

# Fordham Footsteps: Celia Aniskovich, FCRH '14, Interview Transcript

Matt Burns:

Welcome to Fordham Footsteps. The podcast that features Fordham alumni and discusses their path from their time as a student to their current career. Some will have a direct correlation to their majors and others will describe why they took some unexpected turns.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Either way expect an insider's guide to certain industries and some great stories from our esteemed alumni. I'm Sara Hunt Munoz, Senior Director for Strategic Initiatives.

Matt Burns:

And I'm Matt Burns, Associate Director of Alumni Relations for Young Alumni & Student Engagement. And with us today, we're thrilled to have Celia Aniskovich, FCRH 2014. Welcome, Celia. Thanks so much for being here.

Celia Aniskovich:

Thanks for having me guys. I'm excited to chat.

Matt Burns:

So Celia, let's start with the major. So you were communication media studies major, correct?

Celia Aniskovich:

I was. So I majored in communications and then I minored in philosophy and I had a concentration in American Catholic studies as well. So a little bit all over the map, but I always joke with people that all of those are essentially majors and minors about telling stories, which is what I do for a living. So I had quite the range of classes and I loved all of them and was particularly grateful to have ended up at a school where I could find out that I was interested in philosophy and theology, which I would've never known before I got there.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Did you come to Fordham for the media education?

Celia Aniskovich:

I did not at all. The running joke amongst friends and family is that I applied to, I think, 13 or 14 schools all over the country, all different sizes from 2,000 to 45,000. There was no rhyme or reason to any of it. My one rule, the one thing I knew I didn't want to do was go to school in New York City. So of course I ended up at a school in New York City, but I visited Fordham and I got a tour. That is the thing that brought me to Fordham and is probably the thing that made me a tour guide. And my tour guide who

Matt, you're going to know who this is and I forget her last name, but her first name was Stephanie. She was a senior when I was a freshman. She was in Mimes, I think.

Matt Burns:

Steph Pennacchia.

Celia Aniskovich:

Yes.

Matt Burns:

She was president of FET.

Celia Aniskovich:

Okay. All right, there we go. I don't even know that she knows this. She is the reason that I went to Fordham. She brought us into McGinley and said, the thing you need to know about Fordham is that where we eat, where we serve and where we play as in campus ministry, the athletics center to her left and the cafeteria to her right, are all in one place and that is indicative of what Fordham tries to instill in us. This Cura personalis, this idea that all of this is one part of us, and we care about all of you. I was the sucker. I was in. Then I heard McShane talk and it was all over. And so I broke my cardinal rule of where I didn't want to go to school. I showed up at Fordham, very unclear as to what I wanted to do.

Celia Aniskovich:

I'm so grateful that I picked a college in New York, because if I had figured out what I wanted to do, and I was in rural Texas, I might've had some problems, but I got there knowing I had a strong love for the liberal arts and I was excited about Fordham's core curriculum and I was never going to pursue a math and sciences degree, but I wanted to try a range of things. And then I was lucky enough to be in a city that had incredible internships in those things where I could start to figure out, okay, what part of this do I want to pursue?

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Talk about some of those internships. You had some very enviable ones.

Celia Aniskovich:

Yeah, I loved my internship. So I became an NBC fan girl, I guess is a way to say it. I was at the Morning Joe. I was at Dr. Oz, I was at Late Night with Jimmy Fallon when Jimmy was still at Late Night, I was at Nightly News with Brian Williams when Brian was still there. Gosh, I'm sure I'm forgetting something, but a number of NBC internships. I also did a couple of theater internships. One of my favorite fun facts is that my college job was, I worked at the Broadway Souvenir store in Times Square underneath the Marriott Hotel, which I credit for everything that I'm able to do in my job, because nothing is hard after working that job. You meet every type of person and you encounter every type of scenario as you're trying to fold Lion King t-shirts with people screaming at you three inches from your face.

Celia Aniskovich:

So it was definitely a good learning moment. And yeah, I spent a lot of time in that NBC building and a lot of different places and I think very quickly, I got very interested in the world of news and the world of

live news. I'd say Morning Joe and Nightly were two of my favorite internships. I was at Morning Joe at a very interesting time in our country's history as well. I was there for a Sandy Hook shooting and the rise of mass shootings. I was there for Hurricane Sandy as well. So got natural disasters under my belt. And that was a team that had been doing that for five years when I was there. They've now been on for more years than I can imagine that that show's been going, but my job while I was an intern, I left campus at 2:30 in the morning and I'd get there at 3:15, 3:30 in the morning.

