

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 Noa Tann, who graduated from the Arabic and Portuguese programs in spring of 2019. Thanks so much for joining us today, Noa.

Noa Tann:

Thank you so much for having me, Christina. I'm really happy to be here, and if you're listening, you're part of the UCF Languages family, and that's the best place I found in college.

Christina Torres:

Awesome. We're very excited to have you talking with us today. Let's get this started by just asking, can you tell us a little bit about yourself, maybe where you're from?

Noa Tann:

Absolutely. So starting at the beginning, I was born in Haifa, Israel, so my first language was actually Hebrew. Then I moved to the US when I was three, and my parents immediately enrolled me in a French immersion school.

Christina Torres:

Awesome.

Noa Tann:

In Indiana. So I learned French as a kid, switched to public school in middle and high school and studied Spanish there. So I came into UCF with Hebrew, English, French, and Spanish.

Christina Torres:

Wow, cool.

Noa Tann:

So that kind of led me to Arabic and Portuguese because my goal is to speak as many languages as I can, communicate with as many people as they can in the world, because I want to be a diplomat.

Christina Torres:

Awesome.

Noa Tann:

Right, so my logic was, all right, I know Hebrew, plenty of people speak Arabic. Let's go that direction, and then I know Spanish, why not learn Portuguese? So definitely not the most adventurous language choices. I could have picked Chinese or something further out of my comfort zone, but I definitely think

following the path of languages that are related to each other helped me gain mastery and fluency faster.

Christina Torres:

Oh, no, I think it's pretty adventurous that you decided to continue down that track and just say, let me learn as many as I can and keep going. Awesome. Yeah, we love to hear that. So you graduated in Spring 2019. What have you been up to since graduation?

Noa Tann:

So I graduated in the spring and I was lucky enough to have the help of the Modern Languages Department as well as the Burnett Honors College in applying for a Fulbright for my immediate post-graduation plans, and I did it. I don't want to sound like it was easy, it took seven or eight drafts of each essay and lots of sleepless nights. But with the help of a lot of support at UCF I got a Fulbright grant to teach English in Brazil. And unfortunately, because of the way the Brazilian school year works only began that grant in February of 2020.

Christina Torres:

Okay.

Noa Tann:

And you can imagine what happened a month later.

Christina Torres:

I can. I can, yes. Yes.

Noa Tann:

So the State Department pulled all students who were abroad for any purpose back to the state, and I kind of had to start from scratch with my post-grad plans, but I took some time to apply to a lot of different things, and now I am very happily interning in my field in Washington DC.

Christina Torres:

Ooh, very cool. So where in Washington DC are you working now?

Noa Tann:

So I'm working for a think tank. It is a bit of an unusual think tank. It's not like most sort of doing research, but with a political slant. It's actually more of an investigative think tank. It's called the Center for Advanced Defense Studies or C4ADS. And basically the idea is using sort of methodologies from the intelligence sector, but sources that are unclassified, so publicly available information to investigate transnational criminal networks around the world. So I am with the environmental crime sell at C4ADS, and so I'm getting an amazing experience doing research and analysis on wildlife crimes all over the world.

Christina Torres:

Wow, that's really cool and really important work. I don't know how much you're able to share with us, but do you have any kind of general case that kind of stands out that you want to share with our listeners?

Noa Tann:

Absolutely. Because I have one where Portuguese was recently relevant to my work. Perfect. So I loved my Portuguese classes at UCF. Shout out to Dr. Sandra Sousa. What a legend. If you don't know. She is from Portugal. And when I traveled to Brazil, I came in with a bit of a Portuguese accent, which is a bit different than the Brazilian way of speaking. So I did it. She did teach me a bit of an inconvenient accent, but still wonderful, amazing language skills that continue to help me in my field to this day. So when Portuguese was relevant in my current internship was we recently got a grant from a federal agency to do some trainings with media outlets in Africa on our investigative methods for investigating wildlife crimes because the goal is that we shouldn't have to, or we shouldn't want to or do investigate crimes, the world over there should be people on the ground in those countries, where wildlife crime is happening, who have the skills to do it themselves.

Christina Torres:

I'm sure it's more sustainable to have the local people take care of it too. Yeah. Awesome.

Noa Tann:

Exactly. That is entirely the concept of this grant. So my boss is the one who wrote the grant and got it and has made the plans, and then I was in charge of the next step. So once we got the grant, we had to identify and select media outlets in different, it was specifically African countries, and as you know, Angola and Mozambique are both Lusophony, Portuguese speaking countries. So those were in the portfolio of countries we were focusing on to build capacity for investigating wildlife crimes on the ground. So I got to research the news and media environment in those two countries, and I mean, nowadays there is the little Google translate button, so I didn't need to know Portuguese in order to look at the different websites and understand what each newspaper focused on and who worked and what job and who could be the best point of contact to reach out to for this project.

