

**Opening:**

This is Academically Speaking, a podcast hosted by Dr. Theodorea Regina Barry, Vice Provost and Dean of UCF's College of Undergraduate Studies. It features inspirational stories from the college's faculty, students, and alumni about the transformational power of education.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Welcome to Academically Speaking. I am Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry, Vice Provost and Dean of the College of Undergraduate Studies here at the University of Central Florida. And with me today is our absolutely wonderful student, Nicole Boisson. Nicole will graduate in May with degrees in environmental studies and political science. She has held numerous leadership roles at UCF, including Sustainability and Innovation Coordinator for Student Government.

Nicole is an accomplished scholar. She received UCF's 2023 Founders' Day Award for the College of Undergraduate Studies, and in that same year, she received the university's Order of Pegasus Award, the most prestigious and significant honor a student can receive here at UCF. She has had many accomplishments throughout her undergraduate career, including conducting undergraduate research with the Department of Biology, focusing on biogeochemistry. We're going to talk a little bit about that.

Once she graduates, she will accept a position to lead young students on adventure trips in the Southwest. And breaking news, Nicole will be defending her undergraduate thesis on Monday, and so we wish her all the luck in the world, not that you really need it, because clearly you have the capability and skills necessary to do all the things that are required to successfully defend your thesis. Welcome to Academically Speaking.

**Nicole Boisson:**

Thank you so much for having me. Dr. Berry. I'm more than honored to be here, and I would like to thank you for all your leadership and all of your support that you've provided me. I would not be able to accomplish any of those things without your constant support and the support you provide all students here at UCF.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Well, thank you. And my goal really here is to not only highlight all of the great wonderful things we do in the College of Undergraduate Studies, but to really focus on what it means to be a student in our college. So my first question for you today is why did you choose environmental studies and political science as a major?

**Nicole Boisson:**

Absolutely. So it really began in high school. I fell in love with AP environmental studies, and then I came to UCF and I had declared that major, and then I started meeting other students in this community, other students in the College of Undergrad, and it just solidified my idea that this is where I belong. I love studying the natural world, but then I also love this community of people that are also here with me studying the natural environment. And even coming to college, it was a hard decision of where I would like to

go, but once I got here and I got into this college and I met so many amazing mentors and so many amazing students, it really solidified my decision. And I continued with environmental studies because I truly love being outside. I truly love learning more about our interaction with the environment.

And so that's kind of where my political science major also came in, because I started learning more about the policies and how as society we handle environmental policy and environmental disasters and things like that. And then I just realized that there's a lot of people out there that don't have as much background as they should when they're making these big decisions. So I decided that I would be someone that would have both backgrounds. It's something that I truly am passionate about, helping solve climate change, and then also something I'm passionate about, which is policymaking and the people that we affect when we pass these large bills and things like that. So I also had some really wonderful experiences interning with Representative Eskamani, working with student government and just learning about UCF's politics and how I can be involved and how much they really uplift students' voices here. It really solidified my decision on both majors and how much I really love both subjects.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

So in your introduction, you talked about your research in biogeochemistry. First of all, tell us what that is.

**Nicole Boisson:**

Absolutely. So biogeochemistry is the study of nutrient cycling, specifically in wetlands and in anaerobic and aerobic conditions. So I specifically am studying mangrove forests and how they're encroaching on oyster reefs, which oyster reefs aren't wetlands, but how both of them are affecting carbon storage. So a lot of ecosystems are very important because they sequester a lot of excess carbon from our atmosphere. But we're seeing a lot of different patterns that we haven't seen before, such as mangrove encroachment. So they're growing on top of oyster reefs in places we haven't seen. So I want to study how that's affecting carbon storage and if we can make and form different carbon stores that are more stable over time, and so they can hold carbon for longer periods of time and not letting it escape as fast as it can.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Tell us a little bit more about mangroves. I know they are widely seen in areas in and around Florida, but do we find them in other geographic areas and how do they typically appear other geographic areas?

**Nicole Boisson:**

Absolutely. So mangrove forests are tropical and subtropical plants and trees and shrubs. So there's some varieties. There's red, black and white mangroves that we see here in Florida, and we see them normally down South. And what we're seeing is a huge migration of them up north. I specifically am studying their migration to the Indian River Lagoon, which is northwest of here, sorry, northeast of here. And specifically, they are very important ecosystem engineers. So they provide habitat for very important

species. They themselves sequester a lot of carbon. But what we're seeing is that their propagules and their prop roots are starting to catch on oysters. And in some places we've seen this be a natural phenomenon, but they typically stay in sometimes the 10,000 islands of Florida. That's one place where we've seen this. But then where we're seeing this in the Indian River Lagoon, we're seeing this in places that were normally dominated by oyster reefs.

