

[musical intro]

**Tirzah Khan:** Welcome to Retriever Tales, a podcast from the Center for Democracy and Civic Life at UMBC, featuring conversations with members of our campus community.

**Candace Dodson-Reed:** I am Candace Dodson-Reed. I use she/her/hers pronouns.

**Rehman Liaqat:** My name is Rehman Liaqat.

**Kate Drabinski:** Hey, everybody. I'm Dr. Kate Drabinski. Most people at UMBC call me Dr. Kate.

**Rees Draminski:** My name is Rees Draminski. I use he/him pronouns.

**Tirzah Khan:** At the Center for Democracy and Civic Life, we believe that stories are everything. The act of telling and listening to each other's stories can bring us together as a community and enable us to work collectively in ways that help us all thrive. I'm your host, Tirzah Khan, she/her pronouns. I'm a senior Information Systems major here at UMBC.

[intro music fades]

**Tirzah Khan:** Today we're speaking with Poulomi Banerjee, an alum and staff member at UMBC. Poulomi, go ahead and introduce yourself.

**Poulomi Banerjee:** Hi! I'm Poulomi Banerjee. I'm the Acting Assistant Director of Annual Giving at UMBC. I graduated from UMBC in 2016 and I never left since. And I'm currently a grad student in my final semester in the Master's in Public Policy Program.

**Tirzah Khan:** That's so exciting! Congratulations. So what about your role do you enjoy the most on campus?

**Poulomi Banerjee:** So—and I'll, I'll talk about this a little bit later in the podcast—I've, I've had so many different roles on campus. But I think with working in Annual Giving, you know, I think there's such a stigma, like, a social stigma behind giving back and donating to your alma mater after you've already paid tuition and fees and everything after you graduate. And, you know, in a perfect world I wish, you know, we didn't have to have things like Retriever Essentials or the Stay Black and Gold Fund, you know—like, every nonprofit's goal is to be out of business because then the issue doesn't exist anymore. But—and it's just not possible, I think, the way that we do higher education in this country. And so when we do have programs like Retriever Essentials and Stay Black and Gold where we're helping students, you know, like, have

something to eat for the week or, like, like, be able to pay their rent for the week, like, that is the most satisfying part of my job—the fact that, like, I'm able to help those students, you know, continue their education at UMBC, and that without that funding they wouldn't, and, you know, getting to connect alumni who have those resources and are able to, you know, donate—like, have the means to donate, and connecting them to, like, these different funds to, like, actively, directly, directly help students is a really fulfilling part of my job.

**Tirzah Khan:** Yeah. So can you tell me about how you got to UMBC in the first place?

**Poulomi Banerjee:** This is—yeah, that—this is a, a roller coaster.

**Tirzah Khan:** Okay, I'm excited.

**Poulomi Banerjee:** So I did not—full, like, full transparency, did not want to come to UMBC. It was my backup school, but it wasn't—it wasn't even—like, I just did not want to go to UMBC, and I think my high school had such a, such a negative stereotype behind it—which it doesn't anymore, thanks to, you know, the incredible work of our, our Communications team, and, you know, March Madness [2018, during which UMBC, a No. 16 seed, beat the University of Virginia, a No. 1 seed, in a historic upset] definitely changed, changed a lot of perspectives. But it was just—it was embarrassing at the time for me to go to UMBC, and so I didn't even tell anyone that I got in. It was the only school I got accepted to—I got waitlisted and denied everywhere else. And my first semester I, I was—I laid low, and it was difficult for me because I was President of Model UN and Red Cross and had an internship in high school. And so I was, like, top of the chain, crushing it... and then I go to UMBC and I'm at the bottom again. And I, I, I just, I felt lost. I didn't want to—I, I didn't—I continued to not want to be here. But, you know, I, I think from getting involved, going to things like Involvement Fest, STRiVE—which I'll talk about later—like, that is what really made me fall in love with this school, and I was going to transfer after my first semester, but STRiVE prevented me from doing that. And then I, I loved it so much and I created such a network at UMBC that I got offered a role to do some networking for the 50th Anniversary, and then I just—I kept bouncing from office to office from there.

**Tirzah Khan:** Yeah. It's ridiculous how many people hate the idea of coming to UMBC, and then they get here and they're like, "Oh! Maybe this isn't that bad. Maybe I actually like it."

**Poulomi Banerjee:** It's a hidden gem.

**Tirzah Khan:** Yeah, it really is. Yeah. So can you talk about a time where you felt like you really belonged at UMBC? And what was it about that moment or that experience that made you feel that way?

**Poulomi Banerjee:** Yeah, I think—the—so this is when I really learned the true impact of networking. So I, I was going to transfer after my first semester; I was very unhappy with kind of how things were going that first semester. And I went to STRiVE. And right before I went to STRiVE I actually—I—so—I got involved in (seb) [Student Events Board], like, right after Involvement Fest, and I would go to every single event; I would just, like, sit myself in the (seb) office even though I was a volunteer and no volunteers ever hung out in the office at the time—like, I really pushed my way in. And I applied to—they had one Programming spot open, and I was like, “Let me apply. I'm a freshman; I'm not gonna get it.” I got it.

