**HFNT #5: See Ya Later, Graduater!**

**Episode Transcript**

[INTRO MUSIC]

Scott: Happy Friday, North Texas! I'm Scott.

Alicia: And I'm Alicia. And today is Friday, May 24th.

Scott: And this is the first episode after commencement, which means it's our great grads episode.

Alicia: That's right. Every semester, thousands of UNT students earn their degrees and become Mean Green alumni. And for the last several years, our team has been sharing the stories of especially inspiring graduates in our great grads series.

Scott: Yeah, it's always one of our favorite projects. There's guaranteed to be a few stories that'll bring a tear to your eyes. And now that we've got the podcast up and running, we want to shout out a few of our great grads on here. Alicia You want to give the people a preview of the grads they're going to hear from today?

Alicia: Absolutely. We've got a hospitality management student who's graduating a year early and already has an incredible job opportunity lined up. We'll hear from a Marine Corps veteran who just earned his second bachelor's degree and is coming back for an M.B.A. And last but not least, we'll have the story of an Iranian refugee who came to America at 17 to escape religious persecution and just earned her Ph.D.

Scott: I can't wait to get to those stories. But you know what? We need to do first, Alicia?

Alicia: I know exactly what we need to do first. We got to catch up.

Scott: That's right.

[TRANSITION MUSIC]

Alicia: Scotty.

Scott: Alicia.

Alicia: We're just two weeks removed from commencement, which means it's officially summer in North Texas.

Scott: That's right. You got any summer vacation plans?

Alicia: Yep. I'm going to go down to the Woodlands, spend some time with my boyfriend and his family for the 4th of July, and then I'll just take some time off to spend with the parentals this summer. Because you always need a little bit of family time, you know? So I'm definitely looking forward to that. What about you?

Scott: Yeah. My wife and I are going to Alaska this summer. We're doing a seven-day cruise and then going to Denali National Park for a couple of days. So we're super excited for that trip. We've been planning this one for a while now, and it'll be nice to escape the Texas summer heat for a couple of weeks.

Alicia: Definitely. Scootle McDootle, that is so cool. I cannot wait to hear all about that. Hey, speaking of travel and vacation and hospitality…

Scott: Beautiful segway.

Alicia: I know, right? Our first great grad is graduating a year early with a bachelor's in hospitality management. Rachel Richards has always known she wanted a career in the hospitality industry. But her journey to UNT actually started with a recommendation from a family friend.

[TRANSITION MUSIC]

Rachel: One of the family friends that was there that we were mingling with had mentioned UNT to my mother and I, and we thought, “Well, okay, we'll look into it.” You know, no harm, no foul of doing the research and looking. And so we looked into UNT and we had seen a lot of reviews. And even our, my neighbor was a UNT alum. It felt like there were so many people I didn't even know were UNT alums. And they only had good things to say about it, that they were, they reflected on their experiences and wish they could go back and to see so many grown adults who are so past that college point and they've like started a family, they got kids and they still speak so highly of it. I'm like, “okay, that has to speak for something.” So, we eventually realized that this hospitality program was kind of a secret gem that a lot of people, especially within hospitality, appreciated the program. UNT was closer to my home, only being an hour, far enough away that I was independent, but close enough that I could see my family. And it just felt right. UNT was so diverse, I could see myself being there. There was no effort in how I saw my college experience going. It just felt so seamless. And so, from that to meeting the dean, and you know, how many students know their dean's name, right? And so they totally and I formed a great relationship over the last three years and a lot of faculty as well. And so it just kind of all was big check, check, check, check. And I just haven't really looked back. But it's great.

Jill: And of course, we're so glad that you came. I also know that you've done a lot of internships while you've been getting your degree here. And I was wondering, did were there any like UNT Resources that helped with that, or does it have more to do with connections that you've made throughout your years?

