Interview keywords/topics: Ireland and Appalachia, Community

Interviewer: Dr. Jessica Martell
Interviewee: MM

MM:

Okay.

Dr. Jessica Martell:

Okay, we are ready.

MM:

Um, this is MM being interviewed by Dr. Jessica Martell on March 18th or, uh. April 18th, sorry. Uh, 2024. Uh, it is a Thursday. This interview is part of an oral history project for Watauga Residential College class 2202, a Spring 2024 [00:00:30] course about Ireland and Appalachia. This semester we discussed different ways of using and understanding historical information, and we are creating our own historical documents in this project.

Dr. Jessica Martell:

MM, thank you so much for being here. I am delighted to be interviewing you today. Ready for your first question?

MM:

Yeah.

Dr. Jessica Martell:

Alright. So how would you describe your identity or identities in particular as a member of different groups or communities such as race, ethnicity, if I could say that [00:01:00] correctly? Ethnicity, class, religion, gender. How has this changed in your lifetime and what do you want people to know about these identities years from now? Any way you'd like to address that?

MM:

Yeah, so I would consider myself like a North Carolinian through and through - both sides of my family are from North Carolina and have been in North Carolina since the 1600s. So, um, my mom's side of the family is from the Graham-Swepsonville area, um, [00:01:30] where my dad's family is from the Wilkesboro area. Um, and we have a really rich history, um, very large extended family on both sides as a result of that. And so I take a lot of pride in being a North Carolinian, but also understanding some of the good and bad history that comes with that.

Dr. Jessica Martell:

Yeah, that makes perfect sense. Um, so do you have a hometown that you identify with for yourself? And if so, how would you describe it? What makes it special?

MM:

[00:02:00] Yeah, I would consider my hometown… I have two. So I have the place where I was born and lived until I was eight. And then I have the place where I moved to when I was eight and grew up and my family still lives there. So I was born in Atlanta, Georgia, at Northside Hospital. Um, it's a great community to grow up in, uh, very much. We kind of joke my family, that my parents were the token straights in their friend group. [00:02:30] I didn't realize people thought it was wrong to be gay until I moved to North Carolina. Um, because all of my uncles, all of my babysitters growing up were gay men and usually gay men of color. So, uh, uh, a lot of my relationships that were healthily modeled to me were those of gay men, um, and in the gay community. Um, and my main nanny growing up was a lesbian, a butch lesbian at that. So for me it's like I very much was super thrown off at like [00:03:00] 10 years old when they [context: North Carolina Legislature] were like, ah, yes, no gay people together. And I was like, what? This is crazy. So when I was eight years old, I moved from Atlanta with my family pretty much overnight because I got into the Chinese immersion program at my elementary school, Glenwood Elementary in Chapel Hill. And we had already been planning to move back, but because I got into the school basically at the last minute, like literally the Saturday before school started, um, and because [00:03:30] my father had lost his job in the 2008 financial crisis, he's in the financial sector, um, we moved to Chapel Hill pretty much overnight and lived with my grandmother for a year before, uh, settling down and getting our own place. So I very much consider a lot of my personal identity to be centered around Chapel Hill and my experience there, while a lot of my personal values and core beliefs are as a result of my time growing up in Atlanta.

Dr. Jessica Martell (03:58):

Yeah, that makes a lot of sense. And actually [00:04:00] it's nice to know a little bit more about your background through this because MM is a global studies major and I didn't realize that you had such a deep foundation in Chinese language and culture. Like going back to your move to Chapel Hill, do you think, I mean, has that clearly shaped your choice of major?

MM (04:15):

Yeah, for sure. I actually started taking Chinese, um, uh, in kindergarten. Hmm. Uh, so I moved to North Carolina in second grade. So I started at a charter school in, uh, Atlanta that was, uh, [00:04:30] it was actually a, a largely majority students of color, uh, charter school too. So, um, oftentimes the classes that I've been in basically up until middle school, um, were uh, minority majority, if that makes sense.

