**#HFNT 1: Total Eclipse of the Start**

**Episode Transcript**

Scott: Happy Friday, North Texas! Today is Friday, March 29, and I'm Scott Brown, welcoming you to the premiere episode of Happy Friday, North Texas! the official podcast of the University of North Texas. On this podcast we’ll be covering all things UNT and bringing you the stories of the students, alumni, faculty and staff that make our Mean Green Family so unique. I can't do that without my co-host. Alisha Tell the people what we're bringing them today.

Alicia: Hello, everyone. I'm Alicia Zartman. And today we have an eclipse-isode that you will not want to miss out on. We’ll be dropping a clip from our YouTube series “The Lab,” featuring Dr. Rebekah Purvis from the Department of Physics. We also have an interview with history associate professor Zoe Ortiz talking about the ways ancient civilizations interpreted eclipses. And Scott, didn't you recently interview UNT alumna Cara Santa Maria?

Scott: That's right, I did. Cara is a science communicator with a decade of podcasting experience, so as we're kicking off our own podcast, I thought it'd be cool to see what words of wisdom she could offer us and she did not disappoint. Plus, her background in science communication also led us to some eclipse talks, so we tied back into the episode's theme.

Alicia: That's awesome. Also, can we take a moment to recognize the fact that we're closing out Women's History Month with three strong, smart women dropping knowledge on us? How's that for being a topical source of worldly UNT news?

Scott: That's right. Double themes. It's a Women's History eclipse-isode.

Alicia: That's right. But before we get into all that, let's check out the campus calendar to see what's coming up.

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Scott: So, there's always a ton of stuff going on around campus and we can't cover everything or you all would eventually stop listening. But obviously the big thing coming up is the solar eclipse on Monday, April 8. Our campus is supposed to experience 99% totality and our Frisco campus is going to be at 100%. So we're having watch parties on the main UNT campus, out at Discovery Park and of course, at the UNT at Frisco branch campus.

Alicia: It's going to be so amazing. The next solar eclipse to cross the U.S. won't be until 2044, but you only get totality in a given location like every 300 or 400 years. So it's truly a once in a lifetime experience for this to be happening right here in North Texas. We hope all our Mean Green Family can join us. So check out you antico edu slash eclipse for more information about our plans.

Scott: Speaking of the eclipse, first up on the docket, we have a clip from “The Lab.” If you're not familiar with “The Lab,” it's a series on our YouTube channel where we feature researchers from all over the university to talk about the work they're doing on all sorts of topics. In this particular clip, physics lecturer Rebekah Purvis talks about how eclipses give scientists an opportunity to study solar flares, which, fun fact, could apparently cause the end of the world as we know it. So that's neat.

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Rebekah: How can solar eclipses help avert space weather catastrophes? I teach physics and astronomy courses. My research background is in heliophysics, which is the study of the sun and its influence on objects in the solar system, including technology like satellites. The largest space weather event on record was the Carrington event. In 1859, Richard Carrington was observing sunspots when he saw a bright flash. Less than 24 hours later, telegraph wires were sparking and catching on fire. There were Aurora observed as far south as the Caribbean, and compasses were not working properly. During a solar eclipse, we can see the atmosphere of the sun in a way that you cannot see with instrumentation and telescopes. Scientists can use the data collected during a solar eclipse to validate and improve space weather forecasting models. If a Carrington-like event happened today, it could be disastrous. We could have massive damage to our power grids, which could cause blackouts that last for months. We would have to change the way we live our lives completely. Scientists today still cannot predict that a solar storm will happen before it starts. And so, in a way, we are still like Richard Carrington, watching and only knowing that an eruption is happening when we see it happen in real time. The satellite operators and the power grid managers need accurate forecasts in order to make the best decision to protect those assets. And so any data that we can collect that will improve our space weather forecasting models will keep us all safe. Thanks for joining me today in “The Lab.” Check out the playlist in the description to see more videos from “The Lab” and hit that subscribe button or there will be a space weather catastrophe.

Alicia: That's so interesting. Love how she ends it with a super casual threat of natural disaster.

Scott: Yeah, that was super chill. I really do love “The Lab” though, because it's a great way to get bite-sized chunks of cool information. Obviously, that was just the audio, so if you want to check out that video, we'll have a link to it and the rest of “The Lab” series in the show notes. While you're there, be sure to subscribe to our YouTube channel to catch the new episodes of “The Lab” as they drop.

Alicia: Yes, please check out those show notes. They will keep you up-to-date on all the things. Alright, next up, our very own Bess Whitby went out and interviewed Zoe Ortiz from the history department to talk about how ancient civilizations learned to track eclipses and how they would interpret them as omens, both good and bad. Quick programing note, this interview was recorded out on campus, so you'll hear some background noise, and at one point, the bell for McConnell Tower, so that'll be a nice little bit of nostalgia for our alumni listeners.

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Bess: So yeah, you mentioned that you were discovering solar eclipse discussions in some of your recent research. If you wanted to talk a little bit about that broadly, that would be awesome. And if you could just give some insight into what those conversations were like that you found.

Zoe: Yeah, so my research was specifically on the Zodiac in Roman art. Essentially the site that I excavate out there, there's an altar that was found that has a zodiac on it. And so doing research into why the Zodiac is on this altar, what significance it has and how did the Romans come to understand, like celestial bodies.