Rachel: So it's a mixture of both. So one of the first things that definitely got me to the point that I was, was the Leadership Academy. So, our Dean, Dean Hawley, as well as one of our professors, Dr. Christy Crutsinger, came together because they've been working within CMHT for quite a while. Both of them had started as faculty and Dean Hawley became our dean and they wanted to create an organization that was specific to the College of Merchandising, Hospitality and Tourism to help develop students, because especially with hospitality, experience is so heavily valued above necessarily education because it's such an experience-based industry. So what they wanted to do is, okay, if our students are in their prime period of development, let's develop their leadership skills at the same time so that they kind of go in tandem. And so my mom was like, You should join that, you should do it. And I was like, okay, I'll do it, I'll do it. And so I joined and my goodness, was that most amazing thing. Dr. Crutsinger I cannot speak more highly of that woman. She is just a superstar. She is so encouraging but so good at constructively criticizing you to make sure that you grow, but you're not offended by it. She puts on amazing events. She asks, You know what? This is a thing that I was thinking of. I think you were the person to do it. And just that such confident, unwavering faith to have, especially as a student just getting started. You're just like, I don't know, am I capable of this? Can I do this? And she was so good about being like, You are 100% ready for this. And so really, when I joined Leadership Academy, that gave me such a good wide of like resources to use of other students, other faculty, we were given a mentor through the program, which was amazing. So I've never had a mentor. So that was great. As well as the image to put on a career fair every semester. So my Four Seasons food and beverage, summer internship was actually through that switch to career fair, and it was required not only by the Leadership Academy, but thankfully other professors typically required it as well, especially a freshman that they have to go to this and so but I was able to get that internship solely because of that so definitely a big help there. As for Arizona, that was actually all of my prep had been done through U.A., so I had gone to multiple resume workshops. I had gone to interview workshops that were hosted either by CMG or by the Leadership Academy or even through some of my honors classes. Honors classes were really, really big about making sure you had a good resume and that you knew how to dress and having the resources is like, okay, if you don't have a professional clothing, we offer this, this is what you can go and do. And I think that that's such a big difference, especially if you don't have the ability to afford it. That's really, really important, especially because people are more confident when they're wearing something, they feel good in. And so I always like that resource as well. And so through that I was then able to talk to a friend of my dad's and because of the preparation I'd had from the interview workshops and all those sort of things, I was able to communicate clearly to him what I was looking for, what I feel I'm prepared for, and what I'm trying to get. This is how I'm trying to develop, this is what I'm trying to find. So he was the one that got me in contact with Arizona, the Arizona Biltmore, and that's kind of how that happened. Then I live by myself for the first time, never done that. I was in a state I've never been in before and it was so exciting and I was just amazed that I thrived and Dr. Crutsinger Singer would check up on me. And it was just it was so amazing. And again, everything that you mentioned was the reason I was able to do that entirely.

Jill: That's a great I'm looking I skipped over the part about if you had like a professor who had the greatest impact. It sounds like you've had many. If you were choosing just one, would you? Would you or a few?

Rachel: I will limit it to a few. So, Dr. Katz, Singer is my number one. She is the reason why I've grown so much. She has personally watched me develop over all these years and she sobs every time she remembers that I am leaving. And it's just I'm so, so touched. I adore that woman. She's delightful. She's such a good teacher. I mean, teachers that truly interact with their students and make their lectures so much more interactive and conversational, I'm automatically they're like, I love school. So maybe there's that. But it's not just a lecture. It's like a conversation. And I feel so much more mentally stimulated in classes that are done like that. My second is Professor Todd Uglow. He does the exact same thing. I had to take an elective credit and I purposely chose a class that he was teaching because I knew that I would enjoy, no matter the subject matter. I just love professors that put like a little bit of comedy into it. Like we're real people, we don't need to be spoken at, we need to be spoken to, and so he has always done a really good job doing that. He taught our human resources class, our hospitality law class, our entertainment classes, because we had the new events majors. So we have a lot of people who have switched over to that. And so he has just been amazing and he was always so willing to be like, Hey, if you need help, let me know. I know this person, I'd be more than happy to speak to them for you. It was so quick to be so supportive and be like, I'm your number one fan. I'm going to see you through this. So I always loved him for that and he was just so easy to talk to. And then my last professor that I absolutely adore is probably Chef Duryea. So Chef Jodi Duryea, most people, most students kind of feel sort of 5050 about her because she just has a very particular style in the way that she approach approaches her classes because she obviously is in the kitchen. So it's not a typical classroom. And to me, she is the sort of person where she can really help you develop grit. And not a lot of people in my generation, especially with talking about emotional intelligence and how someone should be spoken to, will necessarily understand that grit is still necessary. And so Chef Duryea was so good about giving me that tough skin and saying, You are capable of this, you are capable of being strong, you are not just going to fall away. And so I love that she was so good at pushing me when I needed it. And even if it meant she raised her voice a little bit because it's loud in a kitchen, that was fine because I knew I could push back. I knew I had that tenacity to be able to do that. And so sometimes a lot of people think that they need it's okay, it's okay. But I do think having that balance and having someone who knows when to push should be like no cut the crap, I need you to do this. And that can be really good, especially in hospitality. There's a lot of moments where you have to do that. So if you build it young, there you go.