But the Portuguese certainly helped. My boss wasn't sure exactly. I think she had a few questions for me afterwards in terms of how was I sure that this person worked for this organization? What did this mean? What does this job translate to? And so my knowledge of Portuguese was definitely useful in understanding which news agencies were working on sort of investigative journalism, which ones were independently owned versus connected to the state, because that's a big issue as well, is that we want to make sure we're building that investigative capacity in independent journalistic outlets. So that took some sleuthing and some Portuguese knowledge.

Christina Torres:

That all sounds very cool. What, if I can ask, part of the environment or animal rights are that related to?

Noa Tann:

Definitely. Okay. So the only thing I can't tell you is really specific partners who work with, I can't tell you, oh, we worked with this agency or that this law enforcement group. Or this nonprofit because we want to protect everyone. Something that's a big emphasis when I came in, they were like, all right, you can talk about your work as much as you want, but you want to try to keep people safe. Because the last

thing we want is to have some partner who's investigating something have the fact that they're investigating a crime be widely advertised. So the specific focus of C4ADS'S wildlife crime, environmental crime cell is mostly on sort of large scale transnational wildlife trafficking and smuggling.

Christina Torres:

Gotcha. That's so important to be working on.

Noa Tann:

Yeah. So it's looking at where in the chain between, there's a poacher who hunts an animal to middle men who consolidate and buy these and buy these animals or animal parts to venue. That's where you get into networks and cartels that have to have the connections and the money to bribe officials to move big shipments of things like rhino horn and Ivory and Pangolin scales across the world. And yeah, it's a really fascinating place to be. I think the specific think tank I'm working for is using a lot of really innovative methods, looking at social media, tracking ships, tracking airplanes, all through publicly available data. That's because

Christina Torres:

Really cool.

Noa Tann:

Technology has really democratized the field. So not only so I can do work from my laptop from home that maybe in the past only someone at a secure facility with really high access to security cleared information would be able to do. But because of the internet, everything is possible.

Christina Torres:

That's all very cool. You have touched on this. Is there anything else that you might want to add about how either the Arabic program or the Portuguese program prepared you for your life now, post grad?

Noa Tann:

Absolutely. I think both programs and every language that I've ever studied has helped me towards my goals in three main ways. The first is the most obvious learning languages helps you communicate with people across the world and make connections across cultures, across ethnicities, nationalities, preconceptions, political ideas. Specifically during my time at UCF I actually studied abroad in my native country in Israel to study Arabic. And so I was studying in a majority Arab area, whereas I was born in my family lives in majority Jewish areas. So that was a real opportunity for cross-cultural connection through language. And it's not UCF affiliated, but I'll still plug where I studied abroad in case anyone is looking for an Arabic study abroad. It's called Diva in Hebrew or Divathaviva in Arabic, D I V A T H A V I V A. And it was just an amazing intercultural experience that I had for a summer there. So yeah, I had a host family, I had siblings, a little host, siblings and friends. Then I was a volunteer summer camp counselor, and it really let me get to know a people and a culture, which was very close to me physically, but very far culturally.

And I think that's really important, especially in Florida. We have so many Spanish speakers and Portuguese speakers in Orlando, and that's another group that if you don't speak that language, they live right next, see them every day, but there's a little space there. And the way to bridge that gap for me at least, is language

Christina Torres:

With language closing that space for sure. I love how you said that because oftentimes we don't really know about those close by neighbors as much just because we have that bit of a cultural and language gap between us. But closing those gaps so important. And I think it takes it back to your original interest in diplomacy too, because I mean all about bridging those connections, right?

Noa Tann:

Absolutely. Yeah. The second of the three ways that I think language has helped me is in being able to collaborate in my work with people around the world going back to this grant, we are going to reach out and email to these different news outlets, and we might have to conduct trains in different languages in Portuguese or in French, depending on where in Africa we're focusing on. But if we have those language skills, we don't need a translator. We can teach and learn from each other so much more quickly and easily. And then when it comes to just scholarship and research, being able to collaborate with others around the world, especially in international relations is really key. And the last way is really in research and being able to take in information that's in a different language and make it useful to English speakers because there is so much information out there, whether it's research from other countries, whether it's data that other countries have put out, that is just less accessible to English language researchers because we don't have the language skills, especially to American researchers. So I definitely think that on that side, I'm currently applying to grad school. I'm not in grad school yet. When I'm doing research in higher education, I really look forward to being able to use my language skills to collaborate in my research and be able to expand my research across language barriers.

Christina Torres:

That's very exciting. I mean, I know that sometimes we forget that even though English is widely used, there's so much information that's accessible when you just open that language door and you can walk through it and interact with everyone who speaks those other languages. So

Noa Tann:

If you add things, add things like context, knowing the cultural context, for example, in my work, I don't speak Chinese, but I have colleagues who do and because they speak Chinese and because they know things about how, for example, Chinese people use the internet. They know where to look for certain publicly available information on Chinese internet. Whereas I wouldn't know how to do that, but I could figure out where to find information on Angola newspapers and who works for them because I knew Portuguese. So it's definitely something that I think, obviously UCF's a huge research university, and most people are engaged in some, or many people are engaged in some sort of research, and I could not overstate the benefits of learning other languages to expanding your research skills and abilities.