Bess: Let me ask really quickly, when you say the Zodiac, is it the Zodiac that we think of today with astrology, that same kind of system, same sort of schedule or like months?

Zoe: Yeah, it's almost exactly the same. We've kind of adopted it whole cloth when it comes to the names, the time periods, all that stuff, because it does relate to different constellations in the sky at very specific points of time throughout the year. But the big difference is that for the ancient Romans, Greeks, Babylonians, astrology was both myth and science. It was together. There was no kind of separation that we have today of like astronomy and astrology. And so that's like one thing that's a little bit more challenging for us to understand that those two things go hand-in-hand for quite a long period of human history. So it was a way for them to both understand how the night sky worked and be able to even predict different things happening. So the Babylonians were actually able to predict solar eclipses and this was thousands of years ago, but also it's this combination. We kind of have this separation today of science and then myth or legend or fate. We separate those things out very clearly, but back in the day, they didn’t. The Babylonians or the Romans, the Greeks, they have this kind of understanding the eclipse is coming, but they would still interpret it as an omen to be feared or, in some cases they thought it was an omen that meant good things were coming. So trying to understand how they understood it was part of my research and what they understood and how they reacted to it, how they adapted to it.

Bess: Okay, that's super interesting. So you kind of got into this like you just mentioned. I was curious about what were those kind of perspectives on eclipses. So it sounded like sometimes it was this like omen or like portent and then sometimes it sounds like it was like possibly something to get excited about or like a good sign. Is there anything that drove those two separate reactions or dictated?

Zoe: One thing to know about the Romans and the Greeks is that they were all about how omens were to be interpreted. So there were people called augurs and their job was to interpret the science. Right? And so that's why it could be good, it could be bad, it could be maybe we don't know. And so natural disasters or the direction a bird is flying, these were all things that needed to be interpreted. And so something like an eclipse, especially like a solar eclipse, was just something that needed to be interpreted. Funny enough, you can kind of see where ancient people chose to interpret it a very specific way for their own purpose. Like understood this human inclination to kind of take these supernatural events and kind of believe what people say about them. For example, Alexander the Great, right before a battle, there was an eclipse and it was against Darius the third of Persia. And it's really interesting because we know that Alexander the Great chose to look at it as a positive omen. He made a sacrifice to the sun god and he told all his trops, the gods are on our side and this is how we know. Whereas literally across the battlefield, Darius sees it and he starts freaking out, right? He immediately is afraid. His troops are afraid. And Darius ultimately loses that battle to Alexander.

Bess: So they ended up being correct in their assumptions of what it would mean.

Zoe: It's like a very, at times, self-fulfilling prophecy for sure that looking at it as a positive omen is relatively uncommon. It's more seen as a negative omen, but it's something to be interpreted. It's not a guarantee, especially after Alexander the Great was able to conquer the East for that short period of time. It really created this like cultural scientific diffusion across period, across that geographic space of the Greeks with the east. And so the Greeks started learning from the Babylonians how to understand the celestial bodies and so because of that, there's a slow understanding of what's actually occurring and that it can be predicted. And so you start seeing over a period of time into the Roman Empire, you just get much less mentions about eclipses, you get much less connection of supernatural to the gods, all that stuff. And so it's almost as if the more understanding of the scientific side of it, the less they start connecting it to the myth side of it.

Bess: Okay, that makes sense.

Zoe: But it takes a good, almost like a millennia.

Bess: And so this is after Alexander the Great's big victory that you would talk about. Is this a time where a lot of cultures are kind of joining together and melding and there's also a big exchange of ideas and knowledge?

Zoe: Yes, mostly for geographical reasons, there was a pretty strong separation of the western part of Europe and the east. And it is early on. So the Babylonians, the Mesopotamians, the Assyrians, those are all coming from the east, like from the Arabian Peninsula. And their achievements in science and astronomy, astrology were just far beyond anything else in the world at that time as far as we know. Once Alexander conquered Persia and now there's much more of that whole region was kind of engulfed into the Mediterranean cosmos, as it were. These people started traveling and the knowledge started traveling to the west. So then we start seeing this diffusion of knowledge. For example, probably the most fascinating artifact that brings us – have you ever heard of the Antikythera mechanism? I think you'd love this. Did you see the latest Indiana Jones movies?

Bess: I have not seen it.

Zoe: So they talk about this. It's called the Antikythera mechanism. They get it completely wrong, but that's fine. It's an actual mechanism that was discovered in a boat wreck in the Aegean Sea and it's hard to date, but they think it's about third century, second century B.C. and it's called the world's first computer. And it's because it's got 50-plus gears. They're all minuscule and they're super precise. And basically they think that it's a calendar that could predict different celestial bodies from Egypt. And what they pretty recently discovered is that it has one of the dials represents what's called the Saros cycles, and that's an eclipse cycle. It's a solar eclipse cycle. So this little dial, if they turn it a certain amount of times, they can predict when the next solar eclipse is going to happen. And it's this mechanism thing.

Bess: This sounds like it could be like a story just all on it’s own.

Zoe: It's easily one of the coolest artifacts in the whole world. And we have nothing else like it. We have no idea who made it. Super, super fascinating, very confusing to understand and decipher, but they've done a really good job with it. And of course, unfortunately it was underwater, so a lot of it has eroded. But if you search for it online, you can see some pretty convincing reproductions of it. But this mechanism is actually able to predict with relative accuracy solar eclipses. It's so cool.