Jill: Perfect. Have you faced something difficult that you want to talk about that you overcome?

Rachel: I would say so. I was really grateful that I was given the opportunity in high school to do some college classes. So it meant that when I came to you in tea, I pretty much had maybe three core credit classes to do, and then I was thrown straight into my major specific classes. So by my second year since I'm graduating a year early, a lot of the hard classes were kind of shoved into my second year as a second year student, but I was taking like junior level classes at the time. So it was really hard because those middle like level classes are the ones that demand the most in terms of time and time outside of class, in terms of like homework projects, assignments, stuff like that. It started to feel like I had 20 different plates that I was trying to balance. And no matter how hard I tried to keep all of them up, some are going to fall, and then you just feel so upset because you have all these things you want to give 100% of yourself to, but you simply the math just doesn't add up. And so you end up just sort of dissatisfied with everything because nothing was done the way you originally would want it to be because you just didn't have the energy to do it. And during that time I lost two grandparents and my family dog. I had to be able to go home because I've been so busy between work and school. So I hadn't seen my dog for like two months. And then my mom calls and says, Yeah, we're probably going to have to put them down on Saturday. That was really hard of just like dealing with grief, dealing with stress, dealing with guilt. It's just it all starts to stack up. And thankfully, especially to faculty and students in general, there's so they've made it so good at open communication. There is some schools that I feel like a they're just so huge. You're never going to know your professors and I have never been attracted to that. And that's another reason why I wanted to go to UNT you and felt like a good size, like had enough size where like everyone to know everyone. But I had classes where I actually formed relationships with all my professors. And so it was so it felt like more than often that not that I could email and say, Hey, I do not expect to be given more time on this assignment. I simply wanted to explain to you what

This is just my circumstances. I accept the penalties, but I just want to let you know, and probably nine times out of ten, the professor would give me an extension anyway, not because they had to, not because they asked for it. I specifically said that I understood it. The consequences would be and yet they would do it anyway because they understood that like it's hard, it's rough college and the classes can be rough. And I just I really don't think I would have gone through if I didn't have such understanding professors that were willing to be so kind to me. And I had people that cared. And thankfully they saw that I worked hard, that I was a good student, or good employee. And so, you know, it's just that was rough.

Jill: Is there one thing that you're going to take away from UNT? Do you think it's changed you in some way?

Rachel: That's so hard. I mean, there is not a single second, not a single doubt in my mind that I ever chose wrong. Like to the point where my best friend was going to Texas A&M for education. And I said, you should go to UNT. And she did. And she came here. Now she's doing business management in the college business and she likes it so much more. She loves how everyone can be themselves, because sometimes in other towns or other universities, there can be a lot of similarity in dress, in behavior, in activities. And sometimes it can feel hard to find that sense of identity. And I feel UNT even down to the orientation, all their labels have their pronouns on them and something as small as that. It's not forcing on anyone. It is simply just a piece of information that is nicely and delicately put there for the people that would like to know that information. And I felt that she would benefit and kind of spread her wings a little bit from being in an environment that allowed her to be uniquely her because everyone is so different and we have such a good, diverse student population. And so I love the fact that I get to meet so many different people. UNT has made me love things about myself that I should have given more attention to. That being me is okay and it is worth being and I don't need to change myself to fit in with people. I can change my style. I don't have to fit into one particular style and it's just helped me realize my passion. So UNT has been like the perfect mold for me, and if I'm going sad, I have to miss out on a year. Although my parents are happy about it, I am kind of upset about it. So I just. You want to help me to develop into such a good person. Because looking back, 18 year old Rachel was like a baby, a child. And so just to see that I have so much more calm, kind of cool, collected confidence in myself that I'm more sure than I even was then about what I want to do and that I have the relationships that I do. And I've met so many amazing people. It's just, UNT has warmed my heart and I it's just made me more passionate for people. And that's not just because of the hospitality, but that's just because of the people that you went to. And although I do want to leave Texas, it's going to be very bittersweet now because I love the people here and I couldn't have had that without you.

