sense of choice in life, that we always have a choice and every single moment, we always have a choice.

Matt:

You ended up writing a book didn't you?

Cat:

I did. I did. I wrote a book last year actually on these very familiar topics, it's called *Belonging: Overcome Your Inner Critic and Reclaim Your Joy*. And it's a very interactive book, really helping you understand how you get in your own way and then taking practices to really integrate those learnings into action. I've always been a bookworm and I love reading, I love writing. But I also have a real love, hate relationship with the self-help industry, because I think that we can often intellectualize ourselves out of changing our lives and insight without action is useless, insight plus action creates a transformed outcome.

Matt:

What was that process like for you?

Cat:

I think it started with realizing that I had something that people wanted to hear, that what I said mattered, and that people would benefit from hearing it. And that alone was a huge personal endeavor. Realizing that wow, people actually want to hear what I have to say. But it was actually a hugely transformational process in and of itself writing a book because it demanded that I put my own philosophizing as a coach into writing, really detailing what is my philosophy as a coach, what do I believe as a coach, and what are the topics and areas of conversations that I think anyone needs to face or to confront in their own life and specifically in their relationship with themselves to really experience that sense of well-being or happiness or contentment that I think we all desire and we oftentimes seek externally.

Cat:

I think many of us are living in the age of an achievement epidemic where we're always seeking new achievements, more money, more acronyms after our name, more promotions, more things that we've done to feel good about ourselves or to feel like we're enough. And I think that many of us are playing this externally driven model to confront an inner battle conversation and that's what the book is all about to help you start to seek within the answers.

Sara:

And what was the writing process like? Was it grueling? Was it emotional? Was it joyful? How did you feel? Or was it all of that?

Cat:

It was totally all of that. I think that I really benefited writing while I was on vacation. I did most of my writing when I was away from my office, in Canada, on vacation with my family. Last January I spent three weeks in Portugal and Spain and I did a lot of writing there. So really breaking the norm allowed me to create a lot more space to think. But back to that morning routine, I am an extreme morning person. And I had a weekday writing date Monday through Friday at 5:00 AM for nearly seven months with a fellow writer where we did a lot of brainstorming and drafting during those early morning hours.

Sara:

What's next? I mean, do you see another book or what do you think is on the horizon for you?

Cat:

It's so interesting. I, for the first time in a long time, feel like I don't know what's next and I couldn't be happier with that. I feel like I've truly reached a place in my career as well as in my personal life where I feel just so fulfilled and deeply satisfied with what I'm up to. And I think that there's probably a baby in the future at some point, but professionally speaking, I think that I've truly found the full expression of my gifts that I have to share with the world.

Sara:

Well I think it's wonderful that it has been such a journey. I mean, you really embody the idea that it's a marathon and not a sprint. And I think that's a great takeaway. It's to know that you get these nuggets in your education at Fordham and you use them in different ways, but it doesn't have to be the first job out of school that you're putting everything into it, but that progressively down the road, you're sort of sprinkling out your Fordham education and I think that's just wonderful.

Cat:

Yeah. And I also think, as young adults, as well as in our older adulthood, we put so much pressure on ourselves with the decisions we make, the major we choose, the extracurriculars we commit to, the internships we have, what we do with our summer, where we spend our spring break. And I don't think you can take the wrong step as long as you're willing to learn from each step you take. And I think that's something that I have really had to confront in my personal life and something I bring into my coaching a lot, is that there's no such thing as failure. The faster we fail, the sooner we will find the what's right for us. And the more we resist failing or the more we resist taking action and discovering what we really want and who we truly are, we're just delaying our life.

Matt:

Well, speaking of big steps, leaving a very stable government job and starting your own business, is such a big step. And how did you come to that decision? Did you yourself have any coaches or mentors that helped you with that?

Cat:

Well, I have worked with a coach since the first week that I started training as a coach and I have never not worked with a coach. And I will always work with a coach because I think that the more you grow, the more you uncover how you get in your own way. They say that 70% of our daily beliefs are in our subconscious, meaning that we're not even consciously aware of 70% of the things that we believe every day, which is crazy to me.

Cat:

So I think for anyone considering entrepreneurship, first of all, congratulations, I think entrepreneurship is such a valuable professional choice that's so meaningful and satisfying, but I think you need to discover what type of entrepreneur you are. And I think that there are two main types of entrepreneurs. There are the bridge burners who see something that they want for themselves on the other side of the bridge and then they leap up over the bridge and they burn it up after them. So they have to make it,

right? These might be the types of entrepreneurs who give their notice at their job the month they decide they want to be an entrepreneur. I am not that type of person. I am what I like to call a bridge builder, where I knew that I wanted to become a coach well in advance of when I actually resigned from the government.

Cat:

So I think starting there, really getting a sense of what type of person you are. And what's the style of building your own business that would support you. And then at some point you need to come to grips with your own relationship to fear because entrepreneurship is an industry that requires you to consistently transform your relationship to fear. And learn that the things that you fear won't kill you, and that if you fail, it's just a learning opportunity. But most of us really avoid the things that we fear. We have this life-death relationship to it. Oftentimes we don't necessarily differentiate between that physical fear response versus that mental fear response. And the mental fear response is that part of us that's afraid what other people might think about us or what other people make up about us or what they assume about us. And we don't always differentiate between those two fear responses. So transforming your relationship with fear and learning to actually embrace it and welcome it are two of the most important lessons you can make on your entrepreneurial journey, to start.

Sara:

That's great advice, thank you. Where can people get your book?

Cat:

It's on Amazon and Barnes and Noble.

Matt:

What advice would you have for any students listening, particularly if they're economics majors or future life coaches, or might want to follow in any of your footsteps here?

Cat:

There's no major for coaching and I think that there's no majors for lots of things. So I would say don't necessarily get stressed about the major or the words or whatever's at the end of your name, just follow what you're passionate about, follow the topics and subject matters that interest you, that you feel like you can dork out about because they will totally guide you on your career path if you follow them. The people with the more niched industry or business idea are the ones that are the most successful. So the more dorky and unique and uniquely you qualities and passions and subject matters that you love, those are the ones to follow. Everything else will fall in place.

Sara:

Well, thank you Cat, it was wonderful talking to you today.

Sara:

That's another addition of Fordham Footsteps.

Matt:

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