Bess: And then in your research, what was the earliest mention that you found of eclipses being discussed? Because I'm just curious how far back in our written or archeological record, we just have people thinking about this stuff.

Zoe: So this goes a little bit beyond my own expertise but I do know that there was a clay tablet found in Mesopotamia, 1300 B.C. that talks about a solar eclipse. There's a clay tablet that they discovered and it was the Babylonians were able to predict it first and looks like pretty good accuracy, I think within three months, they could predict when a solar eclipse was coming. And actually one of the really interesting things that the Assyrians did, which was around the eighth century B.C., they were able to predict solar eclipses, they believe this is a combination of science and myths put together and science and faith put together. They believed that even though they knew what was coming, even though they knew that it had some kind of relationship with the moon and the sun that it was still a bad omen, especially for the king. And so they believed that the king was in danger during this period of time, so what they would do is they would have a substitute. They would usually pick some kind of criminal, some kind of convict who was already sentenced to death anyway and dress him and set him up to be the king like a decoy. And so then once the eclipse happened and danger passed, they would then execute that convict and put the king back in his place. And the king would be like a regular person during this and just secretly living. So you see the logic. It's like, this is what I love about the history. You see the logic, but it's so far removed from anything we would do. Like it's normal, but the logic is there.

Bess: So it sounds like there were lots of almost fear-based decisions or sometimes celebratory decisions that were made linked to the eclipse. Were there any religious or spiritual associations that we might not have touched on that were associated with eclipses outside of it just being a sign from the gods?

Zoe: So like I said, Alexander did a sacrifice to the sun god, right? So at times they think that that was part of it. But interestingly enough, the most we see commentary about eclipses is really in relationship to battles. So a lot of times it's because it could be just a selection bias where a lot of the text that we still have or has histories and the histories will mention, there is an eclipse right before this battle and it affected the outcome of the battle. It was a bad omen for this side or that side or whatever. So it's more religious in relation to warfare. They connected it for the most part. They did see it as something coming from the gods.

Bess: Okay, gotcha. When we started talking, you had mentioned kind of thinking about these parallels between how today we think about this stuff versus then. Obviously there are probably a lot of differences because now we know exactly why and how these things are happening, but do you think that there are things that you’ve observed in your research about that period that just seem really analogous to how we react and how we feel about these events?

Zoe: I think how much we're such naturally curious creatures. We're always asking why. We lean on cause and effect. The reason you're asking me for this interview, why people are curious about the eclipse and Googling it and asking questions. We are just such inherently curious creatures and we care about cause and effect. And so I think that kind of explains why even when they couldn’t predict eclipses, we're going to come because they're so curious about their night sky. They're so curious about the movement of the stars and of the planets. And they were able to figure it out, but they still needed more reason why. Why is this happening when it's happening or why? And that's where the next part comes in. That's where the religious part comes in. So it's just that connection that I think we always have, that we're just incredibly curious creatures and we really care about cause and effect. Because that's something you always see throughout the ancient world. As a researcher myself, as somebody who tries to understand the past, I know I'm not doing my job if I just say, “Well, that's weird” and just stop. You know what I mean? They had a reason. We all have reasons for why we're doing what we're doing, just because we don't understand it doesn't mean that the reason wasn't there. So that's kind of how I how I interpret it.

Bess: Okay, that's great. I love that.

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Scott: It's so crazy to think about what it must have been like to witness an eclipse with absolutely no warning or context or understanding of what was happening.

Alicia: I know! You're just going about your day, farming or whatever, and look up like, “Guys, where's the sun going? I think it's leaving us!” Totally understandable how you could take it as a sign that the gods are mad at you. Bess also wrote a story on this for our news site, so we'll have a link to that in the show notes as well. Big thanks to Bess for going out and getting that interview.

Scott: Absolutely, that was great. So for our last clip, I was so excited to get to talk to Dr. Cara Santa Maria. Cara has two degrees from UNT. She earned her bachelor's in psychology in 2004 before getting a master's in neurobiology in 2007, and she recently completed her Ph.D. in clinical psychology. Between her time at UNT and now, she has had an incredibly successful award-winning career as a science communicator, including a decade as a podcaster. She's the host of “Talk Nerdy with Cara Santa Maria” and a co-host on the long-running “Skeptic's Guide to the Universe,” so as we're getting our own show started, I wanted to get some podcasting tips, and with her science background, the conversation also naturally led to some eclipse talk.

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Scott: Cara, thank you so much for joining me today. I appreciate you taking the time out of your schedule.

Cara: Absolutely.

Scott: So we're launching this podcast for UN T, and obviously you've been doing this for a while now. You've got some big podcasting milestones coming up this year. So 10 years in, obviously podcasting is a pretty different environment today than it was 10 years ago. How did you get into podcasting? What made you want to give this a try?