[TRANSITION MUSIC]

Scott: Man, we need to put her in a commercial. I love her. And how much the resources and support she got from you and you helped her.

Alicia: I know our resources pretty much rock now, Rachel, starting her career at the Four Seasons, if we ever take this podcast show on the road, we're going to need to give her a call for.

Scott: For real big thanks to our very own joking for bringing us that interview. And if you want to read more about Rachel's UNT experience, check the show notes for a link to Jill story for a next great grad. We want to give a quick content warning because the story does involve domestic violence. So if that might be triggering for you, you may want to skip ahead about 15 minutes.

Scott: Mario Pena grew up in extreme poverty with a father in prison and a mother who suffered from drug addiction. After graduating from high school, he enlisted in the Marine Corps and served from 2010 to 2019. He earned a bachelor's in economics from UNT last year before following that up with a second bachelor's in history this year. And he doesn't plan on stopping there.

[TRANSITION MUSIC]

Lisa: You've mentioned to, you know, you've got this sense of importance of diversity of people and cultures and Trump. Tell me about that. Tell me about who who you are and what drives you.

Mario: You know, as a child, like everybody supposed to have like a happy childhood, or at least that's what we all hope for. And I don't really get that. I mean, at an early age, I remember one day my my father was coming home. He gave me and my sister Candy, and we just thought it was going to be a no, not the normal day. And he was drunk, I guess, and he found out that my mom was cheating on him. So crime of passion, you know, he wanted to take out the whole family, but he end up getting arrested and spent like ten years in prison.

Lisa: Oh wow.

Mario: So I never really got to know him. And once he got out, he was just back to the alcohol and drugs. And then my mom, she had boyfriends on and off. And some of them would abuse me. Some of them were nice. But she had a lot of trauma still. So she, she developed vices. And somehow my family decided that it was proper for me to stay with her.

Lisa: Wow.

Mario: It wasn't till years later when she got in trouble for truancy. For me not going to school and all that. Wow. I think one year I went to school like 20 days of the year.

Lisa: Oh goodness.

Mario: So after that, they threatened to take her to court. And so my grandmother, she took a control of my situation. She was my guardian. I think she was in the process of doing that. But then she passed away from cancer. And as I moved with my aunt and my siblings, there's two brothers and one sister. But then once I moved in with my grandma, there was multiple people in her house. It was bigger than my aunt's house. There's like 60 people there. And I was sitting in a sleeping bag in the closet there.

Lisa: How old were around that time?

Mario: She passed away in 2005. So I had just barely turned 13. But then I moved with my aunt. And her house was smaller, but she had less people. But, I mean, it was on average, eight people, sometimes more, sometimes less.

Lisa: All family or just other people as well?

Mario: Family members. Yeah. It'd be her grandchildren. So. My cousins. Wow. Sleep on the couch. Sometimes. When somebody went to prison, I got to sleep on that bed for six months to a year, but nothing really was considered mine.

Lisa: Wow. How do you feel like that impacted you?

Mario: Honestly, I. It makes me appreciate everything else. It makes me appreciate life. All the little details, all the small things. Like I wake up and I'm happy. Like, I get I get to call the bed my own. Wow. Has somewhere I don't have to share everything now everything's as crowded. I don't have to book a time to take a shower to brush my teeth. I don't have to try to worry about There's not enough food. And so I'm very happy. You know, I come to classes every day I can just because, like, it's the opportunity to experience that I wouldn't have had before.

Lisa: So you kind of touched on a little bit. Lived in homeless shelter. You were homeless and lived in shelters and that sort of thing. I mean, what about for those of us who have never had to endure that, what is that kind of experience like?

