S01E06: Climb the Non-Corporate Ladder

Brendalee Brown 00:11
Before I got into history, one thing that I never used to do was ask questions. And back then it was always just like, here, this is what you're told, this is what you need to believe, type of thing. Then I had the life changing professor for me, that was like, “Okay, so the book says this, this, and this, but what do you think? You know, let's go back to our sources and kind of dive a little deeper as to why we see things this way, why we're understanding things this way.” It kind of opened up my eyes to view the world and view people differently.

Scott Muir 01:00
This is *What Are You Going to Do with That?*, a podcast where we explore everyday folks' decisions to study the humanities as undergraduates and their pathways to fulfilling careers. I'm Scott Muir of the National Humanities Alliance, an organization dedicated to promoting the value of the humanities on campuses and in communities. It's important to note that college doesn't follow a precise four year plan for many students. Only 41% of students graduate in four years for a wide variety of reasons. About 40% of undergraduates work 30 hours a week or more, and many students are forced to take time off for financial reasons or to attend to health concerns or care for family members. Amidst these challenges, intellectual passion for one's chosen subject goes a long way toward sustaining a student to graduation and beyond. In this episode, we meet Brendalee Brown, whose slow-emerging love of history inspired her to overcome such challenges to earn her degree from Angelo State University and launch a career in the museum field at Fort Concho National Historic Landmark in San Angelo, Texas. Brendalee describes how her professors made history come alive, nurturing her curiosity and critical thinking to help her realize her true potential. She then found that the interests and skills cultivated in the history classroom led quite directly to a great job. Today, she finds fulfillment providing the kinds of invigorating experiences of history that helped her come into her own to visitors and volunteers at her museum. Let's return to her story now.

Brendalee Brown 02:41
So I was born and raised here. So ASU is kind of an automatic thing, especially being a child of a single mother. You know, I had kind of limited options at the time. I always did sports—sports, all that was the biggest thing so history was the last thing on my mind. Getting into ASU, I pretty much dropped sports, I dropped music, and my main thing was to do just nothing but basics until I tried to figure out what to do with my future and everything else. I started when I was about 18. So the first thing that I did at ASU was get into psychology. But for some reason, I just didn't really feel anything. Then I went into criminal justice. I tried that for a semester. I went into teaching. Tried that. And that one, I said no. About the age of 21, I dropped out for a little bit to take care of family. And also to process, you know, what I just did. And then to think about my future a little bit more. Got back into it, communications was the last one

that I did. And finally, when I got into history, that's kind of where everything that I had learned, with psychology, criminal justice, teaching, communications, it all fit into one box when it came to history. I don't know. It's just like so many things that led up to finally settling on one thing and not really settling but actually enjoying it. And I wish—the things I knew now, I wish I knew them back then, because I would have been done with school so much quicker. Because at the beginning, I did not take it seriously whatsoever. I wasn't focused. For me, it was just like, oh, let's go to school because we're being told to.

Scott Muir
It's the next step, right?

Brendalee Brown
It's the next step. I mean, had I known then what I know now, I would have taken it more seriously, I would have been like, "oh my gosh, history is great!" I should have taken all these professors back then. But I'm also not criticizing my past either. Things happened for a reason. And I'm in this position right now because of the steps that I took. And I finally decided no, this is my path. This is what I choose. And I'm just like, so hungry for more and you know, doors are opening for me.

Scott Muir 05:15
What were some of the classes that kind of stood out to you or kind of drew you in?

Brendalee Brown 05:20
Finally, when I did get into history, I did have one professor who—he made it so fun. It was an 8:00am class and I was wide awake. I was just so excited to be in that classroom. His name was Dr. Wongsrichanalai. He's the one that got me into history. He made it exciting, entertaining, regardless of what era he was talking about. Even the gritty parts, you know, he did not skip over anything. He made it engaging, especially for those of us that can't really pay attention for too long. You know, mind kind of tends to wander a little bit? He would keep us engaged the whole entire time. He actually had a huge megaphone that he would carry with him. And anytime, you know, he would get into the lecture, he would just emphasize his voice, or he would recite the speech into the megaphone. Not only that he moved around the classroom. Even if you weren't raising your hand, he would come up to you and say, "Okay, so what do you think about that?" He asked us our opinion. And I think that's what really helped us stay engaged in the whole conversation, in the whole lecture, is that, it got us thinking. You know, no answer was the wrong answer.

Scott Muir 06:38
What were some of the historical periods, or events or controversies or topics that grabbed your interest in these courses?

