

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 Virginia Perwin, who graduated from the MA TESOL in the summer of 2022 and our TEFL certificate in the master's level back in 2017. She also has an MA in Adult Ed from Florida International University, a BS in Education from Temple University with Health and Physical Education concentration. Thank you so much for joining us today, Virginia.

Virginia Perwin:

Thank you, Christina, for having me. I appreciate you taking the time to interview me.

Christina Torres:

We are so excited that you can join us and we'll start off with a general question here. Can you tell us a little bit about yourself?

Virginia Perwin:

That's really a broad question.

Christina Torres:

It's a pretty broad one. How about where you're from?

Virginia Perwin:

Okay. I'm from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. I grew up in Philadelphia, went to Philadelphia public schools and attended Temple University, which was a city school in which we had to go by subway to school and back home again by subway or bus. And this was a city school for people who couldn't afford to go to schools like the University of Pennsylvania or away from home like Pennsylvania State College. Penn State was actually, people would like to go to Penn State to be away from home and to be in an area of Quakers, and it was really a very exciting thing, but you have to have money to go to Penn State. I was one of seven children. I am the fifth child, and I had two brothers and two sisters older than me and one brother and one sister younger than me, and the fifth child kind of gets mixed in a large family.

Therefore, I was kind of that very independent child that really had very little identity in that family. However, I became the hub so that my older brothers and sisters could kind of rely on me and I was the head of the second family, so to speak, my younger brother and sister. An interesting thing, the dynamics of a large family. I was the first child to graduate from a college. My oldest sister went to college but dropped out. My older oldest brother went to college after a war. He was a veteran and I had another sister that took some classes in business, but none of my siblings completed school. My oldest sister who went to Penn State was on scholarship. She was a very bright student. I am not. I'm a very ordinary student.

Christina Torres:

I will disagree with you there, Virginia politely. Agree to disagree with you there because we know that you are one of our really wonderful examples of lifelong learning, but can you tell us a little bit more about what motivated you to stick it out in undergrad?

Virginia Perwin:

Yes I can. When I originally started school or when I had decided that I wanted to go to college, I wanted to go to Girls High, which was an academic school, and my mother said no, I could not go to Girls High because I did not have the grades to go to Girls High. So I went to a school and had college commercial academics throughout school, but I wanted to go to college because I wanted to teach a child that I grew up with who was confined to a wheelchair. Her name was Kathleen, and Kathleen had infantile paralysis, and I wanted to teach Kathleen how to play like other children. So I wanted to go to school to learn how to teach her how to play. I was also interested in medicine and the body, and I didn't understand what infantile paralysis was. So these were kind of connected and it put me into physical education as a program.

When I graduated high school, I did not have the qualifications to go into college, so I had to work to earn the money and go to school to bring up my math grades because I didn't have the academic background for college. So I did that and I was the last child at home, even though I'm the fifth child and there were two younger siblings. My younger brother joined the Navy when he was 16, and my younger sister got married, so I ended up being the last child at home. Anyway, I was determined to go to school, which I did, and I stayed at home and I went to school daily and I was really enjoying that. I had to work while I was in school to earn tuition and books. I also competed in gymnastics, swimming and diving. I was a competitive swim and diver, and I was also a competitive gymnast.

These are athletic endeavors that do not compliment themselves. However, I still chose to do that and spoke to each coach and said I promised to do all of the required trainings, which I did and still competed, and they allowed me to do so. I continued when I was ready to graduate, I chose the school that I wanted to teach in, which was Widener for Handicapped Children, and I was told that I didn't have the background for it because I had no guidance when I was in college. When I originally enrolled at Temple University, the dean who interviewed me passed away after my first year, my records somehow got lost, and after that I had no guidance and no advisor.

Christina Torres:

So that presented a challenge for you then. What lessons would you say you learned from your experiences with your competitive athletic endeavors and that time when you had to advise yourself really that you carried forward after your graduation?

Virginia Perwin:

Well, competitive athletics I think helped me because the sports that I chose to participate in were individual sports. So I could make a schedule that would allow me to practice when I had the time, and therefore I was able to work, study and do my practices at the same time. Fortunately, because I was home, I was living at home and I had no real obligations at home except just to live there and be nice with my parents.