Mario: To me, it was just normal. I didn't know any other life. Whenever other kids were talking about their family. I had no idea what they're even referencing, like cooking at dinner when our asparagus. I had no idea what asparagus was until 16. wow. I can relate to a lot of my classmates growing up. But I also don't want to share my life, so then I just, like, suffer in silence. But I also wasn't, like. I didn't feel like I was a victim either. To me, it's just like this is something I'm going through, and when I get older, then I could change my situation. But in the meantime, just go through it, absorb as much as I could. We eventually moved into a little camper for a couple of years. It was at that point, my sister was still with us, and it was me, her and my mom. And it was just one of those campers where it's maybe twice the size of this room that we're in right now. And I enjoyed that. We got to eat top ramen, so having a microwave was a plus.

Lisa: For sure. For sure. But school was hit or miss, it sounds like you weren't always there?

Mario: No, I wasn't always there. And I didn't realize I needed glasses either, because I was always missing those days where they do the checkups. And so it was very hard for me to learn English because I couldn't learn the the grammar or the rules behind it because I couldn't even see what was on the projector. I didn't wear glasses until, like, 15 years old. Even then, people bully me for it. So it's like, why would I ever want to wear it? But I coped by just memorize everything on the board. And I would just, like, keep mental notes of what was being a race and what was being added as the teachers were talking. So that's one thing that helped me learn. And even though I wasn't there for a lot of the times I got into get into the education program. wow. But the thing is, like, these children, they had, like, laptops. This is like the early 2000, so laptops are still very expensive, and my family is very poor. So I eventually got kicked out of the program because I couldn't keep up because, like, I couldn't even get on the Internet. I couldn't do anything. I tried using the school libraries and it's just not feasible when I need to take the school bus. There's no resources at home. There's nobody who knows how to approach the problems. But that didn't deter me from actually learning. But there could be more opportunities that I could have had now. But I take that as the the potential that I still have, and I try to apply it now as an adult. In 2000 is actually like 2009. I I'm a recruiter for the Marine Corps, whose name is Gunnery Sergeant Christopher Mallard. And I was like, I want to join. He's like, okay, well, you know, you have to graduate high school first because, like, I was under the impression like, well, it's military, so you don't have to graduate high school because I want to get out of there. I didn't really care to be there. And so once he told me that, I actually I became more committed and focused on actually learning the material, more actually participating in the assignments and turning them in. I tried graduating early, but they're like, No, that's not a program that we participate here at this school. But they're talking to the recruiter is what cemented my my commitment to education and then actually learning more and more.

It's just whole new worlds that are unexplored.

Lisa: Absolutely. And you mentioned that, you know, the military kind of made you appreciate education even more.

Mario: It did. The people who were able to get degrees while they're in. Some of them decided to get out and pursue civilian jobs and others decided to get commission. But the thing is, it was opportunities. And I hadn't quite looked at education like as like money. But at that point I was like, okay, I, I needed to get into the Marine Corps. And it's like, okay, well, sometimes I'll hire you. But the opportunities are different depending on which degrees you pursue. And what level you pursue as well.

Lisa: Yeah. When did you leave the military?

Mario: 2018.

Lisa: Okay. Okay. And so immediately started here, then? How did you pick UNT?

Mario: I remember one of my friends talking about UNT when I took my first classes. It was actually really enjoyable. One of the reasons why I put my application in for the master's program here at U.A., because the the atmosphere is beneficial for students. And then the classroom settings are very well established for the students. The professors are amazing at their job. They're very accommodating to each student.

Lisa: Tell me about some of your standout experiences while you've been here. Who've been some of the great professors you've had, the classes you've enjoyed the most?

Mario: I really enjoyed the economics classes, to be honest. I don't really like math, but the math is enjoyable in economics because actually it's like applicable to situations and like markets, real world translation and government policy. So some of the classes I really enjoyed were the microeconomics and macroeconomics. And I always had like an interest in history. I was in the 10th grade and we took the standardized test and I got a letter in the mail saying that I scored perfect on the history section. And so they wanted to do like a ceremony solely. They did a ceremony at the high school, and that's always stuck with me. And I think that highlighted the fact that I was actually able to be well or to perform well in history. So that's just like history. I got the prizes that I didn't normally get from history, and I think that that really has stuck with me.