Celia Aniskovich:

They'd open the Starbucks at 30 Rock for me to come in and start ordering drinks for the Morning Joe cast. I know the deep dark secret of every celebrity you can imagine, which is their coffee order. And there are some weird ones. So that's also a fun one to bring out at parties, but there is an adrenaline. People who work in news know there is this addictive adrenaline to that live news format and I was a sucker for it real fast.

Matt Burns:

How'd you find those internships? Was that using career services or did you chase down your own leads?

Celia Aniskovich:

So I got my first internship at NBC at Dr. Oz on a fluke. I just applied and they needed someone and it wasn't a super competitive internship, but once I was in the building, as anyone at NBC can tell you, it's a place that they really encourage networking. The other incredible thing about NBC, which it's still amazing to me. I don't know if they still do it, but when I was there, you could literally look up anyone's email in the entire system, anywhere in the world that worked at NBC. So you could say, "I really want to talk to the line producer of Jimmy Fallon." And you can just look up their email and say, "Can I buy you a cup of coffee?" And sit with them for five minutes. I did that a lot.

Celia Aniskovich:

I talked to people about where they'd come from. I talked to people about other opportunities. I cold called, cold emailed people and said, "Can you sit down with me?" And it's the thing that I encourage students and young professionals to do the most. People want to help you. No matter how old you are, people remember what that was like. It feels good to be able to help someone get a job and get a new experience. And so people are eager to help and I think it's always that first one. I wish I had a better story of how I got the first one, because I know the first one is always the hardest, but even if you don't have that NBC directory, Google the people that you like and find them on LinkedIn and reach out and ask them to buy them a cup of coffee.

Celia Aniskovich:

Someone did that to me years ago and I brought her on a project and have kept her on almost all the projects I've done out of nowhere. She just said, "Please, can I sit down with you?" It works. It shows determination and it shows confidence in your abilities and I think it's a really good path forward. Certainly, career services helped me balance applying and attending those. There was a semester where I was doing both Oxygen and Morning Joe. So as you can imagine, the 2:30 wake up, plus another internship, plus a job. I mean, it was a lot.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Plus classes.

Celia Aniskovich:

Plus classes. Yeah, of course, plus classes at school. That thing that we all do, but yeah, it was a balance, but I was really determined not just to get those internships under my belt, but to figure out what I wanted to do, because I didn't know what I wanted to do and I didn't want to graduate not knowing what I wanted to do. So I wanted even more so than just figuring it out. Figuring out what I didn't want to do. I did a PR internship at Oxygen and I realized very quickly, PR is not for me. That was almost better than a good internship experience because I said, "Great, I can check that off the list. It's not my cup of tea." So I did that through my four years at Fordham.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

I know when I was in media communications major, you took a gamut of things, screenwriting and magazine writing and pop culture. Was it like that for you? Did you have any classes that really helped define your path?

Celia Aniskovich:

You're really asking me to think back. That's crazy. I haven't thought about those classes in quite a while. Yes. So we had a class. I don't know that it's taught there anymore. At the very least, I'm not sure it's taught by the same professor, but called media and national identity. Susan Maushart taught it when I was there. She is an incredible woman. She came in on our first day of class and sat in the class like she was in the class and let us just talk for like 10, 15 minutes before she got up and announced she was the teacher, which as a student was horrifying. Like you're talking about all sorts of things that you maybe don't want your professor to know. It was so smart, not related to the class, but I just remember her doing that and really putting us all on notice.

Celia Aniskovich:

That was a class, I think, that was really interesting because it combined a factual study of the industry with an interdisciplinary approach. We talked about *The Devil Wears Prada* and that scene with the cerulean sweater and how it goes all the way down and infiltrates different parts of the world. We read a book about how soccer changed the world. She burned a flag in the class. She burned one of those little toothpick flags and everyone was fine with it. And then she got another slightly bigger flag and burden that, and she started to gradually... People were cool with the toothpick flag, but got a little bigger and then it wasn't okay.

Celia Aniskovich:

And she asked us to grapple with why we felt that way. Why wasn't this all right? But I think it asked me questions that I hadn't ever really thought about and that were important to thinking about a career in journalism, a career in telling stories about how different people navigate stories differently. I took a Hitchcock class that I loved. I have to say my American Catholic studies concentration, those classes were really impactful to me. We read people like Flannery O'Connor and Thomas Merton and Dorothy Day and writers that I think aren't taught widely at a lot of schools, especially those female Catholic writers. You don't get a lot of that.

