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Liesl Riddle:
Welcome to GWSB Proud, a podcast all about why are you proud of GWSB? My name is Liesl Riddle and I am the Associate Dean for Graduate Programs here at George Washington University School of Business. And I have the great pleasure of sitting down with GW alumni, faculty, staff and students to hear why they are GWSB Proud.

Welcome to the podcast today, we're joined today by Guarav Sharma who is part of our Global MBA Program, graduating a class of 2017. And he's here today to share with us a little bit about his experience at GW, and why he's GWSB Proud. Welcome Guarav, I'm so glad to see you on campus today.

Guarav Sharma:

Thank you Liesl Riddle, it's great to be back in D.C. and being back on campus. Thank you for having me.

Riddle:

So walk us back in time a little bit, and I'd love to hear more kind of what was your GW origin story so to speak, why did you think about business school? First of all tell us a little bit about that, and then why GW in particular?

Sharma:

Right, so it's a long and complex story, so my primary background is in medicine. So I'm a Medical Doctor, Physician from New Zealand, that's where I graduated from, and while I was in New Zealand I got involved in a little bit of the public health, public policy, side of things, but also had an opportunity to go to Mongolia, and do an internship there. And while I was there I kind of you know, looking at their healthcare system, I was trying to help increase access to medicine and surgery for people, but felt there were a lot of hurdles, and a lot of it had to do I think with my own sort of understanding of healthcare system, because as a doctor you know, all you think about is well you know, the patient in front of you, but apart from that one-to-one care, you don't really understand you know, where does the money come from, you know, who's prioritizing that patient to come there, who's paying for the electricity bill, you know, who's sterilizing the equipment. Like simple things like that, that you never learn, so and with my experience in Mongolia I really felt like I needed to understand all those things if I wanted to make a system-wide change. So it was always at the back of my mind that I wanted to do an MBA after my Mongolian visit, and when I went back home to New Zealand I was on a few different company boards, a few different NGO boards, but again a few times, I felt you know, I was giving them advice because I came from healthcare sector, but I didn't really understand the financial side of things, and often I felt like you know, I was just faking it. I was like, “yeah that sounds, all good,” so there was a lot of gap in my knowledge that I really wanted to bridge. So that's where I thought you know, an MBA would really help, so coming to GW MBA I actually ended up getting the Fulbright Scholarship first, and the idea was to then apply for schools, and when I was applying for schools I ended up being a bit sick. I got something from one of my patients, was quarantined into the hospital for a little while, and you know, got accepted into some schools, and didn't end up doing interviews to some schools, and there was an issue with you know, just the deadlines and things, but I think GW got in touch with me, and they'd heard about me from somewhere, and they said you know, “would you like to apply?” And you know, “we're here right in the middle of D.C.,” and I had some, you know, political interests as well, and policy interests, and I thought you know, it would be a great place to come and study, and I think it was the best one of the best decisions of my life.

Riddle:

Well I don't think I ever thought that I would wish someone ill health, but if that means that we actually got a great student like you on campus then I'm very grateful that happened to you. [laughs]

Sharma:

Well that's, why, it's interesting how things work out…

Riddle:

It is! It is, it is one of those serendipitous types of moments, so you mentioned wanting to come to business school to get specific skills, looking back on it now, what specific experiences, or skills, or knowledge that you really felt like you needed, did you really get from your experience at GW?

Sharma:

Well I think the core business classes, you know, that's something I mean, as I said you know, being a physician you really don't understand any of that, you don't understand finance, you don't understand marketing, you don't understand, human resources, none of that you understand at all, so you know, that's something that you know, everybody learns and that's something I found very useful. And even now I’m on a few different NGO’s and company boards, and again this time you know, I feel confident in giving advice financially compared to you know, four years ago, so that's one part. But you know, the electives are really broad as well and it really depends on you know, what you want to learn, and that you can pick up, so I mean, I did things in public health, I did things in journalism, I did things in foreign policy school, and there was a lot of those again related to you know, what I wanted to achieve with my MBA, so a lot of things across the board.

Riddle:

How did you find that your advising went, were you, did you feel like you were able to really put together kind of, something that was kind of customized to your interests?

Sharma:

Oh definitely, and I was really surprised by how many different courses you could take, you know, across the board. And even now that I'm this week back in D.C., I'm catching up with friends, you know, and, not only because MBA you know, people end up doing different things after they graduate, but just the fact that they were from different schools, they're working in all sorts of different sectors, whether it's federal government, or you know, whether it's private sector, it's healthcare, so that really helped you know, in connections. It really helped in my knowledge as well, but it's a lot more courses than I thought you would have options of. Yeah, and if anything I have to say, I wish I could do more credits you know, there was, there was a point where I had to choose between like two or three awesome classes at the same time, and I just couldn't.

