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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, I am so excited to have John and Nicole Samuel here from the class of 2014, yeah so really really lovely to see you, all here back on campus. John and Nicole are here to join us for our Global MBA Orientation program where we're doing one of our famous signature round table events. Those are the types of events where we bring in our alumni as well as some of our recruiters and corporate partners, or other experts in the field, to sit down and have a dedicated conversation with a small group of students that have common interests with them around breaking news topics in their field. So we are so grateful for you guys to come back to campus and to do the round tables, and to stop in and do the podcast here with us today. you know, it's been, it seems like it was just yesterday you guys are here on campus and I want you to kind of walk us back in time if you can a little bit, to where were you, or draw a picture for us. Where were you when you decided to apply to business school, and then why did you choose GW, what do you think? Nicole?

Nicole Samuel:

Sure, I'm gonna start way back from when I finished undergrad, and I was working with a private sector company. I was a project manager there and I had been there for a few years, and I decided, “oh gosh you know, I really feel like maybe I should switch into non-profit.” So I went into non-profit, I was working for a public health non-profit and as soon as I got there I'm like, “uh maybe business is actually better for me.” And it was while I was there that I decided to apply to business schools, I really didn't quite know where I wanted to go next and needed a place and a space to really figure that out, and so I applied to a few different programs. I came here to GW’s campus and just really fell in love with D.C., I really liked everyone that I met, it was a very approachable yet very refined experience. And so I was very very excited when I was accepted into the program and very happy to move to D.C.

Riddle:

That's great, that's great, so John what about you, where were you?

John Samuel:

I knew I wanted to go to business school when I was working in New York City. I had been out of college a couple years and I remember meeting all these folks in New York in the banking and finance sector who were all preparing for business school, but I was working with the City of New York at the time, and I had the opportunity to go to Africa and start up a new business there for some private equity investors. And I thought, going out to Africa would be the way for me to stand out against all those other people. And so I remember sitting in my office in Uganda when I got an email from Liesl, and when I got that email it was the moment I knew I wanted to go to GW and I remember sitting in the cubicle reading this email getting so excited about all of the research that Liesl has sent about diaspora investments. I had no idea what this was but I knew I wanted to be part of it. And I only applied to GW after that because I knew it at that moment and I'm so glad I did so thank you so much for sending that email.

Riddle:

We are fortunate to have both of you in our programs, you guys were both very instrumental I think and played significant roles in your class. you know, one of the things I find really fun about our recruiting process is that we do have a lot of very engaged faculty that really want to know who are the prospective students, how can maybe this prospective student you know, play a role in my research, or be a good TA in a class or something like that, and I feel like increasingly we have faculty that are very much involved in making those connections for us with our incoming students, and I think it's a good way to sort of welcome them to I think to the overall overall community. So you came to GW and what were some of the highlight moments for you other than the time that you spent here, who were some of the people you hung out with, what did you kind of do on a day-to-day basis, what are some of those highlight moments that really stand out for you?

John:

Yea, I can, I'll take this. I think that I had a lot of friends, got to know people over all of the different social events and it was great to make these great long lasting friendships, but the best relationship I did get was Nicole, we met in the program and we got married afterwards. But it's been amazing to watch you know, as we've grown as a family, Nicole and I have had kids but it's also great to see our classmates who've been there by our side through our wedding, through our children being born, to us moving down to North Carolina and that community has been there from the day we got here until to right now, which is amazing.

Riddle:

Yeah I thought I used to think that John was also you know, you remember, you were my research assistant and teaching assistant right, and I would tell everybody, “man, I have the best research and teaching assistant, he's always coming by and asking me, you know, what else he can do for me.” And little did I know, it took me a long time to figure out, it really had nothing to do with my research it had everything to do with the wonderful woman working at our front desk in the office of graduate programs and that was you Nicole, so thank you Nicole I owe you a lot because I was very research productive, and had great teaching assistant support while John was around.

Nicole:

That's great, I did work there, haha.

Riddle:

So what about for you Nicole, as far as a standout?

Nicole:

In addition to all of the wonderful people that we have met, because there's been a lot of them, something that I had that was just recently sharing, was for me GW stands for curiosity and exploration, and Johnny will be the first to attest that I sometimes overlook those things in my day-to-day life, and I tend to be more operational at home, particularly. But so being a student and being on campus really allowed me to explore new ideas, new people, new concepts, I was able to participate in so much. I came on campus saying I'm going to take advantage of every single moment of these two years, and I did, I went to every event, I was president of clubs, I was a TA, I worked in the Admissions Office, I did a lot, and I loved every minute of that. And so for me GW is about really testing waters and figuring out what do I really want to do, how can I get involved, how can I add back as well?