Celia Aniskovich:

I remember because I did not come from a Catholic school. I think a lot of the people in the concentration did have that Catholic upbringing, Catholic high school that I wasn't familiar with. So I hadn't read scripture. I hadn't done a lot of this and we had a pretty split half and half female male class. I remember he's a lovely human and he will remain nameless, but at one point we were reading Mary Karr, who's one of my favorite writers. She's written a bunch of memoirs that people know her for, but she's also a Catholic convert. She wrote a book of poems called Sinners Welcome. And this student said, "Like she's talking about lipstick and high heels and just all this women stuff that I can't relate to."

Celia Aniskovich:

And we had this big conversation about how do you think it feels as a woman to spend years reading only white male voices. This is so empowering for us. It was this real growth and learning moment about the stories we tell, the stories we are told and the stories we get to have access to in our educational institutions and that concentration, it was mostly taught by a lot of strong women and pushed us to look at different voices. I also think pushed me to look at liberal Catholic voices that I hadn't heard before. And voices like Mary Karr that you would maybe never expect to be in the same room as a Thomas Merton.

Celia Aniskovich:

And so all of those classes, again, just year after year built a love of stories and a love of storytelling. I think I have a lot of dear friends who went to NYU and one of my best friends always says to me and not to throw any shade at NYU because I love all the people I know from there, but she always says, "I feel like NYU cared a lot about my resume and Fordham cared a lot about your soul." And I always really liked that. I'm appreciative that our soul is so cared about as students at Fordham. I think it takes us far further than we could ever imagine when we were students there.

Matt Burns:

It really sounds like you were looking for a career in storytelling. Can you talk a bit about what you do now? What made you go that route of narrative and documentary filmmaking?

Celia Aniskovich:

Yeah, absolutely. So I did. I was really interested in news. I did a lot of internships in news and one of my last internships in news, like I said, was at Nightly News with Brian Williams. It was when Brian and Lester were transitioning when there were a lot of big world events that were also happening. It was the beginning of a transition for me, where I started to get disillusioned with the idea that you had a minute and a half to tell a story that needed a lot longer. I got very upset by the fact that people were given soundbites for horrific things that they wanted to speak more about that often we have to run and stick a microphone in someone's face the moment it happened. I am, for people who know me, too much of an empath, too much of someone who cares about what is fair and right and just and that felt not always fair.

Celia Aniskovich:

Sometimes I felt as though we were detracting from the story rather than adding to it, rather than helping and I never wanted to do that. So that was where the seed was planted. I learned a lot from that internship. I met one of my closest friends in that internship to this day, and it was a culmination of a lot of incredible NBC internships and it is also the thing while it planted a seed of disillusionment is the thing that spurred me on to apply for the NBC Page Program. I did the program.

Celia Aniskovich:

I was only in it for three months. It's now a mandatory year program, but I got the opportunity to do a rotation at the CNBC long form unit. It's the one documentary rotation in the Page Program. It's hard with hindsight to say this for sure, but I don't know that I could have told you that I knew what a documentary unit was, that I even knew that that was a thing. And so I got to go there and just what an incredible group of people. I can't stress enough, how caring and wonderful those people are. A lot of them came from 60 Minutes.

Celia Aniskovich:

Collectively, there's a huge amount of experience in that room of people and everyone at CNBC because it's in their New Jersey building, it's the sister to the big building and people really care and want to cultivate the kids internship and page experiences as much as they can. So I did that and then I left the program after three months because while I was at that rotation, I got an incredible opportunity to work on the television show *The Americans*. And while it was not what I thought would be my path after the Page Program, I couldn't really say no. For those who don't know, it was a show on FX about a group of Russian spies, Keri Russell, as the lead actress in it and Matthew Rhys as her husband.

Celia Aniskovich:

I went there for season three of *The Americans* and had a interesting job. The easiest way to explain it was I was responsible for the historical accuracy of the show. I did a lot of what was the name of that street corner in Virginia in 1984? And what did Soviet Russia look like at that time? And what were the gas prices and were we using red solo cups then or were they still white clear cups? I worked within the Post Department and helped that team. I adored that job. It's not a job that has a real trajectory other than a couple of period shows that job doesn't really exist everywhere. I had a great boss at the time who had worked in documentaries early on and who was also talking to me about it.

Celia Aniskovich:

The woman who had had my job the season before me had moved on to Jigsaw Productions, which is a big documentary production company in New York. So I was talking to her and talking to this old boss and I got the opportunity at Jigsaw after that show wrapped to work on a series called *The New Yorker Presents*, which was a series on Amazon and where we took the *New Yorker Magazine* and took both true and fictional stories and brought the magazine to life on screen. That was my first documentary job and I kind of never looked back. I just decided, this is what I want to do.