Christina Torres:

Being nice is always good.

Virginia Perwin:

And being a good kid but they didn't require very much of me, which was fortunate. And the time that I needed to stay at school to do extra work in the library or research or something like that was fine. If I had to go to meets, I was also able to do that. I had that kind of freedom, but I was a very independent child. Yeah, an independent learner, but without guidance.

Christina Torres:

Okay. I hear you saying that you're recommending that everyone gets an advisor and talks with that advisor.

Virginia Perwin:

Absolutely. Absolutely. Yes, you can be an independent learner, but you still need a mentor. You need someone who will help you with your goals, and I definitely agree upon a five year, a three year, one year, what can you do in one year looking at yourself realistically, looking at your academic and your personal life and other things along the way, but you need an advisor that's there as well.

Christina Torres:

Hey, I like that you're talking about mentorship. That's something I tell my pre-service teachers often is that I would absolutely not be in this part of my career at my age had I not had really excellent mentorship, especially when I was starting out though, I'm really grateful for the folks who took me under their wing. So I agree with you on mentorship,

Virginia Perwin:

And I would like to segue on that as well, because I did have professors who, both at Florida International University and at UCF, who did kind of step forward to help me. As a matter of fact, when I was at FIU, it was one of my professors, after we had taken class, and I'm in my master's program and we were having an after class get together with all the students, she and I got to the restaurant early and we were just chatting about classes and things like that, and she turned to me and she said, Virginia, I think that you could be a better student. She said, but I think you have a learning disability. And I looked at her and I said, oh, Dr. Rocco, you are so silly. I said, how could I possibly have a learning disability? I'm in graduate school.

She said, yes, but you are a C student and I don't think that you should be a C student. She said, I think you could do better. I want you to be tested. And she set up a program so that Florida International would test me for two days of solid testing in their testing department in Miami Beach. And true, I have a learning disability. I can read, I can write, I can speak, and I can hear. However, for me to learn best, I must use all of my modalities. I'm a seer, and I must hear, I must be able to take this information and write it. And guess what? I became an A student.

Christina Torres:

Talk about a conversation that changes your life, right?

Virginia Perwin:

So even though you may have someone who will help you, if you don't take advantage of that, then it's really on you. Now, on the flip side of that, this is at Florida International University. Once I got my degree, they said, Virginia, you're a researcher. We've set up your committee for your PhD. And I said, no, no, no. I don't want just research. I want educational technology because I want to work with

teachers. I want to help teachers to teach better. So they said, no, no, no. I said, I want to go to Nova Southeastern University. And they said, no, no, that's not the school for you. But of course, not listening to my mentors who were there for me, I did my own thing. And then of course, I moved to Oviedo, and guess what? My NOVA program no longer became accessible to me from where I was living in Oviedo because their campus was now at Millennium Mall, and I had no way to actually access that. So I ended up at UCF.

Christina Torres:

Okay. And then UCF welcomed you. Was that the time that you joined the TEFL certificate program?

Virginia Perwin:

Yes. Yes. This, the TEFL certificate program was my first real introduction to UCF. I was teaching ESL at Seminole State College with my degree in adult education. However, the state mandated that anyone teaching must have 18, at least 18 credit hours in the subject in which they were teaching. So I went to UCF and I said I needed to get some certification so that I can continue teaching at Seminole State. And they recommended the certificate program, which I completed, and I was told that I was eligible to graduate and please do the paperwork for graduation. And I said, I'm graduating from what? And they said, from the TESOL prep program, the TEFL prep program.

Christina Torres:

Yeah.

Virginia Perwin:

And I said, no, no, no, no, no. That's not a graduation. I said, I want to graduate from something more than that. I would like a master's in teaching ESL. So they said, fine. Then I had to enroll in a master's program Sorry about that. So wordy.

Christina Torres:

No, it's all good. And I remember because we were colleagues in the masters in TESOL at UCF when I was doing my masters there as well. So I remember you from our classes, and I remember that for a brief time. We overlapped at Seminole State College when I taught over there for their English language learners. So, we recognize each other from classes and from the hallway. Yes. Thank you for sharing your journey through education. I know that you told me a bit before we talked about how your education was really well-rounded, you learned a lot of different subjects in your BS from Temple University, your Bachelor's of Science and education, and how you've really navigated different programs in your lifetime. What would you say about as a recommendation to folks going through choices in undergrad about well-roundedness, about the ability to explore different subjects?