Cara: Yeah, I mean, my sort of origin story with podcasting is a little bit random, so I started “Talk Nerdy” in 2014. I joined the “Skeptic’s Guide” about a year later. So I had already been podcasting for about a year when they asked me to join them. So when I first got into doing “Talk Nerdy,” it was kind of born out of some struggle, I guess you could say at the time. My main sort of source of income, my career, as it were, was television. So I got both my undergrad and my master's degree from UNT. I did psychology for my undergrad and biology with a neuroscience concentration, so it was in the biology department, for my master's. And then through a lot of random luck, I ended up working in public science communication on television. I was working on a TV show at the time, which was pretty grueling. It was a live daily show. It had a pretty intense schedule. And unfortunately, although I learned a lot on that show and I made a million friends for life and I had a wonderful time in many aspects, some aspects of the show were incredibly psychologically damaging, namely that the executive producer was just deeply, deeply sexist. It was a very, very contentious set. And because I was a co-host, it was myself and a man were the co-hosts of the show and co-producers. It was just not an egalitarian experience at all. There was a lot of gaslighting, a lot of therapy involved. So anyway, I'm on the show. It's really, really getting to me and randomly during that time, I was invited to be a guest on Joe Rogan's podcast. We were talking offline, or actually this might have happened on air in this episode, and he was like, “You should start a podcast. Like, it's actually a really good experience for those of us who have struggled with working in the TV scene and not having a lot of empowerment.” So basically Joe's like, “Hey, if you start your own podcast, you're your own producer, you choose the content, you choose what you talk about, you choose who you interview, and it can be really empowering when in these other aspects of your career you're very disempowered.” And I was like, “nobody's going to listen to a show.” But because we were on air and because it was the Joe Rogan podcast, which just to be clear, was very, very different 10 years ago, right? He said to the listeners, “Hey, would you listen? Tell her you'll listen.” And so of course I got this outpouring of incredible support across social media. And I was like, you know, I'll try. I'll see how it goes. I kind of put together my first few episodes. He was one of my earliest guests. And yeah, people listened. So I was very lucky that I started at a time and around people who could kind of support me during my beginning experience in podcasting because I had no idea what I was doing. And honestly, I don't think the show got good, I mean, I don't even know if it's good now, but I don't think it got better for years. It takes a while when your podcasting to figure out how to do it.

Scott: Interesting. So you mentioned that that first year or so was a lot of learning about the medium. What were some of those challenges you faced when getting started?

Cara: Well, one of the challenges that I didn't face, which is the opposite of the challenge that almost everybody who starts in podcasting faces, is listenership. I started with listenership because of that experience. And so my challenge was actually in some ways inverse to most. It was that I started with a ton of people listening and then there was a drop off, which is pretty typical and common. So you think about it, a big chunk of Joe Rogan's listenership listen to my first several episodes and then the ones who resonated with my content stayed around and the ones for whom I just wasn't the right fit for them dropped off. So one of my first challenges was figuring out where I was going to net out because I started strong and weakened, whereas most shows start super weak and then they have to kind of build authentically from there. So that's one thing that was kind of different about my show. But in terms of the kind of kind of classic challenges that most podcasters face, it's all the same stuff. Like what equipment do I use? I don't know anything about audio editing. I don't understand this medium at all. How do you actually launch a show on the back end? Who's the hosting provider that I'm going to use? It's technical, right? What's an RSS feed and how do I make this work? And so, reading a lot of articles, talking to a lot of people who are in the podcasting world, making big mistakes and learning from them, and then also just, you know, I was lucky enough that I had worked in television, so I think I already had some kind of interview skills under my belt. But just navigating what's a good show, what do people want to hear? And probably most importantly, that push and pull between how do I present something that is pleasing to my audience versus how do I create something that is important and authentic to me. And I think ultimately I netted out much more on the latter than the former. I'm okay with the fact that my show is somewhat specific and that a certain type of person is going to listen to my show and it’s not going to be appealing to everybody. But the truth of the matter is, I like to work smart, not hard. I've been doing this 10 years. I don't want this to be a pain point for me. I want to do what I want to do. And I'm just lucky enough that a handful of people have come along for the ride.

Scott: Yeah, that's awesome. And you mentioned still learning, what are some of the challenges you still deal with today? I imagine, just having recently earned a Ph.D., just scheduling can be probably a pretty big challenge.