Celia Aniskovich:

I truly believe one day I will wake up and someone will call me and say, the jig is up. You don't get to get paid to listen to people for a living, but until that day comes, this is what I will do for a living, because I do get paid to listen to people for a living, which is an incredible privilege. I just love it. I mean, I think we have an incredible responsibility, but we also have an incredible medium in which to tell stories that are often overlooked or short changed. We have the literal time to tell more about it and to talk to people whose lives it impacted.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

So you're both a producer and a director, correct?

Celia Aniskovich:

Yes. And for those who aren't familiar with documentaries, because it's a little bit different than news and certainly different than scripted. The best analogy I've ever heard for what is a director and what is a producer in documentaries, is that a director steers the ship and a producer makes sure the ship is still a ship, but yes. So producing documentaries is for the most part, very creative. You are responsible for often finding the people that are going to be in the film, talking to them about their stories, figuring out the structure of the story as a director.

Celia Aniskovich:

I like to do both hand in hand. I think separating those jobs sometimes does a disservice to the film is conducting the interviews, is figuring out the visual landscape of the film, what it's going to look like and how we're going to piece all of that story that the producer has assembled together. And yes, I do a little bit of both. I love both and my films while I've done a lot of crime, I wouldn't say it's the only thing I've done or am interested in, but I certainly think my work tends to be centered around strong human stories, strong character studies. Stories where there's a lot of gray area where things aren't black and white.

Celia Aniskovich:

I think that comes from the Fordham experience as well of giving people the benefit of the doubt and trusting people to be able to explore their own stories and talk about the nuance. It's an industry that I really love and has gone through some radical change in the past even five years. It's been really interesting to be a part of it and see how we're growing and changing.

Matt Burns:

I love that you mentioned, you're looking at those stories with a lot of gray area. A lot of different stories like that out there. How do you actually pick the subjects? How do you decide with so much out there?

Celia Aniskovich:

Yeah. So it's a mix I'd say for me personally. It's not the same for every documentary producer director but I'd say for me, it's a mix. About half of the stories I tell are stories that people come to me with and say, "We'd like you to direct or produce this." And the other half are stories that I find and go to a production company and say, "I'd like to work with you on making this." So I am a freelancer. I've been a freelancer since the day I left the Page Program. So it was only not a freelancer for about three months. We can talk about that, but that is a whole other ball of wax and it will make your parents very nervous, but I love being a freelancer.

Celia Aniskovich:

So it's one of those two options in terms of how I find stories, how I hear about stories and in terms of the literal, how do I find stories? It's a real mix. I'm a little bit of a research freak. There are great long form magazines that still exist in this country, Texas Monthly, Indianapolis Monthly are places where you can find those long form, deep dive stories and articles and journalists are still writing those as much as we think print is dying they are. I'm always looking at that. I'm looking at local newspapers that people don't read. Sometimes I'll go on eBay and buy 30 newspapers from 1984 and then just sit with them and see, is there some nugget here in something.

Celia Aniskovich:

Sometimes I see a story where it's a paragraph and I think, "There's definitely a lot more to this than the reporting that's been done." I did a podcast recently and that's how that podcast came about. I wanted to know more and the more I wanted to know wasn't out there. And so I felt like I had to make the more. I think so often that happens with documentaries and podcasts. There is this sense of, okay, we've heard about this story, but why haven't we heard about all of it? How can we dig further? I also think now, and maybe it's just because we've turned to 2020, and there's this cyclical nature of documentaries of every 10 years.

Celia Aniskovich:

It's the next 10 year chunk that you focus on, but there are all of these great '90s stories that we've forgotten about, whether it's Framing Britney Spears that came out and we forgot about the whole Justin Timberlake of it all. I just finished a film actually about Woodstock '99, the music festival that is premiering the London Film Festival in early October. You think 1999 wasn't that long ago and you forget all of the things that you've forgotten about the late '90s.

Celia Aniskovich:

I think we're also at a time where we are doing a little bit of a revisionist history on this period and these chapters that we thought we'd closed and looking back with the good hindsight that we have and saying post Me Too, especially for a film like Woodstock '99. How did we treat the rapes that happen there? How did we treat these conversations at that time? And it's horrifying. I mean, it is completely horrifying and it also shows us really how far we haven't come. I'm grateful particularly to be able to share those sorts of stories.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

It seems like a lot of it is relationship building and getting people to trust you in order to talk to you. Can you speak a little bit to that?