Riddle:

But we can keep talking to you about graduate certificates, you know, we have 24, soon to be 25.

Sharma:

Definitely,or maybe another degree, I don't know!

[All laugh]

Riddle:

That's right, we very much believe in lifelong learning here. Well tell me a little bit about, you were so active when you were here on campus and a lot of different organizations, I know you were constantly going to different events, what was sort of student life like for you?

Sharma:

So I think in terms of student life, my sort of agenda was that you know, D.C. is a very special city, and there's a lot of things that happen here you know, like you want to make the most of it. So I was sort of the person I was going to five to seven events a day, like after school and between classes, everything, and I mean, I was involved with the University Association, I was the Senator on the University Association, I was also one of the Advisory Council members to the former Dean as well. But you know, there's Net Impact, there's entrepreneurial organization, there was a healthcare association as well, so being part of that. I also took part in a Pitch George competition, I got the first award actually, and that one, and also an audience choice award so you know, that's really good.

Riddle:

Absolutely.

Sharma:

Yeah, but apart from that like I mean, you know, there were some highlights. I went to one of the Peace Institute, and I think the Prime Minister of Pakistan Pervez Musharraf was speaking. I was here on campus during election time, and I sort of volunteered for the Clinton Campaign, and then I think there was Bernie Sanders and Ted Cruz, they were debating one time I was there. So at every point you know, there's been some sort of you know, person you look up to who's been here talking, or you know, somebody who's currently involved in current affairs, and you get to see them live, which you don't get to do in many other parts of the world.

Riddle:

Do you have any friends that you keep in touch with from your class, were there any special relationships, you want to give anybody a shout out?

Sharma:

Oh lots of friends actually, and you know, interesting coming back to D.C. this week, all the way from New Zealand, my family said you know, “two days isn’t enough, who are you going to see?” I've been back six days now, and I have not seen a single thing in D.C., I've been catching up with friends every day, and so it's been a lot of friends. There's a guy who just drove down from New Jersey, there's someone who came down from Philadelphia, Vinnie he came from Baltimore, Britney is coming from Virginia. So there's a lot of people you know, I keep in touch with, and I think the interesting thing is, even though you're away you, and the time difference is a big thing, I'm someone that might call almost once a week, you know, when I'm driving or they're driving, so there's still that connection,

Riddle:

It's still a strong community sort of feeling. Yeah, that’s great.

Sharma:

Yeah, oh and there's Mark, I'm traveling with him after this next week as well so catching up in New York.

Riddle:

Oh great, oh that's really great to hear. And also looking back, was there a special class or project that something really sort of was sort of a highlight moment for you?

Sharma:

I think it's hard to choose and pick actually, one of the classes that I really liked, it was out of outside of business school, it was about decentralizing governments, and it was great because my project was related to Mongolia so you know, going back to the start of the MBA, and it was about decentralizing Mongolian healthcare systems, and the professor I did it with when he was young, you know, 40 or 50 years ago, he had started working with the Mongolian government with USAID, so his work was related to that, so that you know, there was an instant connection. And then another guy in my class is involved very deeply involved with Mongolian politics, so it went from you know, me trying to make a difference in Mongolia, not having access to people, not being able to get things done, you know, bureaucracy everywhere, to my friend saying, “well you know, if you want to come and work in Mongolia, we can help you know, connect you with people.” And he connects me with a few politicians as well. So you know, I mean, it's just that instant connection that I could see, which I didn't have before coming to GW.

Riddle:

Oh that's very exciting and we kind of bring it full circle you know, for you in the classroom.

Sharma:

Definitely.

Riddle:

I know that Jennifer Windus, one of our Career Coaches in the Career Center, speaks so highly of you, and it was so neat to kind of observe your you know, reunion with her after you know, you've been gone for a while. Tell us a little bit about what was the Career Center experience like for you?

Sharma:

I think I mean, you know, with GW stuff, a lot of them are like family, like for example Jennifer like you know, we follow each other on Instagram, and you know, like her daughter's into horse riding and you know, like I’m following her photographs and you know, she sees me traveling around the world and doing that. So with a lot of people in class you know, I've had that connection, you know, like a personal connection and you know, even back home I would often send them an email every few months saying you know, this is what I’m doing at the moment, how are things going on? And a lot of that comes from you know, when I was here like people took the same sort of interest in you, like Jennifer was very excited you know, when I was running for office, so you know, even before that like you know, she was really the person, the go-to person for guidance. Because I think part of the problem was, you know, coming from medicine you're sort of just looking in one direction and to have somebody like Jennifer, you know, she's got a lot of you know, interesting background and she's helped a lot of students over the years, it's really helpful to get that.

Riddle:

Well you mentioned running for office

Sharma:

Yeah

Riddle:

So let's talk a little bit about the excitement that's transpired since you graduated, walked across that stage, and got that diploma. What's been going on in your life?