Cara: Yeah. I mean, time management is horrible. I'm quite lucky in the scheduling department because since I've been doing it for 10 years, a few years in, I started working with an assistant. It was once I was making enough money, and that's not like a lot of money, but once I was making enough money to take some things off my plate, I was able to hire somebody to help with that. So I work with a wonderful woman. I've been working with her for many years now in a lot of different aspects of my media career named Noel. And she's made it so that I can't function without her. So she keeps my calendar on all of my media appearances. She interfaces with my agent, which is separate from podcasting. He doesn't do anything with podcasting, but in the TV world. She also helps me balance my time, make sure that I take care of myself. You know, obviously schedules all my interviews. She also does some of the back-end work for me now on the podcast and does a lot of interfacing with different kind of publicists and editors at the different publishing houses, because very often I'm working with authors, and so she interfaces with them on their pitches and things like that. So that's been hugely helpful. But yeah, it's mostly just balance. You know, my calendar is color coded, it looks bananas. I just finished my Ph.D., like you said, in clinical psychology, so I've got my patients, I've got my psychology work over here. I haven't done TV since pre-COVID, whenever things sort of crashed, but I've got my media stuff over there, appearances, interviews, things like that. I've got my podcasting, I've got anything personal. So they're all different color codes and she's very good at keeping all of that stuff straight, which is super helpful, I would say. In terms of one of the biggest challenges now, it's growth, I guess you could say. I think I have gotten a little bit lazy about just saying, “Well, good is good enough for me,” but I struggle with when I do talk to professionals in the field, especially hosting professionals, booking professionals, ad executives, and I'm like, “Well, what's your advice?” You know, because everybody knows, or maybe everybody doesn't know, but most people know that if you want to grow an audience, you need to go where the podcast listeners are. So if I want more listeners of my show, I need to be a guest on other shows, right? It doesn't make sense to be a guest on a television show and talk about my podcast because there's no guarantee the people who watch that TV show even listen to podcasts. But if I go on other podcasters’ shows, then it's as simple as, you know, subscribe or download. So that's really important. But the number one piece of advice I usually get is, you just need more famous people on your show. And I'm like, “That's not, ‘Talking Nerdy’ is not like that.” Like the whole point of “Talk Nerdy” is that I interview intelligent people about fascinating topics. It started in the hard sciences and I still would say at least 70% of my guests are hard scientists or hard science writers, but it's broadened into more social justice issues as I've continued on my journey in psychology. But, you know, it's not about celebrities. That's not what my show is, so that's sometimes frustrating. And then I'd say the last thing, sorry, I'm just rambling, is that ad sales have just been abysmal for the past few years. And you've probably noticed this across podcasts. You know, even the really, really, really big shows, they just have a hard time selling enough ad space. Used to be I'd have to turn advertisers down. You know, I only wanted to do, let's say, two mid roles per episode because I don't want to annoy the listeners, but that's how you fund your podcast. There's different avenues, but most people fund it by selling ad space and by maybe doing something like Patreon, like a subscriber model. I heavily rely on Patreon because I'm lucky if I sell one ad every three weeks now, and it's just a different landscape than it used to be. So monetizing is a little bit more difficult now than it used to be.

Scott: So you mentioned starting with a larger listenership and that kind of winnowing down a little bit and then starting to make enough money where you can hire help, which is huge. At what point do you think it kind of hit you that this could be more than just a side project, this could be something that really has some legs?

Cara: It's funny because I still think of it as a side project, but I think it's partially because I am in a very privileged position. Mostly due to my work, I live in Los Angeles. So even though my podcasts are lucrative compared to, I would say like the national, well, they're definitely lucrative compared to the typical podcast. But even compared to median income, I do well financially podcasting, which is, I know, very rare and a very privileged position. But living in Los Angeles, it's still not enough. I couldn't support myself wholly on podcasting. And so, because of that, I always have thought of it as like a secondary or a side gig. But you know what's interesting is that about a year and a half ago when I moved from Los Angeles to Florida to complete the internship portion of my Ph.D., long story short, anybody who gets a doctorate in clinical psychology, you know, doing psychotherapy like seeing patients, you have to do what's called like an APA-accredited yearlong internship. It's your final year of your Ph.D. or your Psy.D., and it's a 2000-hour internship where you're usually finishing your dissertation at the same time, but you're also working basically full time as an unlicensed, not-quite-psychologist, psychologist. And so and it's a match program, just like medical residency. So oftentimes people move for it. So I moved to Florida and did my internship in a clinic, like a gerontology, like an older adult care clinic in South Florida. And it paid nothing. I mean, it technically paid me money, but I don't even think I was making minimum wage. Like, it's crazy how little they're able to get away with paying interns. And so I couldn't do anything else. I couldn't take a TV job. I didn't have time. I was working full time. So I continued podcasting, you know, I've never had a break in my podcasting. I've continued through all of this. And that's when it became really obvious to me that it is more than a side gig, because for the last year and a half, it's actually been my main source of income. It has not been my main time suck, definitely the clinical work, you know, like I said, it was full time. It's 40 hours a week. Podcasting, I'd say I spend less than 10 hours a week between two podcasts, sometimes three. But that's just because I've been doing it for so long. And again, “work smart, not hard” has always been my mantra. I couldn't balance it if I didn't have it super streamlined. But yeah, that's when I sort of realized, I'm kind of supporting myself right now on this podcasting thing. If I didn't have this, I would really be chipping away or I would have needed a lot of savings or taken out really big loans or something like that because I just wouldn't have been able to afford to support myself on a on an intern salary.

Scott: You talked about the time break down and being able to streamline things. And I know you mentioned color coding the calendar and having help with coordinating bookings and all that. Are there any other time management tricks or tips that that you've found that have worked particularly well for you?

Cara: Yeah, I mean, one of them is, again, just a point of privilege. I pay an editor now. Back in the day I edited own show. For years I edited my own show, which is dumb because A, I'm not good at it, and B, takes a ton of time. And it's sort of like that thing you learn as you become an adult. Like, I own my own home now. And, you know, I could fix the toilet myself, but I might do it wrong and it might break again. And it'll take three times longer, maybe ten times longer. Or I could just hire a professional who has all the right tools, who does this for a living and who I know is going to do it correctly. And that's sort of how I feel about podcast editing. So once I was able to, first I got an assistant because I was losing it and I really just needed help with that, and then once I was able to afford to, back in the day with Patreon, you used to set these different goals and things like that. My next big goal was to hire an editor and so that's been a huge part of time management. Otherwise, I would say, you know, think about the outcome, think about what the finished product, what you want it to look like and sound like. For me, I wanted it to feel really natural. So I didn't want an overly produced show and I wanted an interview show. And part of the reason that those were my goals is because I knew I would not have the time to dedicate to a lot of pre-production. I knew that I needed to be able to just walk right into an episode and it be really flowing and be really natural. I also wanted to lean into my talents and move away from things that were Sisyphean for me. I know that a skill that I've been honing over the years is my interview skills. So that's what I wanted to lean into. So, you know, thinking about what makes me unique, what is my point of view, what are the things that come a little bit easier for me if I lean into and then I sort of move away from the things that are just going to be burdensome and feel like a ton of work without a lot of benefit. That has really helped me over the years to come up with a show that makes sense for me and it's helpful for time management. Hugely.