Lisa: It really must have been a huge motivator for you to try to keep going along. I guess I guess that's the question as I'm listening to your tremendous story here. What kept you going? What? Why didn't you give up? Why didn't you look at this adversity and go, it's just not in the cards for me?

Mario: I actually think that I didn't really know that I could quit.

Lisa: Really?

Mario: Yeah. It's just so when you go to school, public education, there's no way out. Like, it's. It's compulsory. So you had to show up. And I knew there was, like, students who would sleep in class or they wouldn't show up to class. But in my mind, it's like, okay, they have something going on. But I didn't realize that they were quitting on themselves. But my mind, it's like, I can't. I can't quit. Even when I was in the Marine Corps, like boot camp, I was like, I can't quit, because if I quit, then I'll get in trouble. I don't know. I just never really thought of it as an option. So I never really had to weigh the consequences of quitting.

Lisa: Did I read to. Now, you give back to the organizations that gave to you.

Mario: Yeah. Yeah. I donate money whenever I can. And if I can donate money, I try to donate my time. I volunteer. I've been doing the Big Brothers Big Sisters of America for a couple of years now. For almost three, three years now.

Lisa: Really?

Mario: It's very enjoyable. The little brother I'm with, I got I him to see him grow up to be a man. And it's very, very fulfilling because although nobody was there for me in that role capacity, I, I want to be there. I hope that change and I'm not just going to take a back seat and what I and what I want to do. Otherwise, I'd be just daydreaming. So I volunteer doing that. And then even here at UNT, I volunteer my spare time hanging out. The Super Veteran Services Center and I help people with sometimes are having a hard time trying to access their benefits or they're having a hard time in classes, and I recommend certain services, or if there are an economic. I try talking to them like, you know, I took that class two years ago or Yeah, that class is difficult, but you want to study these materials, try to understand these concepts. If you need help, there's a math lab downstairs so you can sharpen up on your math skills so the equations are easier for you to process. And, you know, as a veteran, I recognize that there's other veterans who have needs of accommodation who don't seek it because there's still, like, a stigma. The stigma, at least with veterans, is, although we seem normal, that we would just one day snap out of the blue. And I think that stigma creates fear between people who don't understand. And so you having these veterans services center helps bridge that gap of understanding. It creates the community involvement that veterans want to be part of.

Lisa: What long term goals do you have? Career or otherwise, I guess.

Mario: Long term goal? Honest. I want to be in a classroom. I'm still you know, I joke around saying like, I just like when I drop dead while in a classroom. Like I want to be that old. Still learning. But also, I want to create change. So I'm actually in a role, like right now, I'm actually enrolled in alternative teaching certification right now. And I talked to some school districts here the other day at the teacher fair. And it's very interesting because, like, they see you and. wow, you have this education. I am military service and they want you to apply. And that that feeling of them wanting you to be there. It's very exciting because I want to be there, too. And the fact is, you show me that you want me as well. So it's mutually beneficial for us both. And also to once I'm in the classroom setting, I can show the students who are struggling that they could achieve it as well. The students who are performing well, I could help them excel more, give them more assignments that are tailored to what they're interested in and give them guidance on what programs they might be interested in. Ask them what they want to do with their life rather than just, that's class by, because that's kind of what happened with me for the most part. There was nobody really asking me what I wanted to do in life.

Lisa: Right now you must know how motivational your story is and how inspirational is I mean, what do you what do you hope people take away from your experiences in life? And here at UNT and in the Marines, what do you hope the takeaway is and what advice would you share with them?

Mario: Yeah, I would hope that they understand that, that there is adversity, hardship and difficulty. But even if the process takes you longer than you want, that you shouldn't quit. Keep on persevering. Keep on trying. You know, Ella, we have a little saying. You never quit, never surrender. And, like, that was like, with dogfights. Like, you have jets who might try to intercept you and say, okay, well, they have all this armament and they're facing us. But you can slow down the the C-130 to maneuver in paths that they can't, that their speed becomes their weakness. So even slowing down in life like that presents you opportunities if you never surrender. Eventually, those guys run out of fuel and then you can make it home safe. And like that translates to like you never surrendering your life. You keep on going and eventually you do achieve your goals. And once you achieve your goals, then you set that foundation for yourself and your family. Although my family wasn't perfect and the experience wasn't the best. I still want to try for anything else. I mean, it's mine, it's unique. Everybody has their own. And the thing is like, we should embrace our identity and we should. We should interact with each other to create a unique admixture of experiences and understanding and tolerance for each other.