Virginia Perwin:

I think it's very important for people to explore different subjects. Absolutely. When I was at Temple, I think that I probably chose those subjects because when I said that I was taking physical education and they said, ah, that's not an academic subject, and what do you do basket weaving? And I said, no what would be more important? So I started with philosophy and then psychology and then art and music and French, and that's where I met my husband, but that's another story. But anyway, so that encouraged me to do other, take other subjects I recommend and I admire our students who are in the TESOL program who travel to other countries and have experiences in other countries. I think that this is

wonderful to be with other people, to be with other cultures. This is amazing. I never had that opportunity. I could only get it from books and from libraries.

So I did whatever I could do to help myself understand what the world was like outside of my own little bubble. And I did these things on my own. But I definitely think that you should do that. You want to be able to talk to people about their subjects as well as your own subjects. I mean, you have things in common with other humans, but culturally, do you have something in common? Can you discuss a book or a play or even a movie or even experience traveling to another country? And if you cannot, then perhaps you need to study a little bit or learn a little bit about that. And we do that today by watching cooking shows or by watching a traveling show. So we are constantly learning in one way or another. And I think that this is very important for everyone. It's good for your brain.

Christina Torres:

It sure is. Yes. And thank you for that advice, Virginia. I think what you're saying about the options to expand folks' horizons through new experiences we're so fortunate that we have available to us so much information that we can really take the time to educate ourselves, whether that's reading, watching documentaries or whatever it is that we have. I also feel, as you've said, that going abroad is very educational, that if we are not able to go abroad this minute, we can always educate ourselves at home. What would you say you've learned, and this is a big question too, from your English learners, your international students that you've worked with over the years? Because I know they've taught me a lot. I'm curious if you have any favorite stories to share.

Virginia Perwin:

Oh gosh. There are many stories. I mean, our learners are so wonderful, and I really appreciate and love teaching adults because adults has so much to share in my lifetime. They've experienced so many things. I think one of the things that I'm enjoying right now is that I'm working with an older Polish woman, and she wants to learn how to speak English. Her purpose in learning English is that she wants to be able to communicate with her caregivers, her doctors, and anyone that she meets on the street. Her husband will not speak English or learn English. She can only speak Polish in her household to her husband, her daughter, and her children do not live nearby, therefore, she doesn't even have her own children to speak to. So she and I have set up an online session where we meet weekly and we discuss books.

And the books are, believe it or not, on a third or fourth grade academic level for English speaking children, because these books have vocabulary that she will be able to use and learn a little more easily than adult books. So we discuss, we read together these books, and then we discuss them and we talk about vocabulary and what words mean. And then she said, we were getting, to the end of one book and we were chatting about families. Oh, I said, it was my granddaughter's birthday. And she said, they don't talk to me. They don't communicate with me. I said, oh, really? I said, what do you talk to them about? We don't talk. I said, why don't you ask your daughter what your children are reading? Which she did. And she came back and she said, my daughter gave me the names of these books.

I said, let me look into it. We decided that we would read the same book that her 14 year old granddaughter was reading, and she got so excited about that. But it was a series book, and I said, Hmm, series books. We have to read the first one first. So we had to finish that first one before her granddaughter came to visit her during the summer so that she could discuss this book with her granddaughter. This Christina is marvelous. It went really well, and her granddaughter brought the second book, and they were talking about the second book, and we are now reading the second book, which her granddaughter already finished, so she can discuss that with her, and her granddaughter gave her another book. Oh, wonderful. So this is really great. When at one hat, one hat that I wore was

teaching literacy in the prison system, the Florida prison system, and I just remember this so clearly. I had an older gentleman who kept on coming back to prison because he had no skills, and we determined that he was truly illiterate. So I started working with him, and I remember the day after sometime several months when he was just walking down the hallway and he passed me and he said, teacher, look, I can read that sign. It said, do not enter testing. And I said, yes,

Christina Torres:

Yes,

Virginia Perwin:

Yes.