Brendalee Brown 06:46
For me, it was more of the ancient times that really did grab my interest. But I think more and more, it was the more recent stuff. I remember my Vietnam War class, there was one subject, or project I guess you can say, that I pretty much told my professor, I was like, "Look, there's no way I'm going to do this

project. You're gonna have to either give me a zero for it….” And she's like, “Why?” And I was like, “Because I cannot sit here and talk to a veteran without crying. Like, there's no possible way.” Because we were supposed to interview veterans about their time during the war and then write up all that. Thankfully, she gave me a recording. And of course, I'm sitting there crying. And, you know, I sit there, and I think of my grandfather, who is a World War II veteran. Now we have these new veterans that are going to be coming out of the Iraq War, and all these new wars. We're going to have a new group of veterans that are going to have stories to tell that we, as citizens, have no idea what they're experiencing. We have no idea what they're going through. I mean, I already had respect for our military. And so it's just a lot more respect for them, because thinking about the stuff that they had to go through. And you know, what we read in books from secondary sources. You know, primary sources are just even more engaging because hearing it firsthand from people that experienced it right then and there.

Scott Muir 08:25
I'm curious about your interest in museums. How did you first get really interested in that?

Brendalee Brown 08:31
Dr. Pierce, he was the one that actually got me into more of the museum field. I took historical preservation with him. And I think it was that class, the question that he asked was, “Why is history important?” And I remember writing a whole essay on why history was important. And I was like, well, yeah, history is pretty darn important. Because, you know, it kind of plugs into anything that you do. Like everything you do. He got us into it, because he allowed us to have first hand experience doing the research behind an exhibit. Actually getting with a graphics team group to create an exhibit and actually have it exhibited at the fort. So we were doing Native Americans of Texas, especially in the San Angelo area. My partner and I, we did the Comanches. So reading about it, it's like you dive so deep into it, that it kind of gets you thinking, “Okay, should we put this?” You don't want to put something that offends a certain group, but at the same time, you want to share the history of what happened. Once we got our first hand experience in actually setting up an exhibit and the research and the work that went in behind doing all of that, I think that really excited me. And then seeing our names, you know, on the banner itself and seeing the work that we put into it showcased for the public to see. And then not only that, being able to educate the public, it was just really exciting. And that moment, other than the paper, you know, on why history is important. Those two projects got me geared towards museum studies. I remember telling my mom, “I want to do museums.” And she's like, “What museums are there in San Angelo?” At the time I was like, well there's just Fort Concho, but there's museums all over the country. After that, I started thinking, like, what museums could I get into? And I'm like, there are so many, so many things that I could do when it comes to museum studies, if not just history in general. History In general, it just opened up so many doors that I can actually get into.

Scott Muir 11:18
Now, you're working there! So how did that all come about, the path from ASU to working at Fort Concho?

Brendalee Brown 11:24
You know, after having our exhibit, actually at Fort Concho. And then I'm like, wow, this little gem had been hidden here for so long. And I had been in San Angelo for so long that I didn't really realize how neat this place was. You know, we have a great relationship with the ASU history department, so I believe that's where I saw the post, was through them. They had actually posted, “Hey, ASU students and alumni, there is a tour guide position available. And you guys should jump on it.” I remember quickly submitting my application and my resume. And at the time I'm like, “Oh, man, I have a call center background, I have a Whataburger background, I did mascots for two semi pro teams. And then my history degree. What is this going to even amount to, to get my foot into the door?” And no, I talked to the director, which he's now my boss, and my former boss. I remember sitting in there and you know, talking to them. It was so comfortable to be in there with them. Bunch of history nerds just kind of in there, all talking together. I think what set me off, and was like, “I'm so down for this job!”, was my boss saying, “How do you feel about dressing in 1800 period clothing?” And being a mascot,

Scott Muir
[laughs] You were like, yeah, you got this!

Brendalee Brown
Yeah, I'm down! I got the acting part. I can do this. This is great. You know, my goal was just to get my foot in the door and to learn every single department that I could possibly learn. You know, we have collections here. We have archives. We have special events. You know, there's so many different things behind the scenes of a museum that we have no idea that goes on. And I just wanted to learn every single thing that went on behind the scenes.

Scott Muir 13:30
Tell me about how your time there has evolved. My understanding is that you then have moved into a bigger role from that initial tour guide role. Tell me about how that all unfolded.