Celia Aniskovich:

Yeah, absolutely. One of the things when I teach classes or I talk to students who are interested in this. I always say first and foremost, never call the people in your film's characters because they're not characters, they're real people. I think it's very easy to forget that. It's all about trust. The only thing that we all have that is ours and ours alone. The only thing is our story. So when you're asking someone to share their story, you're asking an incredibly difficult thing of them and they are placing so much trust in you. When they share that story, they don't get any say in the edit of a film, they don't know what parts will make it in. They don't know how you'll chop up their words. And so they have to trust that you're going to be true and honest to their story, and they have to trust you in order to trust the process.

Celia Aniskovich:

And so I think a lot of people don't have the same approach and I don't know that there's a right and wrong, but for me, despite how fast these films move and how fast our industry moves, I always go to see a person first without a camera. I always just spend time with them. I've gone to a lot of soccer games. I've eaten a lot of meals at people's kitchen tables. You treat someone how you hope they would treat you in their worst moment. Because for the most part, my job is that 99% of the time I'm talking to people about the worst day of their life, because there aren't a lot of happy documentaries and that's another topic, there needs to be more. But I am talking to someone, if not about the worst day of their life, about something difficult about a trying period, about something they're grappling with.



Celia Aniskovich:

I try to think about how in that scenario, I would want to be treated. There's no magic formula. It's talking to someone like a real person. It's treating them with care and respect. It's listening. It's making sure that you are the right person to tell the story. I did a film last year about domestic violence. Corrinna Martin, who is a mother who lost two daughters and a granddaughter to domestic violence. She happened to live in the town that I grew up in, which was a real fluke and pretty incredible. We've talked many times about many strange things that happened on that film that for two people of faith, if you don't believe in God, it makes you question how you could not after all the crazy coincidences that happened in the making of that film.

Celia Aniskovich:

But we talked a lot because I am a young white woman and she is an older Black woman living in an inner city in a world that I did not grow up in despite living in the same city and was I the right person to tell her story? I think that's an important conversation to have. In the end, we decided we care a lot about one another and it was the right way forward. But I had to constantly check in with myself and make sure that we were being honest and fair to Corrinna's story and that in the areas I didn't understand her experience, I was checking in with her to make sure I got it right. To make sure we portrayed it correctly.

Celia Aniskovich:

One of the things she always said to me that really stood out was that Black women's stories don't have longevity. That we forget about them, that they don't persist. And so I think I can best use my voice and my platform and my position and my privilege when I'm able to give a platform to those voices that aren't normally heard and able to make sure that we do have longevity and that people like Corrinna who needs to be heard are heard. That was a project they did for Investigation Discovery. It was certainly not my most watched thing. It was not one of the Netflix projects that people are interested in, but I think it's probably the most important thing I've ever made.

Celia Aniskovich:

Places like HBO and Netflix don't often share those sorts of smaller stories, but there's still such a need for them. Just because they're not Harvey Weinstein, they're not Jeffrey Epstein, it doesn't mean they're not important. If you look at my work, I've worked with a lot of different channels, a lot of different platforms and I think there is great joy in the fact that we have that opportunity in this country to have different voices and platforms and different types of channels. You might not watch all of them, but they exist. I have been really excited to see, especially even just in the past year or two, the different types of stories that have come to platforms and the effort on the studio side and the network side to really give a voice to those stories that need to be heard.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

I think there's a real appetite, more than ever for documentaries. I feel like they're everywhere and people that wouldn't necessarily gravitate to that kind of filmmaking are really interested in those stories now and it's a growing industry. What do you think?

Celia Aniskovich:

Yeah, absolutely. I think we're in a golden age of documentaries. I always try to think about what kicked it off and I think certainly at least for true crime, it feels like Making a Murderer did something to us. I

hate the phrase true crime, but it is what we call it. But I don't know where that appetite comes from. I'm grateful for it. People don't sit down and watch the Nightly News every night. We just don't do it anymore. And so I think the scariest part is could that mean that people are losing stories and people aren't reading the newspaper and people aren't watching the news, but I'm really encouraged by how interested in documentaries people have become, because it shows that we do want and need stories at our core.

Celia Aniskovich:

This Woodstock film, we opened the film with the original '69 creator of the original Woodstock. I asked him, I said, "What is the hallmark of Woodstock for you? What is the thing that makes Woodstock Woodstock?" And he said the word community. And I said, "Do you think there will ever be a Woodstock like Woodstock '69 again?" And one of the things he said that I loved was he said, "When it comes to community, you get what you give." So if you give peace and love, you get peace and love back. And if you give profit and greed, you get profit and greed back. I think there is this universal sense of us all wanting a community, all wanting to make sense of our stories, all wanting to find this place.