So they are two very important ecosystems, and I can give you a little spoiler of some of my results. What we've found is that in the encroachment sites, they actually are more efficient at storing carbon for longer periods of time. So what we're thinking, we're hypothesizing is that the oysters provide nutrients like ammonium and phosphate, and then the mangroves provide all this stable carbon. And then when you put them together, they're actually very, very efficient of holding carbon for long periods of time. Maybe not forever, but at least longer than we've seen them individually. But definitely more research needs to be done. And I did a very small pilot study.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

It sounds really interesting, and I'd be interested to see how this kind of phenomenon might appear in other areas of the world, particularly in the Caribbean where there are also lots of mangrove forests.

**Nicole Boisson:**

Absolutely.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

So now one of the things I had the privilege of doing last year was getting involved with the Sustainability and Innovation Committee for Student Government at your invitation and learning more about some of the fabulous work that this committee is doing on this campus. And you served as that coordinator for student government and led multiple initiatives, including UCF adopting Fair Trade. How did these experiences shape your time here at UCF?

**Nicole Boisson:**

Absolutely. I would say that specifically that position has shaped me in more ways than one. I'm so grateful for my experience in that position because it really helped me grow in my communication skills. I was really able to kind of step outside my box, and if I wanted to see change such as trying to designate UCF as Fair Trade, I was able to really, really push myself and do that. I was able to meet with a lot of different faculty and staff, including you. That was one of the first times I had met you, and you really gave me a lot of advice, and you really helped me and uplifted my voice and all the initiatives that I had in that moment. So that position has really helped me grow as a person, but also as somebody that wants to see change. So I really love that position.

I got to meet also a lot of friends through it, a lot of people that have similar mindsets that really want to see UCF attain their sustainability standards. And so specifically with Fair Trade, that's actually what I'm doing in my capstone class. And my whole class has been focusing on trying to continue this push to designate UCF as Fair Trade. And I'll be

presenting actually at the College of Undergraduate Showcase. So I'm very excited to present a poster about it.

But specifically, we're just working on buying different Fair Trade products and having it available at stores. So that position also gave me the confidence that I can meet with these officials from Dining Services and Aramark and tell them that this is what students want. We want to see more sustainable products being sold on campus at lower prices. And we truly believe that UCF can do that, and it would be one of the first colleges on the East Coast to be able to do that.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

So for our audience members who are watching or listening to this podcast, can you briefly describe what it means to engage in Fair Trade and what Fair Trade is?

**Nicole Boisson:**

Absolutely. So Fair Trade is a national and a global organization that focuses on producing products that are more sustainable in the way that they are farmed or cultivated, but then also paying those people that are producing these products fair wages. So they kind of set a standard that they will never pay a worker less than that standard, and then they can only go up from there depending on where their product is sold. And so a lot of products can be Fair Trade such as sugar, coffee, tea, those are some products that we have here on campus. Sometimes the whole product can be Fair Trade or just one or two ingredients in it. So there's a lot of different logos you can look up to see if you're buying Fair Trade products. But it's very important not only for the producers, but also for the consumers to be aware.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

And when we think about Fair Trade, are we thinking only sort of internationally? Are we thinking nationally in some producers that engage in that practice?

**Nicole Boisson:**

Absolutely. So we're thinking both. So Fair Trade has national producers as well that help produce a lot of goods. Like in Florida, we have a large sugarcane industry. So there's a few farms in Florida that are Fair Trade certified, but then also internationally in places like Brazil and Columbia that are very big coffee producers, there's a lot of local farmers that have signed on with Fair Trade and are seeing better results and better wages and things like that. So it's a little bit of both.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

And what might that do for the global economy to engage in this practice?

**Nicole Boisson:**

Definitely, definitely. So I would think that it would not only boost economy, but also boost the ability to work because when you're working or producing a product and you keep underselling your product, you keep not being able to pay your workers or

yourself. It can be very hard to sustain a life like that. And sometimes when we're in a more Western-dominated country and we don't really see farmers every day, we don't really see that type of work every single day, it can be hard to really, really think about the food that you put on your table and the ingredients that you buy to cook with and things like that. So I think that it's very important. Can you repeat your question? I apologize.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Okay. So when we think about the economy, right, and how Fair Trade could contribute to that. Talk to me about some ways that you think that might happen.

**Nicole Boisson:**

Thank you. Yes, absolutely. So what I was saying is that it would boost the economy because not only will it provide all these producers higher wages, but they would be able to put that back into the economy, whether it is expanding their practice or putting that for their children's education or their own education, it would really benefit a lot of countries to continue to participate in Fair Trade and sign off with that amazing nonprofit company.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

So if you had the opportunity to talk to someone on Capitol Hill, major legislator probably on the Agriculture Committee or on the Commerce Committee about the importance of Fair Trade, what would be the key thing that you would want them to know?

