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Episode 18: Abby Reynolds

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Transcript

Christina Torres:

Hi everyone and welcome to Futures in Languages, a podcast showcasing stories from UCF's Modern Languages and Literatures Department alumni. I'm Christina Torres and I'll be hosting this episode. Today we'll be talking with Abby Reynolds who graduated from a major in political science with a minor in philosophy and also spent some time in our French studies program here. She graduated in the summer of 2022. Thank you so much for joining us today Abby.

Abby Reynolds:

Thanks for having me.

Christina Torres:

It's a pleasure. We're so excited to hear your stories and jump right into what about language learning was exciting for you. Can we start with our first question, which is could you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Abby Reynolds:

Yes. So as you said, I'm a political science major. I just graduated from UCF this summer and I'm actually starting a master's program in African studies. And to do my research is very necessary to have knowledge of regional languages and also a lot of the primary languages that are used in a lot of African countries. So I was really excited to get in more involved with language study during my time at UCF to help with my graduate studies later on.

Christina Torres:

Wonderful, that's wonderful. The motivation behind your studies. So if you could just share maybe where are you from and how did you find us here at UCF?

Abby Reynolds:

Yes, so I'm actually from Fort Myers, Florida, which is about four hours from Orlando. And I just loved the atmosphere at UCF and when I was thinking about my studies and thinking about how I could make myself a more well-rounded student, obviously language study really came into play just to kind of better myself as an academic intellectual and just be able to communicate with more people. So that's kind of how I got involved with language study at UCF.

Christina Torres:

Wonderful. I like that you're talking about being well-rounded and I know that you said that your major was political science and you also had your minor in philosophy, but you saw that connection to language and you saw that it was important to you. I'm excited to talk a little bit more about that as we continue our podcast episode. So what interested you in political science?

Abby Reynolds:

I actually grew up in a very interesting background. My family had very different political beliefs than the people I interacted with at school and I just kind of wanted to understand more about what politics entails, what does it mean, how do people develop these beliefs and how do they kind of hold onto them? And then I got more interested actually in international relations as I continued taking courses at UCF and I studied abroad in South Africa my freshman year, which got me interested in African affairs and I got to speak some Zulu. I was there, which was really cool and got me interested in thinking about African languages and the importance of being able to communicate with people when you're going abroad, living abroad, just kind of on their own terms instead of expecting them to talk to you in English, which is a very American thing. And so these things really got me thinking about how I can better my studies I guess, and be thinking about these things and take a more interdisciplinary approach to learning and engaging with people.

Christina Torres:

I like that you pulled from your personal interest and then went the route of just becoming more, you said that and that stuck with me the importance of being well-rounded as you continue to pursue your academic interest. So folks listening, you heard it here, Abby said it, and you mentioned studying abroad in Africa. Where in Africa was it, again?

Abby Reynolds:

So I actually had the opportunity to study abroad in two countries in on the continent while I was at UCF. So I studied abroad in South Africa my freshman year. I was there for a month through a program with the honors college, I believe it's now with the Lead scholars program. But it was absolutely foundational for me in realizing and challenging these preconceptions that I had had about the African continent that I think a lot of westerners kind of have these preconceived notions and challenging those and understanding how much I didn't know which is really what drew me to African studies. Cause I was like, there's a reason, a reason I don't know about this because I wasn't taught it before, why is that? And so all of these questions drew me into the field of African studies. And then this past spring I was able to study abroad in Kenya actually for a language study program. And I did four months studying Swahili in Nairobi, which was absolutely amazing. And I, I loved it and I loved being able to speak Swahili every day. It was wonderful.

Christina Torres:

That's wonderful. And how in your words would your Swahili study impact what you were able to do during your study abroad there?

Abby Reynolds:

I felt comfortable going to all different kinds of events. I went to a poetry reading, which was a mix of languages. They had English, Swahili and a lot of the native languages, ethnic languages of the region, which was really cool. And it was actually when I had first gotten there. So I was very much still early on I guess in my Swahili studies. But then later on I went to a choir event. I went to see a play by [inaudible] and it was at the national theater, which was really fascinating politically also, but linguistically too, it wasn't English but they mixed in a lot of Swahili. And compared to the poetry reading I went to at the beginning and the play that I went to at the end, I could understand almost everything that they were saying and the context in which they were trying to communicate the message. And it was just very cool to see how I was able to grow and just how much Swahili I was able to learn in such a short time by being immersed in the language and the culture.

Christina Torres:

Yeah, thank you for sharing that. It sounds like you've had your turning point where you realized, wait a second, I can speak this and I do understand this. And now I can participate more fully in those activities that I want to participate in, which is what we tell our students too. There's a turning point if we work hard and we spend time in it and we really dedicate to it, you know, can see the fruits of that as well.

Abby Reynolds:

And that's what makes it so fun. I think you can just talk to some random person that you've never met before and they may not even speak English, but you have this commonality. I know at the language school I studied at in Nairobi, there was a woman who was studying Swahili but she was from South Korea and she didn't speak English, but we could communicate in Swahili. And I just thought it was just so interesting also the use of second languages and being able to communicate in that way, which was just really fascinating.

Christina Torres:

Absolutely. We talk a lot about how language really is connection. It's the ability to enter different speech communities and participate in those. And what a wonderful example of that and being able to speak to another student who did not have English. But you had your shared Swahili there and how fortunate you were able to go to South Africa your freshman year.

Abby Reynolds:

Yes, it was definitely foundational and directed and shaped the rest of my academic path greatly obviously. Cause I'm now studying African studies, which is not something that I would've previously imagined for myself.