Celia Aniskovich:

I think documentaries help us do that. I think we are in a moment too, where we're all reckoning with this idea of community and where we fit and how we fit in and what parts of community we have access to and what parts we don't. And so I think people are interested in documentaries because we all have that need. We have that need to fill that question and that search and that void in some cases. And so, I mean, I think about it all the time. I think about why people are so interested in them, but I'm mostly just grateful that they are and excited to see as more things come out and how we evolve the medium.

Matt Burns:

Yeah. Great to see such appetite from the streaming services. You mentioned Netflix and you've had some work on there. You mentioned HBO Max as well. Is this something that a lot of executives are asking you for right now or is it a much more that you're going to networks or streaming platforms and pitching ideas to them?

Celia Aniskovich:

So the way it works, which is a little confusing actually, is that the network, the streaming platform doesn't actually make the film. So they hire a production company that then hires the staff to make the documentary. So you've heard of Netflix, HBO, Hulu, but you may not have heard of Jigsaw Productions, Radical Media, Bungalow, October Films, all places I've worked for. But those are the people that are assembling the teams, the directors, and the producers and the crew to make the film.

Celia Aniskovich:

So normally, what happens is those people have an internal staff team of what's called development producers who are developing ideas. Those are the unsung heroes of our business. All of your favorite people that actually come up with the ideas who never get heard about. For the most part, they come up with the ideas and then they approach me or someone else as a director and say, "This is the topic. Do you have a vision for it? How would you see it?" We go to a network. We pitch it. Sometimes I do the development all the way through from the beginning.

Celia Aniskovich:

So I go to a production company that I've worked with before and say, "Hey, I want to make a film about X. Do you want to partner with it?" And we can go pitch it to networks. That is how that sometimes happens. But for the most part, it's a grind. It can sound fun and glamorous, and it is fun sometimes. Glamorous, it is not. It is hard work. It is not a lot of sleep. And that goes to something I caution students about too. There are easier ways to make money. So you got to really love to do this. And it's got to get you out of bed in the morning because there are going to be days when you're running on three hours of sleep and they're going to be days when people are screaming at you.

Celia Aniskovich:

I had a friend tell me recently that her therapist diagnosed her with vicarious trauma to such an interesting concept that I hadn't thought about, but we carry other people's trauma all day and it does get to you and it does something to you. If you don't feel that it's important and you don't feel like the luckiest person in the world to have the job, it's okay, but it's probably not the right place for you. I think it's worth checking in with ourselves about that because we spend more waking hours at our job than anything else in our lives.

Celia Aniskovich:

We spend more waking hours with the people at our place of work than anyone else in our lives. I think we should enjoy it and I think it's something that Fordham also taught me. You don't have to do something you hate. It doesn't have to be a job. It can be a vocation. It can be a calling and you deserve that. We all deserve that.

Matt Burns:

Well, switching gears, talk a bit about some of the podcasts you're involved with. I'm halfway through Spy Affair right now and you talked a lot about gray area we said there's really quite a bit in that. Can you talk a bit about that project or any other podcasts you're working with and give a little look into what goes on behind the scenes like you were just saying with documentaries, but how long does a project like that take? Is it years in the makings to build those relationships and what should people in particular students know who think, "I'd love to do something like that."

Celia Aniskovich:

I am a podcast novice. I will start by saying that. Spy Affair was my first podcast. I am working on another one right now, but podcasts are harder than documentaries. I'm going to say that right now, they are much harder. Especially narrative podcasts, like Spy Affair. It's a bit making a documentary, but without an editor. You're having to write the whole thing yourself. There's narration, it's difficult. It's not just the documentary without visuals. I learned that real fast, real quick, but that was a particularly difficult one. As you can imagine for anyone who's listened to it as well. It's about Maria Butina, who is the accused Russian spy. It was alleged that she infiltrated US elections and she was put in prison. She served a total of 18 months in Virginia before being deported back to Russia where she is now.

Celia Aniskovich:

I got to know her about seven or eight months into her sentence. I went down to a jail in Alexandria, Virginia, and visited her and stayed in touch with her. That was the basis of selling the project to Wondery who distributed it. But once we did that, I had to find and convince to talk all the other people around Maria's story, which is quite the group of people I got interviewed for the podcast. And someone said to me, "What I love about this podcast is you couldn't pay all the people in this podcast to ever be in

the same room with one another." It's true. Like none of these people would ever agree to get together in one room, but it was fascinating. There is certainly a lot of gray area in that story.