Sharma:

So at some point, I was working with a progressive party in New Zealand and just volunteering with them, and the leader of the party at that time, a former leader of the party said to me, “look we need more young people to get involved, you should think about it,” and you know, this is just pre-MBA, and I was going to come here, and I said you know, “sure I'll help out, and we'll think about it.” And then you know, he moved on, he's gone on to do other things, he's a mayor of the city now, but there was a new leader of the party, and again I sent them an email about studying in the US for a public policy degree. And I said to them, “look I'm thinking about doing a public policy degree after my MBA,” and he said to me, you know, “too many degrees! You need to come back and you need to work on the ground and you know, we'd love to have somebody like you run for us, what do you think about that?” So while I was still in my last semester here and I was doing a student exchange program in Mexico, and I just finished one in France, I decided to go back to New Zealand and you know, put my name through. So I was sort of traveling back and forth still going through that, yeah, and just ended up running for office pretty much, even before I finished up my MBA.

Riddle:

Wow, so what's next for you?

Sharma:

So, well in terms of election, you know, I didn't end up winning, but we did really well, and the party I worked for ended up back in government after three terms, so it's a progressive party and you know, we're doing a good job, and the prime minister's doing a good job. You know, she's been to America a few times, so I'm now the Chair of the Electorate that I ran for, I'm also the Deputy Chair of the rest of the region, and I think I'm going to be running again next year, so just about one year left, less than one year left. So watch this space.

Riddle:

How are you using, and how do you imagine that in the future you'll be using your MBA in your political career?

Sharma:

I mean, actually we've had this discussion, with a few other alumni that I met you know, this week, and we've all been saying you know, “was it worth it,” you know, like, “how would you evaluate your experience at GW?” And I think my answer is a lot of it is subtle, you know, like you can't be like, well you know, these are the 10 exact things I learned at GW that's going to help me, but hand on heart, I can say that you know, coming to GW has really helped in terms of you know, connections, experiences, just understanding, I mean, even watching American politics so close by you know, five minutes from the White House. So I think and especially going into politics, it's important that you understand business, you understand organizations, and that's something I've really learned here.

Riddle:

Yeah well you know, it's wonderful to have students like you on campus, but even better when you can continue to come back as an alum, what ways do you like to connect back to sort of the future generations of managers here at GW?

Sharma:

So I mean, just coming back here is one of the big things you know, there's no other agenda coming to D.C. except just to catch up with people. You know, I might be going to the dinner today as well you know, catching up with the new class of GW MBAs. But you know, Linkedin is another big one, you know, you see a lot of you know, people send you requests, you talk to them and often they're asking for advice. I've had a few people ask me, prospective students you know, would you know, advise going to GW MBA, or why not, and then Twitter's another big one. you know, like I'm quite active on Twitter, being in politics, but that's another big one to keep in touch with. But I think the biggest one is you know, a phone call and a text message, and that's one of the things I'd really like to do with my class, and I think that's why a lot of us are close because you do have to make that effort.

Riddle:

Well it is just such a great pleasure to have you back on campus, do you have any famous D.C. sites, or things that you like to do in D.C. that you have to do when you come back here?

Sharma:

I mean, I guess to people listening and if there are prospective students, I would say you know, like there is so much to see in D.C., and I think there's a list on the website with the 100 things to do. I've probably done about 80 or so, like I really went out of my way to see them, but you know, go and see the museums, go to the monuments, you know, sign up to all the events as well. One of the moments I remember going to a book fair and meeting Salman Rushdie, you know, getting books signed by him. And again you know, like the election was happening here, so going and seeing those things. But there's so many things to see in D.C., and even now I actually had a list of 20 things I still wanted to see which I haven't gotten around to. But that's what you really need to do.

Riddle:

Yeah yeah that's great, well if you had to pick one moment, one story, one experience, that you had that you would say, that is my GWSB Proud moment, what would it be?

Sharma:

I think, for that moment, that's, it's a bit hard to put one specific moment for it. But I think just when you were, like when I came back you know, this week, like you know, coming back and talking to people, and even staff members who've moved on, but they've kept in touch as well. And I think that sort of goes to show how connected the GW family is, like you know, you don't have to work here you know, or you don't have to live here, you don't even have to be a current student, but people are still connected, and I think what binds us all together is the GW you know, element.

Riddle:

Well that is just wonderful, welcome home is the best way to sort of end that. It's been great to have you here thanks for sharing with us.

Sharma:

Thanks so much, and who knows I might come back for another degree.

Riddle:

I'm telling you, let's have a conversation about that. [laughs]

Sharma: Thank you, all right, thanks.

[Music]

Riddle:

That's all for this episode. Thanks for listening today. Shout out for music credit to Plantain Papi, also known as Michael Ferrier, GW class of 2020. See you next time to learn more ways we are GWSB Proud.

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