Riddle:

Tell me a little bit more, speak a bit more about student life, so you were involved in so many of our different student organizations, what were some of the organizations that you feel, looking back on it now, added really the most value to either one of your times here?

Nicole:

Well I was in the Consulting Club, I was President of the International Business Society, gosh I, I'm blanking on other...

John:

You did the, that, case thing up in boston...

Riddle:

The case competition.

Nicole:

Oh, the case competition competition, yeah that's right, and other things. So when I look back I mean I definitely am proud that I went and did all of those things. You know, hindsight's always 20/20 and it's like oh I could have planned that one thing better, or you know, I could have made this one connection. But I think that I did all that I could do while I was here.

Riddle:

What's special about a case competition, like what does that feel like?

Nicole:

Oh, Johnny.

John:

Yeah I loved it, that was probably my fave, one of my favorite, like out of class experiences and also when you win it's awesome. So I had the opportunity to compete in a few and then also come back as an alumni and be the case sponsor, but I think the opportunity to work in a small group, I love teamwork, working in diverse teams, working with folks getting kind of whiteboarding even though it's funny, I can't see but whiteboarding is one of my favorite things, I can visualize what's on the board but that just, that brain dump of just kind of you know, throwing ideas out there on the table and just dissecting them, saying where are we going, to go through this and solving that problem, I love it and that was my favorite part.

Riddle:

How much time did you all spend in the Career Center, what role did it really play for you?

Nicole:

In the beginning it's a very structured interaction with the students, in that you know, at least when we were here, someone from the Career Center came in I think every week. We had scheduled activities that we were supposed to complete, we had scheduled conversations that we were supposed to conduct, so it was very structured the first year and there was a lot of interaction. The second year I was heavily involved with the Career Center because, I did on campus recruiting, that's how I got with my current employer, and so with the relationships I built with Angela Johnson, who was the Career Counselor then and I met with her and it was through my relationship with her that she then went to bat for me with the employer and said, “you guys you know, this person's really sharp, you know, you have to interview this person.” And so it was through that relationship that I think gave me the leg up even before I met them. And her and I did you know, sample interview questions, and so I mean, we still talk to her, I mean I literally talked to her like two or three months ago, I mean we've kept in close contact with her throughout the years.

John:

But I think one thing about that also, as you were applying to jobs and when you got the offer with Gartner, you weren't sure about the opportunity for yourself and your own capabilities, but they gave you that confidence, I think, to really lean in on that, and I think it's been a great opportunity for you.

Nicole:

That's true, yep.

John:

For myself I think, I think as a you know, as an alumni looking back, I think one thing as a student you don't realize that day one you should be using the Career Center, using those resources, you sometimes think “oh it's just busy work, oh they're just having us do this,” but there's actually reason why you need to be engaging with the Career Center, and I think for myself, I didn't embrace it early enough. And so when I talk to students now I'm like, “you guys day one, you start orientation, you better be in that Career Center, and engaging with them, learning this and that, you're here to think about your career trajectory, and it starts in the Career Center.”

Riddle:

Yes. How did you balance the pressures to build a professional network, to reach out and get a new job, versus your academics? How did you find that balance, was it easy, hard, how did you manage it?

JOHN:

Yeah I think it was initially, I think it was difficult, kind of understanding the balance. I think again, it's just you're trying to prioritize, you think you're coming to school just to be in the classroom, and kind of do some of these extracurricular activities and not really thinking about the Career Center. But you know, as you move along and as you're looking for the internships, to going into second year, I think that balance you know, you start to put a lot more focus on the career side. But you know, I think for myself, it took me a little bit of time to get that balance, but towards the end I think I was on track.

Nicole:

Yeah I think I definitely focused more on the career much earlier on coming into the program I knew I wanted to work in India over the summer, between first and second year, so I was like starting in September, October, I mean I was reaching out to people, I was making contacts, I was doing a lot. I did work in India that summer. It is a balance, definitely requires a lot of time management skills and purposeful action, but you know, I was fortunate enough in that I went through the on-campus recruiting program and was offered the position, I think in November of second year, so I really had the luxury of then having my second semester not be so stressed and crunched for a job.

Riddle:

Well you also studied abroad right so you did the CAP program, the Consulting Abroad Project course, what was that like?

Nicole:

We had very different experiences...

[All laugh]

John:

Yeah mine was awesome, from a social aspect…

Nicole:

From a social aspect … [laughs]

[All laugh]

John:

...from a cultural aspect, and even from a client, I think it's really it was a good experience, you know, I had the opportunity to work in Asia, work and live in Asia, work and live in Africa, travel to Europe quite a bit, but one place on the globe that I really didn't spend any time with, South America. So I had the opportunity to go down to Peru and I loved it, I loved every bit of it. Although I was calling Nicole quite a bit on Skype, where she was out in India, but I think we both got what we were looking for out of the CAP. I think for me it was more of a cultural experience I was looking for, and I think you got your work experience.