Christina Torres:

Gotcha. Yeah, no, I completely agree with you. Before I forget, I'm just curious. You were on a Fulbright. Were you a Fulbright scholar? A Fulbright ETA? Which program were you in out of curiosity?

Noa Tann:

So I was a Fulbright ETA.

Christina Torres:

You were a Fulbright ETA. Do you think you'd go back as a Fulbright ETA? Once everything lifts and we were all vaccinated at the end of all this,

Noa Tann:

I would love have to reapply. So the application process is quite long and involved, as I mentioned earlier. So I'm not sure that I would go through the Fulbright process, but I definitely want to return to Brazil and see my friends and see the people who I connected with during my time there. And I also began doing, laying the foundations for some research, actually with my program manager. I was at the university, Federal University of Parana in Kucha, Brazil. And my program manager who started the writing center there, actually it is the first university writing center at a Brazilian university.

Christina Torres:

Yay. That's exciting.

Noa Tann:

So he's an American professor and he's really trying to take American methods of writing instruction, things like writing centers and tutoring that really aren't part of the Brazilian upper education system and adapt them to the Brazilian context. And I'd love to go back there and help him with his work.

Christina Torres:

That sounds really fascinating, and I would love to talk with you more about that. That was actually one of the big projects that I did when I was an English language fellow over in Bangladesh, was working on a language and writing center using those same types of American methods in the context over there, which was not, well, it was not common. So we were getting that wheel rolling, and as far as I know, it continues to this day, so I'm pretty pumped about that.

Noa Tann:

That's really exciting. It sounds amazing.

Christina Torres:

That's all very cool. I mean, we talked a lot about a lot of ways that you've used the skills that you acquired in the modern languages department. It seems like you really capitalized on those research connections and the opportunities that were available to you. What advice would you offer someone who's interested in studying Arabic or Portuguese?

Noa Tann:

So for Arabic and Portuguese, I have one specific piece of advice each, and then one piece of general advice for Portuguese, I'd say if you already speak some French or Spanish or Italian, especially Spanish, but any of the romance languages, learn Portuguese. There is so much amazing Brazilian and Portuguese and Angolan and Muslim beacon literature and music and culture. I think it's really understudied in the US and I think as Brazil continues to grow economically and politically going to be more and more important, especially in Florida, for people to have Portuguese skills especially Orlando in the tourism sector. Then for Arabic, a piece of practical advice that I got from my professor, Bama Azim

Christina Torres:

Bama's great

Noa Tann:

To do a lot of listening because Arabic has such a different set of sounds than English. Pretty much every sound vowels, there's some concepts that are the same, but almost every sound just works differently and sounds different than its equivalent in English. And some don't even have equivalents in English. So making sure you are listening to music, finding videos, finding Bama loves to recommend, gram recommend, I think VBC Cairo or some sort of public radio in Arabic. But I definitely think that doing a lot of listening is a big key to going from me speaking English to speaking Arabic, because that's what really gets those sounds into your brain. Even if you can't, can't make them yet. If you know what sound you're supposed to be making makes it a lot easier.

Christina Torres:

Awesome.

Noa Tann:

And then for both of them, something which I like to do, which I think I've found a lot of fun content in Portuguese, is use social media to follow people who produce content in those languages. So the same way you have, if you like to watch cooking videos online or make up videos or craft videos, whatever it is you already sort of watch in your free time mindlessly, finding those same types of things in other languages is a great way to just put those languages in the background of your mind. Not as intense as turning your phone into setting your phone into a different language. I will admit, I've heard that advice a lot and I've never done it, but I definitely think using social media to your advantage and that sort of, especially now in quarantine, we're all on our phones and our computers all the time. We all need social media or fun media breaks from our work or study from homes. So Netflix shows, YouTube channels, Instagrammers, even. I think following social media accounts in other languages is a really fun way to keep those languages around you.

Christina Torres:

Great. That's all very great advice, Noa. And I'm sure that it gives you some context that you can then use to talk about your hobbies and the things that you enjoy in those languages too. Totally. And I'll come around

Noa Tann:

Also random, you just random vocab you wouldn't get for sure. Types of makeup or specific foods that you're in the food unit of your class. Yeah. You can pick up things here and there, which when you see them again in class somewhere else, you're like, oh, okay. I remember that from a video. I remember that from a post.

Christina Torres:

There we go. There we go. Well, those are the tips from Noa. Is there anything else that you'd like to add, Noa here at the end of our conversation?

Noa Tann:

No, I'd just like to say thank you so much for you into the UCF Modern Languages department in general. I am really excited to see it grow. We now have more Arabic. We have a full-time Arabic professor. We have, there's so many exciting changes and areas of growth happening and can't wait to see where it goes and can't wait to stay involved as it grows.

Christina Torres:

Awesome. Thanks so much. So everyone, as you heard from Noa here, open that door, cross that threshold, learn some languages, and you'll see all kinds of opportunities come your way. 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 Noa Tann. Tune in next time to hear more alumni stories from modern languages. For more information about Arabic, Portuguese, and other language programs in the Modern Languages Department, please visit our website at mll.cah.ucf.edu.