Celia Aniskovich:

The comments of that podcast are hilarious to me because I have people screaming at me for being a Trump propagandists and people screaming at me for being a liberal socialist. It's an equal measure. It makes me feel like we did something right, maybe if people are that angry on both sides. But it's worth saying I started in news, but I don't consider myself a journalist. I consider myself a filmmaker. I consider myself a storyteller. I think the difference in that is journalists are largely interested in the what happened and I am interested in the why it happened. I'm still interested in what happens. We need to get the facts right and that was a rigorously fact-check process.

Celia Aniskovich:

Someone actually asked me yesterday, how did it feel to do your first political project? I said, it's so funny. I don't think about that as a political project. I think about it as a story where I wanted to know a girl named Maria, and I guess it is political, but it's never how I approached it. It's one of those projects, like I was talking about earlier, where there was a lot of reporting, but I felt like I didn't know the person at the heart of the story. And so I wanted to get to know her. I don't know that I know Maria Butina any better than when I started three years ago, but I made this series and we talked for a lot of hours and she gave me a lot of time.

Celia Aniskovich:

Everyone in that podcast gave me a lot of their time and were very gracious with their time. But putting it together was a struggle. We had internal struggles and we fought about it constantly about what we should do, what we shouldn't do, what was right, what was wrong. I don't want to ruin the end of it for you, Matt but we had one of the characters get out of prison while making it. So we had to deal with that. And we were also dealing with an election. There was an election in the middle of us making it and we didn't know which way it was going to go. And depending on which way it went, something might've happened or something might've not happened and we didn't know how that was going to influence the podcast.

Celia Aniskovich:

I'm currently making a podcast where something wildly unexpected happened in the middle of making it, that completely changed the course of the podcast. The best way to explain it is a godfather or fellows meets the Tim Burton movie, Big Fish. Probably seems very bizarre on its surface, but I promise there's some overlap in those two stories and that's the gist of it. But yeah, I think with podcasts, it's both a blessing and a curse that you are doing it without video. You need to paint a world and create a world for people. But you also, I think sometimes get more vulnerability from people. I conduct podcast interviews like this, but actually without video. They don't see me.

Celia Aniskovich:

I don't see them but I think people just get comfortable and they almost forget what they're doing. Sometimes they say probably more than they wanted to. I don't know, but it's been a fascinating learning process to also just learn a different medium of storytelling. And how you get involved in it as a student, I don't know that, but I go back to my find people on LinkedIn who are doing what you're doing and reach out to them.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Yeah, no story is too small. I mean, find somebody in your own community and make something with them and then learn and grow on the spot.

Celia Aniskovich:

I taught a class at NYU last semester for kids making podcasts and their stories were exactly that. They got matched with a professor who had done some work in a field and they picked a small story, but they all took a different part. Someone was the audio engineer and someone was the writer and someone was the host. And that's the other great part about podcasts is you need a good amount of money to make a documentary. You don't really need much money at all to make a podcast. You can set it up right away. And some of the most successful podcasts were set up that way. They weren't sold ahead of time. They caught on and people got really interested in them.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

If we could do it, anybody can. Right Matt?

Matt Burns:

Exactly. I wanted to ask because I know you've been a mentor in the Fordham Mentoring Program and for any who doesn't know that pairs alumni with a current junior or senior. I know a lot of the questions you've gotten and our students want to break into this. We always have students who want to get into filmmaking or even specifically documentary filmmaking. Any advice you would offer communication majors in particular or any student wants to break into your field?

Celia Aniskovich:

Yeah. When it comes to advice for people that are still students, double major, minor, don't just do communications. Communications is a great practical education. But in order to tell stories, you need to know how to tell stories. You need to hear other people's stories. You need to have the most well-rounded education you possibly can. And I think all of that technical stuff is great, but it can be learned on the job as well. What can't be learned is a passion and an interest and a wide variety of knowledge in different subjects.

Celia Aniskovich:

I can't tell you how many times, Sara you were asking me how I get people to trust me. Part of it is being able to relate to people. Being able to talk about common experiences. Being able to have had a variety of different types of jobs in Times Square and jobs in 30 Rock, and being able to find something to relate to someone with. It can be as small as seeing a Mary Karr book on someone's shelf when I go to visit them and striking up a conversation about that. But that makes my job a lot easier and a lot more fulfilling.