Christina Torres:

Yeah. Well you started to answer this question already, but could you tell us a bit of what you've been up to since graduation?

Abby Reynolds:

Yes. So I just started my master's program in African studies at Yale. It's been great so far. The atmosphere here is very cool and the program has a huge emphasis actually on learning languages. We actually have a language requirement to learn an African language which is really, really a unique opportunity because they offer I think four African languages here, which is unheard of basically. So I was really excited to get to continue my study of Swahili. I've also actually been using my French a little bit cause some of the courses I'm taking have some French readings, which is really interesting. I'm still very elementary French speaker. But it's cool to be able to look at it like, oh, I kind of know what's going on here. And I have that background knowledge that's been able to help me at least get through the readings and ask more questions. So it's been really, really amazing.

Christina Torres:

That's really great. I talk sometimes with students about how it's so important to find the next good question. And what you're telling me here is that your French skills have helped you to find the next questions that you want to ask in those readings here, even though it's not necessarily a French masters, but French is still important.

Abby Reynolds:

Yes, so it's definitely, it's really been helpful. And there are a couple courses here, French reading proficiency required so having that background, I may be a little rusty, but I have that background to rely on and I have all my notes in my textbooks and all of these things that were really useful in kind of forming the foundation of my French so I can keep building on it even after I've left UCF.

Christina Torres:

So you are already touching on this too, but how did the French classes in that formation prepare you for the next step in your life now?

Abby Reynolds:

Yes, French has been way more useful than I originally thought it would be, actually, which sounds really strange, but I took it just, I was like, I have room in my schedule and this would be really interesting, kind of give me a new perspective on what I'm interested in studying. And I've used it for my master's program already. I also traveled to Kigali in Rwanda over the summer and I was thinking, oh well I'll probably be able to use my Swahili and it'll be fine. But actually they spoke more French than they spoke Swahili. So I was still able to communicate, which was really cool. I was like, if I hadn't studied French then I wouldn't have been able to have as great an experience as I did while I was in Rwanda. So I think thinking, for me it was thinking outside of French, oh, French means France, French does not just mean, France, it means all of these other things has all these other contexts and all of these other cultural histories. And having that foundation has just been really helpful for me, even if it's just, I only got through I think elementary French one and two, so my French is still, I still need to work on it. But I think having that foundation has been really, really helpful for me and continuing my study.

Christina Torres:

Well Abby, thank you for encouraging our listeners who might think, well I only have time for French one and two, or I only have time for level one and two. And you're saying that even level one and two has been helpful to you in your studies and your travel, so thank you for that. Going back here to our next question, what advice would you offer someone who is interested in studying French or really any other language that you have studied?

Abby Reynolds:

I think at first I was nervous to study a new language cause I was like, I don't like making mistakes and messing up. And it's so easy to do that when you're learning a new language. I remember my first Swahili email I sent to my Swahili instructor. I told her to have, I used the word [inaudible], which I thought it meant break. Like, oh, have a nice break, I'll see you tomorrow. And it actually means explosion. So I was like, you know, just have to be okay with, you're going to mess up. You're going to make mistakes and it's going to be okay cause you're going to learn from these things and you're going to laugh about them because I still think about that when I look at these words today. So I think not being intimidated by the fact that it's just this whole vast unknown and instead looking at it as an opportunity to be able to, as you said, connect with a whole group of people that you would never be able to connect with maybe on the same level if you didn't learn that language.

Something else that really made me nervous was speaking, I like learning to read in another language. I think, oh, that's great. I can understand what this is saying. But as soon as I go to speak I get really nervous. Oh, I don't want to mess up. But I think if I could give one piece of advice, just speak, speak and mess up and speak some more. Cause that's the only way you're going to be able to communicate with

other people while you're traveling or you just run into someone, or if you're doing research or if you're, it's just so useful and pretty much any area that you could think of really. So yeah, I would just speak as much as you can.

Christina Torres:

I hear you're saying just go for it. Go for it. Yeah, try do it, study more. Why not?

Abby Reynolds:

Why not? The worst that can happen is you learn a little bit and you go to France, you can just say, you know how to say hello. You know how to ask people how they are to ask for directions. It's like there's really no harm that really comes from trying to learn something.

Christina Torres:

Awesome. Thank you. Abby, do you have any memorable stories from your time in our department in modern languages as you were studying French here with us?

Abby Reynolds:

Yes. So I actually took my second French class online and I took it while I was in Nairobi. And I remember emailing the professor at the time, I emailed her, just so you know, if I'm doing my oral and I accidentally mixed in some Swahili, I'm really sorry because my brain is just not sure what language I'm supposed to be thinking in right now. So I have a lot of really fun memories of being in Nairobi and doing my French homework and being able to learn in a different setting. And it was just really cool. It was really, really awesome

Christina Torres:

To balance those well. And how nice that you were able to take that online while you were also overseas studying an additional language.

Abby Reynolds:

Yes, so it was very convenient eventually. So it allowed me to continue studying French without having to be in the classroom, which I was really grateful for.

Christina Torres:

So great. Thank you so much for sharing your story with us and

Abby Reynolds:

Thank you so much for having me.

Christina Torres:

Absolutely. Our pleasure and all the best in your year studies here. Thank you. Thank you for listening to this episode of Futures in Languages. I'd like to give a shout out to Da Video Guy for our intro and outro music downloaded from freesound.org. I'm Christina Torres and our featured guest today was Abby Reynolds. Tune in next time to hear more alumni stories from Modern Languages. For more information about French and other language programs in the Modern Languages Department, please visit our website at mll.cah.ucf.edu.