Nicole:

I did, we worked, we had an Indian client and they expected us to be on site every day, all day long, we had a lot of work to do, but I thought it was really great. I really enjoyed it, it was fun and we definitely also had a lot of other cultural activities on the agenda. But we did work very hard.

John:

I worked in India for two years! I had to do this for two years straight! [others laughing] So I understand working in India, so yeah I needed a little break. Needed a siesta…

[All laugh]

Nicole:

Well, like people would be posting things on Facebook, or you know, Whatsapp or whatever, from Peru and there would, there was some people who was in India with me that was not as interested in working as hard, and they were very upset [laughing] that people were having lots of fun.

John:

We worked too!

Nicole:

You did, yeah.

Riddle:

Yeah, that's the great thing about the CAP program, is there's a little bit of kind of everything, and it's real, it's very real world too. I think it's very real in so many ways.

Riddle:

Well tell me a little bit about who are your favorite faculty, you got any good faculty stories that we can share?

John:

Well mine's an easy one, mine's a very easy one, Nicole is when, you know, Nicole... Nicole jokes, like, “you respond so quickly to Liesl! you don't respond to me this way!”

Nicole:

Oh no, never.

John:

But you know, that's an easy one, but you know, I think there's a couple other professors who really, faculty members that really that still stand out to me, Professor Lusardi, our macroeconomics professor where we met and fell in love, and she told us we had to name our first child John Maynard Keynes.

[All laugh]

Nicole:

But but we did not!

[All laugh]

John:

But we did not, but no, she really was someone really special, and it's always great to hear her on NPR talking about the financial literacy and the work that she's doing, and it's just so cool to hear, that's my professor. That is one of the coolest things that you know, wherever we are we can still, we still hear that GW on NPR or any of the news coming from here. That's super cool. But another person who really has really touched my heart, and just been a big part of my life at GW, and since, is our TA, from our data analytics course, Goron. And he really spent a lot of time with me because I was struggling with my vision during the program, and Goron took extra time to work with me, and really make those accommodations that I needed to be successful, and he really empathized with what I was, with the challenges I was facing, and that was just a really touching moment, and we're still dear friends today. So he came to our wedding also right?

Nicole:

He did.

Riddle

Great story, great story, a really great GW community story. What about faculty for you, Nicole?

Nicole:

Professor Shyam is my favorite. Yeah I had a strategy consulting practicum with him the second half of the last year, and I was able to see him in action as a consultant, which was really enlightening for me. I saw how he storyboarded, I saw how he thought through things, I saw him put together you know, after we had submitted our final presentation and he was like, “oh gosh you know, we need to make this much better.” [laughs] So the extra level of finesse that he had put on the work. I learned more through that than you know, I did in you know, some other ways, and so it was through him and he just really was just so easy to get along with, and to be with, and so I really appreciated him being part of our experience here.

John:

And even after we finished up at GW, we actually worked with Professor Shyam on couples counseling…

Nicole:

Not coaching, counseling.

John:

Not counseling, yeah coaching, yeah, couples coaching, coaching for leaders who are in couples, who are both working leaders, which is super cool to kind of have that experience, great thing to participate in.

Riddle:

Yeah, yeah that's neat that's really neat. Well tell us a little bit now about after all that background, where you came from, and this wonderful experience that you had at GW, and of course you found each other, what's happened since? Where are you living now, what does your work life look like, what's going on in terms of all these family events that I hear about?

John:

Yeah, you can talk about the family and I'll talk about North Carolina I think.

Nicole:

Yeah okay, so we got married a year after we graduated, and so I've been working with Gartner for the past five years, I'm still with the company, I've had a couple of promotions and I'm really gunning for my next promotion to happen soon. And it's really been just a really great ride professionally with them. Personally it's also been a crazy ride, we got married, we had kids, we have two kids, a two-year-old and an eight-month-old. And life is very full and the best quote that I've heard recently is, “just because it's challenging doesn't mean it's bad,” right. [all laugh] So our challenges are really good challenges, and yeah so life is very full, and we continue to you know, talk about both home life and professional life, and I think that it's been, and something that I don't recognize enough, just a great blessing and that we both went through this program together, we both understand this program, and the experiences that we had through here, and we can talk about our careers and what we want to do, and hear each other's thoughts about that, and it's a very natural thing to talk about. So I think it's been really nice that we have each other to do that with.