[TRANSITION MUSIC]

Alicia: Wow, what a story. First of all, we want to thank Mario for his service and for sharing a story with us. But the way he handled all that adversity and just kept pushing is incredible. Now he's stacking up degrees and giving back to his community. Just truly inspiring.

Scott: I know I need to make like a what would Mario do bracelet and any time things get tough or I want to complain, just look down at it and think Mario wouldn't quit. Super motivational story.

Alicia: I think I'm going to take one of those too, please. While Scott works on our bracelets, I want to thank Lisa Sciortino for bringing us that interview. You can check the show notes for a link to read more about Mario. We've got one more inspirational story to share with you before close out the show, we want to give another quick content warning for this story because it does include mention of a miscarriage. So again, if that's something that might be difficult for you to listen to, you may want to skip ahead. Setareh Dehghani-Moslemi goes by Star, and she just earned her Ph.D. in behavior analysis. Star to the United States with her family when she was 17 to escape religious persecution in Iran. Just two days after making it out of Iran, Star's father died and she spent every day since trying to honor his sacrifice.

Chelsey: Why do you go by, Star?

Star: That's a great question. My name in Farsi is Setareh. Setareh and in Farsi means a star. So before I was in grad school, I was working part time as I was going to school, and one of my managers had a very hard time pronouncing my name and she told me, What does your name mean? And then when I told her that the meaning is the star, then she was like, I'm going to start calling you Star from now on. When she started doing that and everybody had my job to call me Star, and I started to go by Star. And then later on, when I started to work with kids, especially kids with autism, it was a really easy for them to remember my name as opposed to, you know, etcetera, especially if they were working on learning shapes. So it just they stayed with me and now everyone calls me Star and I just even put that in my signature.

Chelsey: I love that. That's like saying I love that. It was kind of a culmination of people that you knew kind of brought that.

Star: Yes, yes, yes.

Chelsey: Tell me a little bit about your family.

Star: Yes. I definitely couldn't have gotten where I am today if I didn't have the emotional support of my siblings and, my mom, throughout all these years. And of course, I have to talk about my husband, too. We got married about 15 years ago when he learned about my passions, about education and the reasons behind them. He never stopped supporting me and we went through really tough times together, and the tough times just made our love for each other stronger and stronger. And I. I could not have gotten where I am today if I didn't have him by my side. And now we have a little one, a little addition to our family. He is five, five and a half months. And before I talk about my dad, I think it's important that I start with the kind of a person he was. So I'm from Iran and a survivor of religious persecution and a former refugee and an immigrant. I was on a Baha'i. The Baha'i faith is a world religion and has that minority population in Iran. And education was extremely important for my family. And my dad wanted to do everything he could so his children get educated. So when I was around 16, he decided to take us all out of Iran so we can have a better future. He was actually very sick at that time, and his doctor did not recommend that he would travel. And we had to take several trains in order to, you know, go city to city and then pass the border and leave Iran. So especially for a travel like this, it was not recommended for him, but he did not listen. And my family escaped Iran. And unfortunately, just two days after leaving Iran, my father passed away and I

Cheslea: It’s okay if you get emotional, please take your time.

Star: So I feel that it was his life mission to get out, get us somewhere safe before he leaves this world. And later, I heard from my uncle that my father told him before leaving Iran that I know that I will not make it. And my time in this world is very limited. But I have to take my family out of this country because if I die here, they will not be able to live by themselves. Then my children will not have the future that they deserve. So then then I have made it my mission to take advantage of the opportunities that I will be given here. And everything that I have done and will do is to make him proud because of the sacrifice he made for us and for his family. Of course, it was not easy. I was 17 years old when I came to the United States and did not speak any English. That and the traumatized experiences as a student in Iran had lowered my confidence and my camp capabilities. And of course, I didn't give up. And I kept going and going and kept trying and trying until I got here. I was also very lucky to have great mentors by my side, like Dr. Bergman, who believed in me and supported me so I wouldn't give up.