**Tirzah Khan:** Yay!

**Poulomi Banerjee:** And I've been in it—I was in (seb) ever since, like, all four years. And so that is kind of how I got my nomination to go to STRiVE. And when I was at STRiVE, that's when I realized that, like, UMBC was the place for me. And I think what was so special about STRiVE was that you are getting these connections with staff members who you will actively work with throughout your time at UMBC. And it's that—it's just—and it's, like—it's kind of, like, a feeling of power, like, “I can make a change on this campus; I can make a difference. And these people, who I'm getting so close to on a level that, like—I don't even get close to my *friends* on that level sometimes!—like, I'm, I'm forming these bonds and friendships, and they're gonna help me succeed, and they're gonna kind of be there with me along the way.” And so having that community and having that space and having those connections with people really kind of, like, set in stone that, like, I can make a difference here and I can make my time at UMBC an impactful one. And so after STRiVE I, I rushed a sorority, I, I did more stuff with SGA—like, I, I just popped off. I was doing all of the things. And now it's, it's just crazy to think about, like, who the [STRiVE] coaches were at the time and, like, where we all are at now—like, I still text Craig. Craig Berger [former Coordinator of Student Life for Campus and Civic Engagement] wasn't my actual coach, but I coached with him when I coached STRiVE. We still text, like, every week, updates on, like, how we're doing and what we're doing. So yeah. That, that sense of community is really what, what helped me.

**Tirzah Khan:** Yeah, absolutely. I think—similarly, like, I was ready to transfer. And then I got into STRiVE 'cause I was working at what is currently called i3b [Initiatives for Identity, Inclusion, & Belonging], but used to be called the Mosaic [Center]. And I was, like—it sounded like a cult. Everyone there, like—

**Poulomi Banerjee:** It really does!

**Tirzah Khan:** Everyone who told me about it at the Mosaic was like, “It's gonna change your life, like, but I can't tell you anything about what happens there.” And I was like, “Um, I'm scared. I'm terrified.” And so I went to STRiVE. You can't talk about it without sounding

like—without it sounding like a cult, though. Like, it, it just, it changes your life and you meet so many people and it just, you know, it's such an incredible experience. And I think—I think the single best thing that UMBC does for its students is, like, teaching us that we're—we don't have to be passive about our experience here, you know? And, like, learning to create change on campus is—it's a, it's an incredible thing. Yeah.

**Poulomi Banerjee:** Oh, yeah. My sibling actually just did STRiVE, and it was really interesting talking to them and how—just, we have such similar experiences going through. Six years later things still are, you know, the same and, and they're teaching the students the same important kind of life lessons that, that I still use to this day.

**Tirzah Khan:** Yeah. I have this, this childhood friend who's, like, a couple years older than me. She's, like, one of my older sister's best friends, and we went to the same mosque. And she went to UMBC and I remembered her always, like, pushing UMBC and, like, being such a big fan of it. And I was like, “It can't be that good. Like, what did they do to her?” And then I got to UMBC and, like, we—I don't remember how she found out, but, like, I mentioned somewhere that I was, like, going to this leadership retreat. And she was like, “Wait, *STRiVE*?!” And there was this moment where like, she—after my STRiVE, we went out to dinner together, and we, like, spent three hours just talking about STRiVE. It was just so wild connecting with this person in a completely new way. It was just... STRiVE's incredible. It sounds like a cult, I know, but it's incredible. Yeah.

**Poulomi Banerjee:** Oh, yeah. I—yeah. It's, like—and you're in (seb) too, right?

**Tirzah Khan:** Mhm. Yeah.

**Poulomi Banerjee:** Which, like, is such a huge part of my UMBC experience. I mean, I didn't want—so I didn't want to go to UMBC, so back when Tumblr was big—

**Tirzah Khan:** Oh, no.

**Poulomi Banerjee:** Like, this is, like, 2011, 12—I searched UMBC 'cause I was like, “Maybe I'll see fun things on the Tumblr feed for UMBC.” And there was one girl posting things like cotton candy machines and popcorn and, like, a giant roller coaster. And I was like, “What is this girl doing? Like, I want to do what she's doing.” So I found out she was in the Student Events Board. That's why I joined it. And then I was her maid of honor at her wedding last year.

**Tirzah Khan:** Oh my God.

**Poulomi Banerjee:** It's just crazy, like, how that happens, you know? Like, we're best friends now, and I used to just—it was her Tumblr post that got me excited about UMBC.

**Tirzah Khan:** That is amazing. So going forward, what kinds of hopes and goals and wishes do you have for the UMBC community?