Christina Torres:

And isn't that what we live for when we teach those aha moments of seeing light bulbs go off and people feel joy about what they're learning?

Virginia Perwin:

Absolutely. Absolutely. It's wonderful. And they teach us,

Christina Torres:

Oh, absolutely. They teach us so much. I know that beyond the more serious things that they teach us about world events and the impact of different world events in various locations and culture and all of that, we also have fun moments where we learn about each other's holidays and food. And yes, I've had a lot of really delicious recipes shared with me over the years as well. Yes, all of those fun pieces that go along with TESOL, I told my TESOL students, TESOL is a fun crowd. We all have stories, and I'm sure everyone has stories, but I always feel like our conferences and our meetings are fun. We have a lot to share.

Virginia Perwin:

They are so much fun. And each year, each semester, and each group of students is completely different. I remember one semester I had a group of students that's so connected with each other that on the final day, which it happened to have been a September to December program, a full program, and we had our last class meeting, and they decided that they were having a gift exchange and a secret Santa. And they decided this themselves, and they decided after the program that they were going to visit other people's homes, and these were people from 13 different countries. It was amazing.

Christina Torres:

It's so wonderful. And I remember seeing those friendships pop up because I worked for several years at in UCF with the EAP program, and I would get folks who freshly arrived, 18, 19 years old, their first time away from home, and I would always tell them on the first day, look around, these are the folks who you will become friends with who will support you during times when you have difficulties at the university, when you are missing home, these are the people that you will someday hopefully visit in each other's home countries, and these are the connections that you'll have around the world. How wonderful it is that you'll be able to say, yes, I know someone from this country, or, yes, I've experimented with learning a little bit of their home language. And you would see them say hello to each other in various

languages that were not their own because they wanted to exchange. And that's just such a beautiful thing about TESOL that I've found that I know you, you've shared with me too.

Virginia Perwin:

Yes, absolutely. It's true. 100%. Yes. Yeah,

Christina Torres:

Absolutely. Exactly. Now, Virginia, I know that we've talked about this before and I'll just briefly mention that you are a wonderful example of lifelong learning. I'm curious, do you have any advice on how your various programs have prepared you for now for the career trajectory that you had in your life?

Virginia Perwin:

I think that every program that I was part of gave me a little bit of something that would help carry on over to the next program. Even now, in the fall of last year of 2021, when I needed to register for my final TESOL classes, I needed a class. I needed two classes in the fall, but only one was available, and therefore I took a program in reading education, and it reminded me how much I really enjoy learning about reading and how we learn to read. Now, we in TESOL learn about speaking and reading, but the reading education program is a little bit different, and it kind of peaked my curiosity a little bit more about reading. And I decided that when I finished the TESOL certificate that I would like to get a reading endorsement because we've learned about brains, we've learned about how we learned to speak, but who taught you how to read? Do you remember who taught you how to read?

Christina Torres:

I would say that while I don't remember specifically the moment or the moments up to becoming literate, I would say that my parents, my mother worked in education for many years, was very adamant about reading at home, reading to the kids at night, reading to my sister and to me at night. And books were always available at home in Spanish and English whenever possible. Both were available whenever possible. It was more difficult when I was younger to get Spanish books here in the mainland. My parents are both from Puerto Rico, but they would try to have my aunt send us books when she could. And I do remember a phonics program that we had when I was in kindergarten which my mom enjoyed because she thought that phonics was very important. And reading for me was a natural thing, although I understand that it doesn't work that way for everyone but I've always been, at least in my family, surrounded by books and reading material and all of that.

Virginia Perwin:

So, you were actually privileged.

Christina Torres:

Yeah, I was.

Virginia Perwin:

You were privileged because you had access to this both hearing and seeing and actually touching and by actually touching and stuff like that. By the time you got to school, your brains and everything about you was receptive to the phonics, the thematic awareness of everything. And you are actually fluent in learning to absorb these things because you got that foundation and not everybody does.

Christina Torres:

Absolutely. And the more I've studied, the more I've learned, especially the PhD in education, I'm now so much more aware that that story is not the case everywhere. But that's why I think it's so important for educators to be aware of diversity and folks' experiences and resources that they can share with their learners at all ages to facilitate reaching their goals. And in this case, the goal being literacy, reading, so important so important.