Brendalee Brown 13:41
I think because I enjoyed what I was doing. I enjoyed, you know, being a tour guide, getting the best of everything when it comes to walking outside, or working with collections, doing gift shop sales, doing rentals. I had many hats to wear. It pretty much all unfolded because my former boss left. I really did appreciate that she allowed us to kind of see what her job entailed. You know, I asked all these questions like, “Why are we doing this? What is this going to benefit in the future? How is this going to help? Or how did this help us in the past?” So, you know, with her leaving, I stepped in. I had already known a little bit about her position. And that has allowed me to explore different parts of the job that she didn't quite get to.

Scott Muir
Can you give some examples of that?

Brendalee Brown
Well like the gift shop, you know, I sit there and I listen to the customer. “Okay, well, you don't have this. You don't have that.” And I'm like, okay, you know what? People ask for that all the time. Let's try to look for it and see if we can find it that relates to the fort and get that in the gift shop. “Oh, well, you know, you don't talk very much about the women of Fort Concho.” So I was like okay, so you know what, let's do some research. Let's start doing a pamphlet that, you know, relates to the women of Fort Concho, or do a special tour on special days that’s dedicated to women of Fort Concho, or, you know, so on and so on. And that also taught me I was like, well, I do have to be patient because I didn't know that one day I would be in a higher paying job. I was actually just getting my foot into the door to learn about the museum, because I had planned on continuing with my master's in museum studies. And then eventually going to like Fredericksburg or going to Houston or somewhere bigger, Boston or Egypt, you know, bigger doors.

I had a cousin, he's in engineering. And I remember him telling me he's like, “You should get into engineering. You're somewhat good with math. And that's where the money's at. Get into electrical engineering. Money is there.” And I remember asking, “But are you happy?” And he's like, “No.” And I was like, that's why I want to do something that I'm really happy with. But at the same time, yeah, there is money in almost everything when it comes to history or anything with humanities. We did a program out at ASU, you know, we were trying to do the volunteer recruiting program. And at the same time, the history department was sitting next to us, recruiting for the history department. This student came up and he was telling me, “Oh, what's going on here?” “Well, we're recruiting volunteers for Fort Concho. We really like to have people come out.” And I asked him, “So what is your major?” And, gosh, I believe he said it was like economics. And I was like, “Okay, that's great. Have you ever thought about becoming a history major?” And he's like, “No, there's no money in history. You can't do nothing with history. You can't really go anywhere with history.” And I was like, “Hold on, let me tell you. There's so many things you can do with history.” And he's like, “Oh, yeah? You're joking.” So I told him yeah, you know, taking law classes and becoming a lawyer, a politician. If you want to get into business, you know, you can actually get into business as well. Education, so many different things with just a history degree. Things like video games. And he's like, Yeah. It's like, history. You can utilize history in so many things. Actors? They do research on whatever their character and they're portraying, they do research on that character and that time period to see how they're going to talk, how they're going to act, how would they react to this kind of situation. You know, all that is history. And he just kind of looked at me, he's just kind of like, “Huh. Okay.” But yeah, that was a really interesting connection that I had with a student because I saw a little bit of me in him because I used to have that mentality. I used to think history's not going to get me the money, history's not going to get me anything. And I saw myself in him. And that's why I just kind of laughed a little whenever he said that. Like, let's talk. And I'm gonna tell you, there's so many more doors that can open when it comes to a history degree.

Scott Muir 18:35
So how are you evaluating your steps from here? I mean, are you still kind of like, thinking you want to go back to school? Or how are you evaluating that decision?

Brendalee Brown 18:44
Oh, yeah, absolutely. Definitely still want to continue with my master's. There's still other positions that are—Yeah, I would be super sad if any of them left—but if I wanted to continue here, in Fort Concho, you know, we still have the curator position, we still have the archivist position. And we can go even higher to the director. You know, and I always joke with my director almost every other week. And I tell him, “I'm going to take your job one day.” And he’s like, “Well hurry up and get your master’s so you can do it soon.” And, you know, starting as a tour guide, at the very bottom, which he was as a tour guide at one point. Then he moved up to education coordinator. And then, from there, now he's the director. He’s making quite a bit. For him to be able to, you know, go from the bottom up, that's very motivating. Because I know that, with time, I too, can move up. If I do decide to move, then I can always have that, you know, that experience of museum studies, of working in collections, working with archives, working with special events, and working with the gift shop. You know, I have all that experience that I can go and work for a different museum. I can work for a different company, if I wanted to, that specializes in special events. It kind of branches out from there. From this position, it only goes up. You know, I can't go back down. It's just gonna keep going up.

Note: This transcript has been edited to make it easier to read.