Dr. Jessica Martell:

Mm-Hmm.

MM:

So I think that kind of colored a lot of my experience in terms of understanding maybe racial politics a little bit better than some people my age. But I feel like that's kind of reductive to say perhaps as [00:05:00] a white person. But I don't know, I feel like, you know, I witnessed a lot of the racism that people would do against my classmates, like firsthand. Like I remember being in like second grade and a kid came up to us on the playground and it was me and a couple of my classmates who were pretty much all Chinese. I think we had one other white girl in the class,

one Hispanic girl, and then one who was mixed Chinese and American. So, and then all the rest of the [00:05:30] girls in the class were Chinese and pretty much, uh, like their parents were first generation, like fresh off the boat sort of. So a lot of their parents were grad students that had come over to study at UNC. Um, I remember this kid coming up to us on the playground and basically being like, I hate Chinese, you know, it sucks, you know? And I remember very much like remembering that and internalizing it and being like, that guy really sucks, you know, but not really understanding until later on that I was like, oh, [00:06:00] that was like racism. That was…

Dr. Jessica Martell (06:02):

That was an aggressive racist comment.

MM (06:04):

Right, exactly. Yeah. And I didn't, but I took offense to it because I was like, no, these are my people, this is my community. Like, why, like, this isn't okay. You know? So I think for me, maybe I have a different view on it maybe than a lot of people maybe that have grown up in majority white schools. And I think that's part of a lot of my frustrations with some of the things that go on at App State because it is a predominantly white [00:06:30] institution.

Dr. Jessica Martell (06:31):

Yeah. Um, well, let's see. I'm trying to find a segue to some of your other questions, but as I, I mean, can I just ask another follow up? Yeah. What was it about Chinese as a language that drew you to it or your family? Were they involved in that choice?

MM (06:45):

Yeah, they were, my mom was actually on the PTA for that charter school. She was part of the foundational, uh, board for that charter school. Um, she was their first PTA vice president. She very much liked being super involved when I was growing [00:07:00] up. Um, basically they had the choice between French and Chinese as the language for the school because it was originally owned by a company, uh, this charter school, it is not anymore, now it's just Atlanta, uh, or Wesley International School. It used to be, um, Imagine Wesley. So it was owned by the company “Imagine”. Um, she, she and the parents on the board really felt that Chinese, they saw even back in like 2005 that Chinese [00:07:30] was going to be the language of the future. And that it was important that there be a community in a school in Atlanta that taught this, when really the only other opportunity for students to be able to get that sort of education in Atlanta would be Atlanta International. And, um, that's not super accessible, especially to communities of color. Um, so being able to have a neighborhood school that, um, where everyone wore uniforms, it was very equal in that way. Like there wasn't any, like, [00:08:00] there were funds to allow people to get uniforms and whatnot, but it, I think in that way it was very, it was a special school because even though it had staffing problems, um, like it was very equal and it was also gender separated. So for my first two years of school, I was only in class with girls. Um, and honestly I think that did help a lot because the boys classes were able to focus more so on how younger [00:08:30] boys learn versus girls, which is a very different, you know, ball game. And then later on they would get integrated in the higher level classes.

Dr. Jessica Martell (08:39):

Wow. That sounds really unique and interesting. And I maybe wanna take it back to your comment about App State. Um, maybe you could talk a little bit about your experience of being a student here, especially since you're in a particularly reflective moment as you prepare to graduate. Maybe what are some of the things that really work well for you here at Appalachian State, considering your background and also some of the things that you might wanna change [00:09:00] about campus?