**Nicole Boisson:**

Absolutely. So I would say that the first thing that comes to mind is just letting them know that, especially if I can know about their district, know if there are large agriculture presence in their district, I would let them know how many of them are Fair Trade. And if I could somehow find some statistics on how much they're getting paid and ask that person what they think, if that is fair. And then I would compare it to Fair Trade wages. I genuinely think that the wages and the sustainability practices come together and they really, really form something special when it comes to Fair Trade.

It's one of the first organizations that has looked at not only economic benefits, but also social benefits and not using pesticides, not using herbicides, doing things more organically. You produce more nutrients in the food, you produce more of the food. So kind of combining that, I would let them know that this is a very, very special program that we think that should be implemented in a government way, not only kind of in this private corporation. So I would kind of let them know that there's a big intersection not only between policy and economy, but also socially and also sustainably in the way that the food is produced. So I would give them a synopsis of all three.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Okay. So you get to graduate in a few weeks, and I know this is going to be a huge moment for you and your family, and congratulations on all that you've accomplished.

**Nicole Boisson:**

Thank you.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

In your bio you told us that you're moving to the Southwest, a completely different part of the country. Talk to me about some of the things you hope to learn about the environment of Arizona and the way in which they deal with environmental issues.

**Nicole Boisson:**

Absolutely. So I am more than excited to talk about it because I recently accepted the position. I would be moving to Arizona this June, and I would be leading kids specifically more in marginalized communities that don't have a lot of experience being outside. And we'd give them the equipment and we'd be almost like their mini-tour guide into a lot of these environments. And then teach them how to camp it, teach them how to appreciate nature. And then there's also a photography aspect to it. So the Southwest is very new to me. I was born and raised in Florida. I'm a little bit nervous to be in a landlocked state, no water near me, but it's going to be fun.

I'm super excited to learn more about things like canyons and almost like their soil there, because I am right now a soil scientist studying biogeochemistry. So here we have a lot of organic matter. Over there it's a lot sandier. So I'm very excited for that part as well. I'm excited for in general the flora and fauna. But I'm also excited because I'll be in a new place in the U.S. and I'll be able to tour some grad schools, which is eventually my end goal, is I do want to my education. So I'll be closer to other states like California, and I'll be able to explore other grad schools. I'll be very close to the University of Arizona, so that'll be an amazing school. They're actually number one on the stars rating for sustainability, so they have a platinum standard. So that would be an amazing place to start as well.

But yeah, I'm also just very excited to teach others everything that I've learned in my undergraduate career and be somebody there for somebody that's at a young age that's starting to explore the environment and show them that you don't need to major in environmental studies to care or to love it. That sustainability and nature is involved in every discipline here, whether you're an engineer, a chemist, a biologist, a professor. There's a lot of intersectionality, and so that's something I'm really excited to continue my work in and to show these kids that.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Well, I certainly agree that everyone can play a role in sustainability. And folks who work with me know my disdain for the excessive use of paper.

**Nicole Boisson:**

Absolutely.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Because it is a sustainability issue, and I think we all have a role to play in relationship to caring for our planet. So moving into that, I want to know how you feel that your time at UCF has prepared you for this next step and future steps.

**Nicole Boisson:**

Definitely. I think that before coming to UCF, I would've never chosen something that was so far away from home. But coming here, I really grew in my confidence of being independent and being able to complete different tasks on my own. I feel like I've grown so much in my ability to communicate with others, communicate with somebody in a higher position than I am, and also just be able to share any problems that I have and things like that. Sometimes it's easier to just kind of bottle it up and be like, "Okay, no, I can handle it." But also being able to ask for help is something that I learned here very quickly, and that that is okay to do. So I really wouldn't be who I am without my experiences here at UCF, and for all the amazing mentors that I have that really believed in me and really believed in my abilities.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

So what advice do you have for our current students?

**Nicole Boisson:**

Absolutely. So my biggest piece of advice is to take the opportunity to apply to different things. Even if it's something that you may not be necessarily interested in, you'd be so surprised that there's so many opportunities at UCF that you'll eventually find something that you love. And try something new as well. So maybe you came in from high school, maybe you came in after your freshman year and you're like, "Oh, I really like this. I don't really like this." But maybe it'll be helpful in the future.

So for example, I'm doing a GIS certificate as well with my major. GIS is something that is grown a lot and a lot of employers are looking for it, but it's not necessarily what I'm passionate about. I'm not super passionate about data analysis, but I took a chance on it and I really truly started to like it. It's very important when it comes to analyzing things like species extinction or species migration and things like that. And so not only is it important, but you can make it important as well and make it something that you like and connect it with things that you already like.