Virginia Perwin:

All of the classes that I took in the TESOL program added bits and pieces to these understandings of how we learn and develop certain things. And by taking the reading programs that I'm now studying a bell and my TESOL background and the fact that I had a learning disability, how can these things be combined? And hopefully by teaching our ESL learners at this point or lifelong learners, that they can listen and read and learn different things continuously throughout their life, and it just makes your life fuller. You can look at something, and you can walk away from it. You don't have to hold onto it forever. There are many, many, many things to learn.

Christina Torres:

Absolutely. And that's such important advice for folks because I feel like sometimes I noticed that there's a lot of stress around this idea of young people choosing or folks coming into undergrad, choosing their major, deciding on a major and thinking about and making those decisions. What advice would you give to someone who is newly arriving to a university and trying to decide on what inspires them and what they want to study and that trajectory?

Virginia Perwin:

Well, I think that they should have some goals that they would like for themselves. They should understand how they learn and what, and be comfortable with themselves in learning and what they're doing, not to be hard on themselves as far as getting all As. Sometimes we tell our children that you are so smart, and then when our children don't achieve something, they feel badly about themselves. They don't only share this with their parents, but they have already decided for themselves that maybe I'm not smart, but you can learn little things and maybe you don't have to be tested on it. You can just learn something for the sake of learning it for your own being, for your own knowledge, and perhaps someday share it, but not necessarily. It's just their learning. I smile when students say to me, I want to be you when I grow up.

Well, what do they want to do? Do they want to be a teacher? No, they want me to be active. They want to be engaged in what's going on. But you know what? You can do it and everyone can do it, but you have to understand, take a little bit at a time, and life gets in the way. That's all right. You have children, sick parents, floods, fires, all kinds of things happen in life. That doesn't mean that you have to stop learning or growing. You can continue doing that. It's just life goes on hold for a little bit, and then you continue and you can do this the rest of your life, and I'm going to do it for the rest of my life.

Christina Torres:

That's so wonderful, Virginia. I like your message about learning for the sake of learning, and it's something that I hope inspires our listeners to this podcast because I wish everyone could enjoy learning for the sake of learning. And I always tell my students if in office hours, if the conversation comes up, that in fact, instructors, lectures, faculty, like we grade documents, not people. It's nice that you are

inviting folks to really consider pushing the ball forward. Always take the next step on what you're going to learn next.

Virginia Perwin:

Yes, please. Yeah, do that. It works,

Christina Torres:

Wonderful. Well, I have one last question for you here, Virginia, in our podcast, and I know that you graduated from many programs, but specifically, I work in the modern languages department at UCF and one of our programs is the MA TESOL program, the masters in TESOL that you graduated from this summer of 2022. What advice would you offer someone interested in studying TESOL?

Virginia Perwin:

Oh, they definitely should do it. Anyone who's interested in languages, interested in people whether they're children or adults, and they're interested in people from other countries, they have an empathy for learning about different cultures. The TESOL program is a wonderful program. It covers many different areas. It touches on research, it touches on the development of language and covers many things, and it goes into research. And the professors are fantastic because there are professors there that will encourage you and they're working. There are professors that did encourage me, and again, and I do want to emphasize, it's an excellent program. Anyone who just touches multiple languages might be interested in the TESOL program itself and the master's program, and then perhaps, and I would encourage anyone who is truly interested in the Master's program to try going on for a PhD,

Christina Torres:

I'm sure that the faculty in our program would be very happy to advise anyone who's interested in not just the MA TESOL, but a future PhD. Virginia, it's been such a pleasure to have you here today as our lifelong learner alumni joining us for our podcast. Is there any final thought that you would like to finish our podcast with?

Virginia Perwin:

The pleasure has been mine. Thank you very much for being patient with me and listening to my explanations of things. I appreciate your patience. Thank you.

Christina Torres:

Anytime, Virginia. 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 of music downloaded from freesound.org. I'm Christina Torres, and our featured guest today was Virginia Perwin. Tune in next time to hear more alumni stories from modern languages. For more information about the MA TESOL and the Masters TEFL certificate, and other language programs in the Modern Languages department, please visit our website at mll.cah.ucf.edu.