MM (09:01):

Um, yeah. Uh, I really have enjoyed the attentiveness that I feel like professors pay their students here at App State. That's part of the reason I chose App State. I was accepted to both UNC Chapel Hill and App State, and I chose App State because I liked the culture better. I felt like it was a lot less cutthroat. Um, and I didn't wanna, I grew up at a high school that was very similar in culture to UNC and I didn't like that. I didn't like [00:09:30] that. I like competition, but I don't like the overly competitiveness and the over emphasis on, uh, academics instead of like mental health and student professor relationships. 'cause I did take my senior year, I took classes at UNC, um, and I just didn't love the impersonalness. Um, versus when I came to App State, I was touring [00:10:00] and they basically rolled out the red carpet for me to, you know, see the departments that I wanted to see and talked to professors and I even, um, audited, I think one of Professor Ryan's, uh, classes on international terrorism.

Dr. Jessica Martell:

Right.

MM:

So that, that really totally, I was, I fell in love with App State because of that. I was like, this is totally the style that I wanna do and I really enjoy the small class size. I think that's allowed me to get closer to my professors. I mean, namely you, uh, uh, I've been very [00:10:30] fortunate that I have a really great community of not only classmates, but professors that I feel like I've been able to lean on for my research and in personal situations, but also creating a really good community within my degree. Um, I will say I think the overall administrative culture at App State has been a little difficult because I remember my freshman year, um, Sherry Everts [Context: Former App State Chancellor 2014-2024], uh, the staff passed a vote of no confidence on her, [00:11:00] and that was 2020, I believe, Fall 2020. And I feel like that's been really challenging for a lot of the professors and students, especially in trying to make more left-leaning policies on campus occur versus the really conservative board of governors and donors. Um, so I think that's been a little challenging, especially in recent weeks and months, um, with, uh, like Pride Week being rebranded to Spring [00:11:30] Fest and a bunch of the L-G-B-T-Q art on campus being taken down. So I think that's been really difficult. Um, but I did jokingly say to my boyfriend when Sherry Everts resigned that it was an early graduation present for me. So I'm hoping that that perhaps inspires some more positive change in the administration and potentially some better culture changes that make things better for professors.

Dr. Jessica Martell (11:57):

Yeah. You actually just covered a whole bunch of your questions in one, [00:12:00] so maybe we'll start to think about closing this off, but I would love to know, um, something that you might take away from, um, transatlantic Ireland or even some of the global studies work that we've done today, or sorry, this semester. Um, is there anything in particular about Irish studies or Appalachian studies that stands out to you from this moment?

MM (12:18):

Yeah, it's really allowed me to get in touch with my roots, I feel like, because my family is both Appalachian and Irish. So I feel like it's really given me the opportunity to reject [00:12:30] the idea of the redneck and kind of embrace the idea of the Appalachian, if that makes sense. My, um, I remember in eighth grade we had to do basically a very similar project to this. Um, and I remember on my family history writing down, they're just rednecks like, and I got a really bad grade on it, but I, I kind of poo-pooed my own family history and my own culture, um, because I had [00:13:00] that idea of the redneck and of the hillbilly. And my mom, I remember, sat me down and had a conversation with me about it and was like, well, you know, maybe, you know, some of your cousins were farmers, haven't been to college, maybe they haven't had the opportunity, but that's because they haven't had the funding. Like you have, you know, they haven't had the same opportunities that you've had. Um, and you know, even though it's maybe a different culture or maybe politically different, [00:13:30] those people would still take a bullet for you. They would still stand in front of a car for you if you were, you know, in need of it. And that really changed my perspective on it and made me more willing to open my mind about it. So it's taken me like eight years of unlearning that sort of, um, ingrained stereotyping that we're taught. Um, and it's really made me embrace my own culture and be proud of where I come from while still [00:14:00] being critical of the negative aspects of it. So for me it's like understanding that, you know, my Irish ancestors were Protestant and they came over after the Cromwellian uh, conquest of, uh, Northern Ireland. They're from Ulster. So, um, you know, my family, my mom's name is Colleen, she has red hair. Our family name is Kirkpatrick. You know, it's very Irish. you know, my family, my mom's side of the family is, [00:14:30] uh, low key bluegrass royalty. Like very much we are ingrained in the bluegrass culture of North Carolina. And it's taken me a long time to recognize the value in that, but also recognize where that came from and understand that bluegrass and hillbilly quote unquote culture is actually indicative of a beautiful cultural blending in the South that has occurred, um, as a result [00:15:00] of both capitalism, but also, uh, like I would say cultural mixing. You know?