So my biggest piece of advice is to just go for any opportunity, even if you don't think that it's your end-all be-all. It's amazing to know what you like and what you don't like before you graduate. You'll find that out pretty easily. And so, yeah, that's my biggest piece of advice.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

All right. Excellent. So now we have come to the portion of our podcast that I like to call the Lightning Round. This is an opportunity for our audience to get to know you a little bit better personally. I'm going to ask you a few very quick questions and you can just respond with the thing that comes first to your mind. So what is your favorite color?

**Nicole Boisson:**

Forest Green.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Oh, of course. Favorite song?

**Nicole Boisson:**

Long Live by Taylor Swift.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

She's a Swiftie. Okay.

**Nicole Boisson:**

I am. I am.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

All right. Favorite movie?

**Nicole Boisson:**

LaLa Land. Have you seen it, Dr. Berry?

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

I have not seen it.

**Nicole Boisson:**

You need to see it. It makes you think so much. You decide which side you're on. It's an amazing movie.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Okay. I might see it. The whole notion of people dancing and singing in the 21st century just didn't quite appeal to me, but I'm going to have to see it.

**Nicole Boisson:**

That's okay. There's an underlying message.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Okay. Excellent. Favorite actor?

**Nicole Boisson:**

Oh, oh, there's so many. Emma Stone.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Emma Stone. Okay. Favorite book?



**Nicole Boisson:**

A Court of Thorns and Roses by Sarah J. Maas. It's a very popular series. It's a fantasy book, but it's a very good read when you're just trying to distract yourself a little bit and do something a little fun.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

I'm not really a novel reader. There's only one novelist that I started reading. She does science, she did science fiction type of writing, Octavia Butler. But outside of that, I like biographies.

**Nicole Boisson:**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Those kinds of books. But it's interesting. Everybody likes something different, right? Favorite singer?

**Nicole Boisson:**

Taylor Swift.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Of course. Favorite actress? Well, you said Emma Stone, so favorite actor.

**Nicole Boisson:**

Favorite actor. Oh, there's so many. I think it's because I've been recently watching all of the Mission Impossible movies. But Tom Cruise is a great actor.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

He's an interesting guy, that's for sure.

**Nicole Boisson:**

He is an interesting guy. But his acting, I genuinely feel he can play so many roles. And I think it's also because I've been watching with my family as well. So, just for right now.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Oh, sure. Not a problem. Okay. Favorite thing to do on a rainy day?

**Nicole Boisson:**

Oh, I would say on a rainy day is to just sit outside on my porch and read a good book.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

That sounds great. All right. So typically I'd like to ask a question that I gleaned from a show that is hosted by Laverne Cox, where she interviews up-and-coming artists and

singers, actors, those kinds of things. And she typically ask at the end of her interviews, what didn't I ask that I should have asked? So I want to ask you, was there anything that I didn't ask that I should have asked?

**Nicole Boisson:**

Oh, that's a great question. I would say maybe what is your work-life balance? I would say that's a very important question to ask a student, because sometimes we're still developing that. And I'm personally not the best example.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

And trust me, that doesn't end after college. Right? It's a regular struggle.

**Nicole Boisson:**

I bet. Yes. So for me personally, I might not be the best example because I've always put a lot on my plate. I've always loved to be busy, but you always need to find something that you are also passionate about that's outside of your job, outside of your academic career. So I personally love crocheting and reading and spending time with friends and family. That really kind of recharges my battery so I can come back on a Monday and then continue my research, continue my schoolwork and things like that. So that's something that I like to do, is little hobbies here and there. And I think that's very important.

Something that I've also been kind of dealing with the idea of is when you graduate, everybody's been asking me, "What's next? What's next?" And so a lot of people pick different paths. Some people pick the path of continuing and going to graduate school. Other people join the workforce right away. Other people want to start a family. And so I've been really toying with this idea that not everybody has a straight path and not everybody has the same path, and that's okay. So if you choose pursuing your hobby instead of what you went to school for, that's okay. If you choose taking some time off and then continuing your schoolwork later, joining the workforce later, that's okay as well. So I think that's also in the back of my mind. And that's a piece of advice I would also give somebody, is that life isn't linear and that's okay.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

Absolutely. And that is a great way to end our conversation. Life certainly isn't linear, but you have in fact taken advantage of a lot of opportunities. Congratulations on your graduation. We are tremendously proud of you and can't wait to see you walk across the stage. I get to shake your hand.

**Nicole Boisson:**

Thank you.

**Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry:**

So I'm really excited about that. And to our audience, thank you for listening, for watching, to Academically Speaking, I am Dr. Theodorea Regina Berry, and have a great day.