**Poulomi Banerjee:** I think a lot of what I used to wish for I saw come true watching my sibling go through their freshman year. I think being so involved with campus life, I just—I wanted more campus life activity; I wanted students to be more engaged; I wanted students to be excited to go to UMBC. And I think this post-March Madness world that we're living in for UMBC has really done so much, and I see students so excited on Welcome Week—and unfortunately, like, last year we didn't get to see it, but I'm, I'm hoping in the future we see the students in person watching those fireworks just excited to be there again. And then, you know, I, I really—and this is, this is more on, like, a national level—I just, I really hope that we get to a place where more students can experience UMBC without, you know, the barrier of, like, cost and kind of—like, right now we don't have SAT and ACT scores that we're accepting, and I think that's incredible, because I was never good at testing. I was—like, I got—my GPA in undergrad and high school—I'll expose myself. I got a 2.8 in high school. I got a 2.8 in my undergrad. And I currently have a 3.8 in grad school. So I—you know, I'm clearly capable. Like, I am, like—

**Tirzah Khan:** Yeah! Good for you. That's amazing.

**Poulomi Banerjee:** Good for—thanks! I'm—you know, like, I, I really like school now. But, like, I did *horrible* on those tests! Like, I was not good at those. And so I think—I really hope that we, we increase accessibility, and I really hope that we see policy moving forward these next four years that help, you know, UMBC become more attainable for students to go to and to access.

**Tirzah Khan:** Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. So is there anything else that you'd like to share?

**Poulomi Banerjee:** This part—I, I, I have some things.

**Tirzah Khan:** I'm ready.

**Poulomi Banerjee:** I have two things. I don't have a whole lot!

**Tirzah Khan:** Okay.

**Poulomi Banerjee:** So I think it's, like, it's difficult, right? This, like, pandemic world we're living in. And so I, I, like, have a pandemic—pre-pandemic, or, like, a post-pandemic, and then a current thing for—I—that I think people—like, especially students—should really do. I think when we're back in person, I really think that everyone—like, staff; students; anyone who is, like, able to get a ticket—should go to every cultural event that UMBC has to offer.

**Tirzah Khan:** Mhm. That's true.

**Poulomi Banerjee:** Because there's, like, no other time in your life where you could experience a different culture's music, traditions, and food for free every weekend. Like, I know I can go to Moby Dick [House of Kabob] and I can get a platter, but it's just not the same when it's not from a Persian Student Association event.

**Tirzah Khan:** Yeah. Yeah. That's true.

**Poulomi Banerjee:** And then, like, right now, you know, while we're virtual, I—my past job, I was the Coordinator of Alumni Development, and I was doing regional events all over the country. So I was just planning alumni receptions in Seattle and, like, San Francisco, New York, Chicago. And there are alumni all around the world, and I've personally met so many in specifically, like, San Francisco, Houston, Philadelphia, that, like, want to help students. And I know there are specifically people in San Francisco who are, like—if you want to apply to jobs or internships there, like, they will provide housing for you. Like, they'll let you stay with them. They'll let you—like, they'll show you around. They'll, they'll tell you the places that you should go to. And, like, our, our community is so strong and we have so many alumni all over the world who want to help. So a little plug I'm going to give is for Retrievers Connect, which just launched—[retrieversconnect.umbc.edu](http://retrieversconnect.umbc.edu). Students and alumni can make an account, and it's kind of, like, Tinder meets LinkedIn.

**Tirzah Khan:** My two least favorite things. I'm excited.

**Poulomi Banerjee:** So you, like, put your interests in, you put the cities you're interested in moving to or, like, that you're interested in, and you'll get matched with alumni who are doing the things that you want to do.

**Tirzah Khan:** That's amazing!

**Poulomi Banerjee:** And it's funny 'cause Greg Simmons, the Vice President of institutional advancement, him and I have, like, very similar tracks we're on. I'm just, you know, I'm, I'm 26 and he is *in his career*, and he was my third match. And I was like, "That's so perfect," because, like, that is where I want to be, and so the fact that we matched is awesome. It's

really great—like, the algorithm is awesome, and you can see where the alumni are, and there's, like, a whole world map. But it, it's, like, a really great way to connect in the way that LinkedIn offers, but it's just more strategic and it, it's more impactful, and you can have real conversations, and you don't have to be afraid that it's, like, a fake person or something like that. Like, it's a real person who had—has—who's had similar experiences to you. So [retrieversconnect.umbc.edu](http://retrieversconnect.umbc.edu). It, it's incredible. I think it's, it's going to change kind of how we do networking at UMBC now.

**Tirzah Khan:** Mhm. Yeah, for sure. All right. Well, thank you so much for sitting down with me today. I—we had such a unexpectedly wonderful conversation.

**Poulomi Banerjee:** Me too!

[musical outro]

**Tirzah Khan:** Thanks for joining us on Retriever Tales. Keep up with the Center for Democracy and Civic Life by following us on Instagram and Twitter @civiclifelumbc and find other Retriever Tales episodes at [civiclifelumbc.edu/retrievertales](http://civiclifelumbc.edu/retrievertales). We believe that stories are everything. What tales do you have to tell, and how do they connect you with the larger story of us all together in community?

[outro music fades]