Scott: Yeah. Any other general advice for someone who's interested in starting a podcast? Obviously, it's a very crowded market now.

Cara: It is. You know, I think one thing that we didn't touch on and this is kind of specific, so I'm sort of doing that thing that people do where they're like, “I'm going to answer the question I want to answer,” but one of the biggest hurdles for me in this world, especially early on when I had a ton of advertisers, I had a lot of eyes on me. I had people trying to buy my show and there was a lot of pressure to do a video cast. And even today, that's very common with podcasting. You know, like think about the Rogen model, there's cameras on, there's like a YouTube presence. But I think one thing that living in a deeply patriarchal society, we, not we, I don't forget it, but oftentimes the men at the helm, especially in these different advertising firms and these different production companies don't realize is how deeply sexist and how very cruel a lot of the comments can be online and how psychologically trying, just how much emotional labor it takes for a lot of women to learn how to navigate that landscape, to learn how to prioritize their mental health, and to just exist in a world where we are concerned, not only about being judged and where the expectations are on us, you know, we have to be a thousand times stronger, faster, smarter, prettier, more put together firmer than most men just to be seen as equal. And so one thing early on that I made a decision about and I've been very firm on, is my podcasts are and will always be audio-only. I have had enough experience working in television and guesting on other people's shows and being on YouTube that I know that the minute that the video camera is turned on, a huge portion of the audience is no longer listening to what I'm saying. They're now critiquing how I'm saying it. They're looking at my body language. They're looking at how I'm dressed. Did she gain weight? Did she lose weight? Why isn't she wearing more makeup? She's not wearing enough makeup. But for me, you know, having an audio-only podcast means that people are just focused on what I'm saying. And I think that's what's so important about a show like mine. It's a very content-heavy show. It's about highlighting brilliant people who have important points of view, who have done interesting things, who are sort of moving the conversation forward when it comes to science, technology, social justice, sociology, psychology, all of those different fields. And so, yeah, I don't want it to be about what I'm wearing. I don't want it to be about my weight or about how I did my makeup. I don't want to be dealing with like sexualized or sexual violence or any sort of comments in that arena. I just want it to be about the content. So I know that's not so much like general advice for podcasters, but maybe for some young women who are struggling with that decision. There's no right way to do this. The right way is your way and listen to yourself. I think that's super important.

Scott: I think that is really good advice. I don't want people to have to worry about being camera-ready. I think that's going to keep people, it's going to hinder us as well from being able to get people to join the show.

Cara: Yeah. It's totally a barrier. It's totally a barrier to entry. And for me as well, like during COVID, it's funny, I said I hadn't done TV since COVID, but I did do a PBS show. But it was like a really short news hit that I did from my home. And every day I had to sit in front of the makeup mirror and get completely camera-ready for a 20-minute recording that turned into like a three-minute show. And I was like, I hate this. Like right now, you know, it's Monday. I'm not back at work yet because I'm starting my post-doc within the next week or two, I'm literally in my pajamas. I'm still unpacking my house and it doesn't matter. I've got my coffee in my hand. My hair's a mess, but none of that has anything to do with the conversation we're having. And I love that I can run from one task to another. I can sometimes schedule a podcast in the middle of my therapy workday, because I do a lot of therapy work from home, like telehealth work because I work with patients who are quite ill. I work in a cancer center. And so, you know, I like being able to see patients in the comfort and safety of their own homes. But if I have a two hour break in between patients, I can literally record a podcast in there. I wouldn't be able to do that if it was a whole video production.

Scott: Yeah. I'm curious, with COVID, did you find it any easier to book guests once, you know, the whole world was having to use Teams and Zoom and use telehealth and everybody was a little more comfortable with that. Did you notice any kind of change in terms of availability or being able to book guests or anything like that?

Cara: Yeah, 100%. Like, if you look at my show in the first several years, I was almost exclusively doing in-person interviews. So I was either only interviewing people in L.A. or if I was traveling, I would try and make sure that I squeezed in a bunch of interviews during the travel. I’d book things or, you know, authors would be on book tours and when they were coming through L.A., they would be, you know, overscheduled, and I'd be squeezing an hour of their time. Also, just in terms of real estate, I had to dedicate office space to a podcasting studio. I was lucky enough to have a flex space and I turned it into a podcast studio. When COVID hit and I wasn't seeing people in-person anymore, and I was just doing it remotely, a whole year went by before I was like, “I could just add a microphone in my office.” And now I don't have to have an entire extra room. So I was able to put my rowing machine in here and use it for a different purpose, which was amazing. So just literally in terms of space and in terms of the amount of prep, you don't have to drive places anymore like you log on. And it's the same for my patients. I mean, I think there's a lot of parallels there. Again, I work with people who are sick and very often dying because I do a lot of end-of-life work as well, and there is no reason for somebody to have to get in a car and drive to the hospital and risk infection if they don't have a medical appointment. Otherwise, if they're not there for an infusion, if they're not there to see their oncologist, I don't want them coming just to do therapy with me. It's a risk that I think is unnecessary. And I also think that there's something really beautiful about the therapeutic relationship when somebody feels safe in their own home. And so I'm different than a lot of therapists, but I'm like, you know, “let's do it from bed.” I don't care. You're lying there. You've got your cup of tea or you're in your favorite armchair or you're in your pajamas, you are in your element and you're as authentic as possible. I think that's when we can do some of the best work. And yeah, I think when it comes to therapy, but also when it comes to interviewing somebody about their work, safety is not just a really important mechanism, but it's fundamental to the entire experience. You're going to get more authenticity, the safer somebody feels. And I think people feel safe in their own homes. Hopefully. And if they don't, that's a whole other conversation, right?