John:

Yeah I think that having that partner in your life, it's awesome because I had ups and downs in my journey after GW. Afterwards I joined an exciting fintech startup, and it was really great. But like many startups they faced challenges, and after a few years we were facing some financial challenges in the organization, and at the same time I wanted to start looking for a new job because we just had a baby who was going to daycare in D.C., which is crazy expensive. And so at the same time I had read this article about this software that was developed by a company called SAS, that was designed to help blind and visually impaired people see graphs and charts using sounds, which I thought was pretty cool. But what was super cool was the guy who designed it had the same eye condition as me, and was living in my hometown of Kerry, North Carolina, the same place I ran away from 13 years earlier. And so I tried for a couple months to get in touch with him with no luck, then finally Nicole said hey let's just look at houses and she found a house online that we liked, and we told my parents. They got so excited they never thought I was coming home to North Carolina. They jumped in the car immediately and as they were driving to go look at this house they're talking to us on the phone and my dad starts yelling at something, and we're like, “dad what are you yelling at?” He said, “there's a blind guy on the road, maybe it's the guy you're trying to get in touch with.” I was like, “oh dad please don't yell at blind people on the road, and I was like don't yell at anyone on the road!” So he gets out of the car and walks over to this guy and says, “are you Ed Summers?” And the guy says, “Yes I am.” And my dad puts the phone in his ear and says, “my son's been trying to reach you for two months,” and I just apologize and apologize, and I end up coming down to meet Ed that weekend, and that serendipitous meeting on the road led to me joining the company I work for today, which is LCI. And it's the largest employer of Americans who are blind and it's based in Durham, just six miles away from my hometown. And I ended up joining the company to start up a new technology service business with the goal of creating meaningful employment for people who are blind and low vision. So it's been amazing.

Riddle:

It's just you guys have had, I think such an interesting story, I think as individuals, and as a couple, and I think you've got an awful lot, I can see in our conversations that have evolved over the years, how much you really have leveraged your experience here to really make a difference in your industries, and in the world, and in your home life. I mean I just, you're just an incredible, admirable couple, and I just feel so blessed to know both of you, and really appreciate you guys coming in to share your story with the podcast, and to share your story, with all of our students on campus today. But before we end today, I just want you to kind of reflect back on this incredible trajectory so far and if you had to label just one thing, what is the one thing that makes you GWSB Proud?

John:

Yeah I'll take this one first, because it's actually five years ago at this same event that we're going to today at the orientation, when I asked the person standing next to me to help me find where I needed to sit, because I couldn't see, couldn't read the name place where I needed to go. And that person was Liesl. I didn't know because I couldn't see Liesl’s face, and when I told you I had trouble seeing, you didn't know I couldn't see at the time, and you immediately helped me, and you immediately told me about disability student services, you empathized, you made me feel comfortable, you didn't make me feel bad about my disability, you made me feel totally comfortable, and I think that experience allowed me to be my authentic self. And that authenticity allowed me to open up my heart and meet Nicole.

Riddle:

Wow wow, that's powerful, that means so much to me, you know, aI was so touched that you shared that with me on that day, and I was shocked that actually we didn't know that this was going on in your life. And I was really very proud of my team because our staff within graduate programs all of a sudden sort of snapped into action and you know, I'm very blessed to work with a very caring team of individuals, and I think that, I'm glad that we were able to welcome you that way. I know that I saw your fellow students in your class, and not just Nicole, though especially Nicole, really helping you and really kind of coming together in ways, and I think that in so many ways you contributed just by being you and sharing the vulnerability that you did share about everything that was going on with you, I think really transformed the lives of many people in your class, so it's had an incredible impact. Now Nicole, that's a hard one to follow, so your GWSB Proud moment?

Nicole:

I cannot top that at all, I don't know if this is quite what you're looking for, but you know, I have a group chat with some other ladies who attended GW, and just having so many wonderfully smart and cool people in my life, Johnny of course being the top of the list, but you know, there's just so many really amazing people that we met here and I feel like being exposed to them, having them be a model for me, and also me be a model for them, and us to be able to talk to each other. There was a couple of ladies who came down to actually visit us in North Carolina a couple years ago, and we sat around our living room and was talking about our responsibilities at work and talking about our pay, which a lot of women don't really talk about, and you know, for us to be able to have those conversations and push ourselves to be better, both as professionals and then also you know, make sure that we're having these hard conversations with each other, and I think that was a really proud moment for me, because it's not just about what happened on campus, it's about how being here and this experience is carrying through you know, up to now, and you know, forever.

Riddle:

Oh that is great I mean, I think that you all have created community, not just while you're here but also among our alumni community, and you can, and as such you continue to play an important role really in GWSB and you're really one of the great major reasons why we are GWSB Proud. Thank you so much for joining us on the podcast today.

John:

Thank you.

Nicole:

Thanks you for having us.

[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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