Celia Aniskovich:

I also think in terms of advice of breaking in, I'm not going to sugar coat it. It's not easy. There are lots of people who want to do it, but I think, and this is going to sound like a conflicting piece of advice, but I'm going to give both pieces of advice. One is be open to try anything. I went to news and then the Page Program, and then The Americans. I was taking routes that I didn't know where they were going to lead. I'm sure my parents again, were terrified that I was going to move back home one day, but just follow

your interests and do that. And then the other piece of advice, which is contradictory is get really good at something.

Celia Aniskovich:

Once you do figure out what you want to do, become the best you can be at it. Know everything about it, read everything you can about it. Talk to as many people as you can about it. So often, especially in the documentary world, there are people that come from film school who only know the camera department. There are people that only know how to do audio. If you want to be a producer, if you want to be a director, you have to know how all of it works and you have to be interested in all of it. It's a team sport. You got to be able to touch things when things go wrong, you've got to be able to figure out how to troubleshoot.

Celia Aniskovich:

I think there's no better experience in the world for the film industry than being a waitress or working in retail. Those crisis management skills, they're enormously helpful, but I think just being persistent, it doesn't happen overnight. I am pretty young still, and I am very grateful for the success that I've achieved, but what you don't see, it's like Instagram, you don't see all the bad stuff. You don't see the long hours. You don't see the piles of Diet Coke cans that are behind my computer right now. You don't see the work and you've got to put in the work. I do believe that people see that work and just keep talking to people.

Celia Aniskovich:

I think, especially in a world of COVID people forget the world outside their home. Call that person, take a walk with them, if you can't buy them a cup of coffee. People are dying to get out of their houses right now. So do that and just keep asking questions. What I do for a living is ask questions and how I got to do what I do for a living is by asking questions.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Who are some of your mentors? Who do you look up to?

Celia Aniskovich:

Oh gosh. One of my greatest mentors is a woman named Mary-Jane Mitchell. She was a woman who got me out of a bad show and onto a new show. It's really, again, been there to answer my questions for me to say, "Hey, I didn't go to film school. I know I probably should have learned this thing five years ago, but I didn't and now it feels too late for me to ask. So what is this? How do I..." And she didn't go to film school either, but I think, especially for a female in the industry, finding strong female mentors is really important. Obviously, I don't know the experience of white men in the industry, but I wager to say it's probably a little easier than for women and people of color.

Celia Aniskovich:

And so I think it's very important to find mentors who know what your path is going to look like, because they can only give so much advice if they haven't been on your path. And they will also from a really crude level, know what extra resources are available for women. What grant opportunities, what programs. I think also just having those people to go to in an emotional and mental way as well. Look, there's still a lot of misogyny and discrimination on film sets, a lot and it weighs on you. It weighs on you so much and there are days that you really feel like, "Why am I doing this?" And so to be able to have

those mentors to help you get through your career. Sure, but to also just be an ear, they become like sisters, like parents.

Celia Aniskovich:

And for, I would say most of us who are pursuing this career path, our parents did not do this. This was not really an industry that they were in and so they can only be so helpful. Both my parents are lawyers. They have no flipping idea what I do for a living and they were great and supportive and they try, but they often caveat with, I don't know if this is normal in your industry, but because they don't know. So I think finding those people... One of the things I talk a lot about in addition to mentors is pay transparency. Talk about what you make, ask people, what they make. That's another way to not only make sure once you're in the door, sure, but to make sure you are being compensated fairly, to make sure you are going on a path that's going to get you...

Celia Aniskovich:

I know so many people who got in quick and then just got stuck for five, six, seven years in the same job at the same rate. We don't have benefits. We don't have a lot of the stuff that protects people that work for an industry. We don't really have HR. So make sure you're advocating for yourself and finding people who can advocate for you. Mary-Jane, who I mentioned, she was fighting battles for me when I couldn't fight them. She was standing up for me when I wasn't in a position to stand up for myself. It's important that you surround yourself with those people.

Matt Burns:

Great. Well, Celia I think that is all we have for you. You've been incredibly generous with your time today. Really want to thank you for sharing all that insight and a look behind the scenes of some of the work that you're doing.

Celia Aniskovich:

You guys for having me, it's been fun to talk about and yet in the line of call up people on LinkedIn, if anyone finds me on LinkedIn, I will go for that cup of coffee with you and I'm happy to answer any more questions.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Great. Thank you.

Matt Burns:

I'm so excited to hear the rest of Spy Affair.

Celia Aniskovich:

Yes. You have to let me know what you think. What your opinion of it all is and who you think she is at the end of it all.

Matt Burns:

Sounds like a plan. Well, that's another edition of Fordham Footsteps.

Sara Hunt Munoz:

Fordham Footsteps is brought to you by the Fordham University Alumni Association

Matt Burns:

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