Scott: Yeah, totally. Obviously, I'm familiar with your shows and kind of how to follow you, but if any of our listeners want to learn more about you or anything, is there anything you'd like to promote or point them towards?

Cara: Yeah, sure. So basically my flagship show, the show that is my show is called “Talk Nerdy with Cara Santa Maria.” So you can go to my website, talknerdy.com or carasantamaria.com. They go to the same place or obviously you can just look up “Talk Nerdy” on any podcast app that you would use. Since 2015, I have been one of five co-hosts of “The Skeptic’s Guide to the Universe” podcast, which is a really large, very longstanding science and skepticism podcast. So again, just search for the “Skeptic’s Guide to the Universe.” We wrote a book a few years ago called “The Skeptics Guide to the Universe.” So an eponymous book. And if you're ever, you know, shopping for books at a bookstore or something like that, I would definitely recommend picking up a copy of that because it's this really great entry, I guess you could say, into scientific skepticism, critical thinking, you know, decision making, neuropsychological humility. So if that's a world you want to get into, this is a great introduction to it. And I also recently co-edited a book with another psychologist, Stephen Hupp, called “Pseudoscience Science in Therapy.” So if you're interested in learning about how skepticism can be applied to psychology and psychotherapy, that's a really great book of essays that sort of spans different diagnoses within psychology and all of the bad pseudoscience and woo, that throughout the years has been tried to be applied to those different diagnoses and why it's bunk and what we can do instead. Also, “The Skeptic’s Guide to the Universe,” the podcast that I mentioned, the five of us also often will do touring events. So we'll do these live stage shows and we are actually going to be in Dallas, so close to my hometown, I grew up in Plano and my mother lives in Dallas. We're going to be sort of in the DFW area, I should say, for the solar eclipse this April. And we decided, “hey, we're all going to go down there to see the eclipse together and that's going to be a more personal kind of like family thing, but let's do some live events while we're there.” So we have an extravaganza on April 6, 2024, at the Texas Theater in Dallas, and our extravaganza, sort of like a live variety show, it's really, really fun. It's a big stage show. It's very interactive. So that's going to be on April 6. And then April 7 is the private show plus. But I think we might have already sold out of that. And that's where we do a live recording of the show. It's very intimate. Usually there's a cap on ticket sales and we do like Q&A and some good VIP stuff with the guests. So I think that one's already sold out, but the extravaganza still has tickets available on April 6. So if you guys want to come see us as part of the eclipse-a-palooza, which will be going on that weekend, please do, because it'd be really great to meet some fellow UNT alums and it's always just kind of weird and fun when I get to go back home.

Scott: Nice. Do they go to the website for tickets?

Cara: You can. Yeah. You can go to our website theskepticsguide.org. You can also just like Google it and you'll find the ticket sales that way. And yeah, while we're there, I'm going to make sure that I hit up Rudy's because I miss the barbecue. I'm going to make sure I hit up Babe’s because I miss the fried chicken and of course, Shipley's because, best donuts in the world and I dream about them.

Scott: That's awesome. You mentioned for the actual eclipse, you said that's just going to be like friends and family?

Cara: We think so. So far, we're still trying to figure it out because we don't have a location yet and we're not sure if we want to do a lot of the back end work to make it a special event. If it does become one, we'll announce it on the show, but as of right now, the plan is that, yeah, with friends and family we're going to be because you know, I don't know if you've ever seen a total solar eclipse, I was lucky enough to present on the one that occurred in, well it occurred across the country, but we were in Oregon for it several years ago. National Geographic hired me, along with an astronaut, actually, to kind of host this big eclipse livestream and it was incredible. It was stunning. But during totality, you know, during those fleeting minutes when you are actually experiencing it, you don't want to be “on,” don't want to be performing, you don't want people to be looking to you. It's a really kind of awe-inspiring, deeply, psychologically, emotional experience. And so we've been discussing whether or not we are interested in keeping that sort of personal or broadening it up to and even I think if we did end up having the bandwidth to put on an event during the actual totality, we would probably want to not be expected to communicate anything and just be able to feel, just enjoy it.

Scott: Awesome. Well, Cara, thank you so much again for taking the time. I can't tell you how much I appreciate it.

Cara: Yeah, of course. Thanks so much!

[TRANSITION SOUND EFFECT]

Alicia: Wow, that was so interesting. I love how her story is all about empowerment and just kind of taking control of her career.

Scott: Yeah, she was great. And I've been a big fan of her shows for a few years now, so it was really exciting to get the chance to talk to her and pick her brain a little bit. We also got to feature her in the cover story for the Spring North Texan, so we'll link to that story in the show notes as well, and alumni listeners, keep an eye out for that print issue in your mailbox.