Dr. Jessica Martell (15:08):

This is gonna be hard for you to narrow down, um, because you're such an incredible student, but what are you most proud of in your academic career?

MM (15:16):

Hmm. Um, I'm gonna be honest, I'm most proud of a paper that I wrote my junior year, and it's what I'm basing my capstone off of. It's, uh, I won [00:15:30] the runner up for the JHP award for that paper. Um, and it was specifically on the Uyghur genocide and specifically mosque destruction. Um, I felt like that was a really great culmination of a lot of my work. Um, and I'm continuing it with my capstone, so I'm very excited about that. But I, I would say that that paper

overall is symbolic of the kind of the way that I've latched onto something that I feel isn't talked about a lot and [00:16:00] kind of spreading the word about it a little bit more. You know, using the platform that I have here at App State to talk about something that maybe is an unsung story.

Dr. Jessica Martell:

Right.

MM:

And talk about the struggles faced by this religious group. Even though I'm not Chinese, I'm not Uyghur, I am not religious, I'm not Muslim. I mean, I grew up Protestant, but I mean, it's pretty much as far as you could get from my own personal culture. But I was struck [00:16:30] greatly by it my freshman year of, uh, at university when I was still online. I think it was the same semester I took your film class. Um, and that semester kind of changed my life. 'cause I watched in the name of the father, I watched Hotel Rwanda and then I also took like two anthropology classes on romance and love and whatever. And I was like, wow, this is really interesting. And learning about the human condition, I think that was something that really sparked my interest [00:17:00] in it. So I think that paper really has made me proud of myself as a student, but also has continued to remind me of what is capable when you dedicate yourself to a cause.

Dr. Jessica Martell (17:13):

Yeah, that's fantastic. Um, it's so wonderful to see the threads throughout your different semesters and different years coming together. It's just wonderful. Okay, final question. What do you look forward to after graduation?

MM(17:26):

Well, I'll be staying in Boone for a year after graduation. Um, [00:17:30] I'm going to be working for a year. So I'm excited to be able to enjoy Boone as a resident and not just as a student because I've kind of, I think it's indicative through my interview that I've been very entrenched in my, uh, academics here. So I haven't really given myself the chance to go to Trashcan falls or explore Grandfather Mountain all that much, you know? So I'm excited for the chance to do that. Um, and I'm also excited to expand my community here. Um, [00:18:00] I think especially after studying abroad last semester, I've made myself a lot more open to a lot more opportunities that maybe I was scared of in the past or more fearful of. But I've learned that you kind of only live once and might as well try everything you can, you know, as long as you stay safe.

Dr. Jessica Martell (18:21):

<laugh>. Well, I'm happy that you're gonna be here selfishly for another year. So I hope you come back and visit us in the global studies program. I will. And also just enjoy your transition to being a normal civilian [00:18:30] <laugh>.

MM(18:30):

I know. I'm like, I don't have to write a paper by midnight. That's crazy.

Dr. Jessica Martell (18:34):

Crazy. What are you gonna do with yourself? I'm sure that you will find amazing things to do.

MM(18:37):

I'll go to bed early. <laugh> crazy. I'm gonna go to bed at nine o'clock. <laugh>.

Dr. Jessica Martell (18:42):

Alright, nine. Thank you so much. Thank you. I really appreciate donating this to our archives so we have a testimonial to the incredible achievements that you've done in your academics here at App State.

MM (18:52):

Thank you. I'm a mountaineer through and through, so I'm very happy to contribute.