Alicia: Alright, it is almost time to wrap up our first episode, but before we do, we've got one last segment. We're going to end every episode with a Q&A we prerecorded so that we could get to know each other a little bit better, as well as to help the listeners get to know us. But we also want it to be an opportunity for us to get to know the listeners. So here's how this is going to work. One of us will ask a question, we'll both answer it, and then we want you all to email your answers to podcast@unt.edu so we can get to know you and share some of your stories.

Scott: When did you attend and and what was your major?

Alicia: I attended UNT in 2018. A beautiful time in the world, I would say, a great time to graduate. I love graduating on an even number and starting in 2018 I graduated in 2022. So very recent, very recent grad. Yeah, unfortunately COVID affected the middle two years, so that was a big adjustment in my life, especially being the only child and being sent off like that and having to come back and reassess. So yeah, other than that, other than COVID, I loved my college experience. It was great. And I majored in media arts and minored in journalism. Not your typical media arts girl. I didn't do the typical film process. You know, that's typically the film and TV field, and I was like, yes, but I saw a little tab on the website that said “social media strategist.” And I said, “yes.” Once I became a senior and got all my basics done, I finally was like, “You know what I need? I need that journalism minor.” So that's where the social media came into play with the journalism.

Scott: Did media arts have journalism classes, or was your minor kind of through Mayborn classes?

Alicia: The School of Journalism had social media classes in there. And I was like, “that's what I want.” And they had it. And I was like, “Okay, I'll I'll make that. I'll take all those classes.” I'll get that minor and not realizing that, it's also a part of the same department area of Media Arts and all that. Yeah, so it's all just kind of like an amalgamation of all the things that I wanted to do in those two.

Scott: You started in ’18, so did you do your full four years at UNT? You started as a freshman?

Alicia: Yep, I pushed through four years. I was like “no more, no less.” I was like, we're going to stay on track as much as possible. It was a good time. I loved UNT. I have nothing bad to say. And it was nice to have some family here while I was in school.

Scott: What family?

Alicia: I had a cousin who was two years older than me who attended UNT and she was a sorority girl, so she kind of got me acclimated to some people. And it was a fun time. What about you?

Scott: Very similar, just a little bit before. So actually, I started out at community college. I went to, back then it was called Quad C, Collin County Community College, and now it’s just Collin College. But I started there over in Frisco and then I transferred to UNT in 2008, and then I graduated in December of 2010. So not quite the tight four-year track that you did. Mine was like four and a half or five years. I went over a little bit, but similar track. When I transferred I had no idea what I wanted to do, but I knew I liked writing and I was really into sports. So I was like, “Well, maybe I could do like sports journalism.” And so I enrolled as a print journalism major and one of my first professors was like, “Don't do print, switch to electronic news.” Back then it was called Electronic News. It was really good. And then I minored in psychology and ended up adding on a minor of German because I did German for my foreign language and ended up making some good friends in my German classes. And if you take like two more classes, it can be another minor. And I was like, “Yeah, sure.”

Alicia: My goodness me, with the extra mile.

Scott: Tacked that on and it was fun and a good experience.

Alicia: That's a good conversation starter. “I have a minor in German.” So you're major was electronic media, where was that housed?

Scott: It was officially through Mayborn. Yeah, but I think if I started a semester earlier, I would have been all through RTVF, but I think I was part of the first crop of May born graduates after the journalism school was officially named.

Alicia: So they don't even make your degree anymore?

Scott: Nope, you can't major in electronic news anymore. My degree is a collector's item now.

Alicia: Wow. That's awesome. Well, there you have it. You basically know everything about us, but don't forget to email podcast@unt.edu and tell us when you went to UNT, what you studied and something you love about UNT and why. We want to get to know you and maybe, just maybe, share some of your stories on a future episode.

Scott: Alright. Well, that's all we have for you all today. But we want to thank you for listening and encourage you to follow the show and give us a rating.

Alicia: Five stars only, please.

Scott: Yeah, I'm pretty sure five stars is the only option. If you don't choose five stars, it doesn't count. We hope you all enjoy the eclipse. Make sure to use the proper eyewear to stay safe out there. And until we talk to you again, we hope you have a Happy Friday, North Texas!

Alicia: And Go Mean Green!

Scott: Happy Friday, North Texas! is a production of the University of North Texas. Today's show was produced and edited by Scott Brown with original reporting by Scott Brown and Bess Whitby. For more information, visit unt.edu/podcast.

[BLOOPERS]

Alicia: And Scott, didn't you recently interview UNT alumna Cara Santa Maria? And Scott, didn't you recently interview UNT alumna Cara Santa Maria? Is it Cara?

Scott: You did it again.

Alicia: Is it Cara?

Scott: Yeah.

Alicia: I should’ve asked before I started. Cara. Cara Santa Maria. I did it again! Cara, Cara, Cara. Like care, but it is. See what the heck? Yeah. Okay. Cara.

[TRANSITION SOUND EFFECT]

Scott: But I really do love “The Lab” because it's a great way to get by size… by size?

Alicia: By size.

Scott: By size, yes.

[TRANSITION SOUND EFFECT]

Scott: Let me get a drink of water.

Alicia: Hydrate, or dydrate.

[LAUGHING]

Scott: Be careful. Gonna spew this water out.

Alicia: I did it to myself, though, so…