Chelsey: Thank you for sharing that with me. And if you need to take just a second, just to take a few breaths, you definitely can. That's a lot to revisit. Even all these years later, I know that it never truly gets easier. But I'm so glad that he was able to see that out with you and your family. And from what I hear, it really does sound like that was the thing that he really wanted the most in life. And I'm so glad he got to see that. So that's an amazing sacrifice that he made. But most definitely it's proven to be probably the best thing that could have happened for all of you. So I'm so glad that you've been able to pursue all of these dreams and I'm sure no doubt make your family so incredibly proud to go from your mother not having the opportunity to learn how to read or write to her daughter pursuing her Ph.D. is pretty incredible. So what drew you to UNT and when did you actually start here?

Star: So I started in 2018. And what drew me to UNT was that when I decided that I want to get a Ph.D. in behavior analysis, I learned that UNT is starting a brand new Ph.D. program in behavior analysis and behavior analysis and concentration. And that I became interested in that. And I went to You want to talk to one of the faculty there to learn more about us? And I applied and I got in, and that's how it all happened. I can talk to you about my experience with Dr. Beckmann, which is which was, is and was absolutely fantastic. I believe that everyone deserves to have a good mentor in their life. And I feel so lucky that I was blessed to have such an amazing person as my mentor. She's not only my academic mentor, but also my overall life mentor. And I've had I've had some rough times and she was there for me to support me and encourage me. She saw me. She and she believed in me. She realized that she realized how important it is for me to be here and went above and beyond to create the experience that I deserved. I truly strive to be the kind of a mentor that she has for my for my students and our supervisors in the future. She's an absolutely amazing human being. And my relationship with her will be a lifelong relationship and one that I will cherish for the rest of my life. And I have told many people that she's the kind of a person for me that whatever she recommends to me, I will do it with my closed eyes. That's how much I respect her. And I how much I value her input and anything that she has for me. Yes, that's wonderful.

Chelsey: It's so lucky to be able to get someone like that in your life, especially in school, that someone's able to take their time to use the rest of their students to be able to really focus on you and mentor you like that. So I'm so glad that you have that relationship.

Star: Yes. Yeah. Not everyone has, you know, lucky enough to have a mentor, a good mentor in their lives. So I feel like, you know, I was I was a lucky one. And, you know, sometimes with faculty, if you have a good a very good and strong dark student, they can lift a lot of weight from your shoulders as far as like, like not needing a ton of help, but, you know, English being my second language, I sometimes needed, you know, additional support to help to ask her to explain things a little bit more deeper for me. She never responded in a way that would make me feel that maybe next time I'm not going to ask her. She never made me feel that way. And she even pushed me to do things that were, you know, outside of my comfort zone. So that way I can gain confidence and, you know, experience things that I didn't experienced before to become a, you know, a stronger scientist and clinician and mentor after I leave UNT

Chelsey: So with all of your experience and your education, I would love to get some advice from you that you would maybe tell any incoming freshman or anyone who is thinking of coming to UNT?

Star: I want to tell them to have a vision and have a vision of what you want to be in life, not just the academic goals, but the kind of a person you want to be and the kind of things that you want to do in life. I'm a very strong believer of imagination, so imagine it. Imagine what you want to be and truly imagine it. And this helps me to find what was important to me, what made me feel good, and be really focused on what I want to accomplish. So that's my recommendation to them.

Chelsey: I absolutely love that. That was beautiful. Thank you. That was useful. Thank you. All right. Now something that I know will be fun for you to talk about becoming a mom. I would love to hear what unique experiences have come from becoming a mother while pursuing your doctorate.

Star: Yes, so unique is the right word. My pregnancy journey was not an easy one and it happened. Simultaneously as my doctoral journey, which made it even more difficult. I actually first became pregnant in 2021 with twin boys and I lost the boys when I was two months pregnant. This happened right around the time that I had to take my comprehensive exam and that was some difficult times and I do not want to go back and think about that. But I had an amazing support system from my family and friends who helped me get past the grief and move on. I was able to thankfully successfully pass my comp exam and then Dr. Breckman made me busy with lots of projects to work towards my dissertation and then I became pregnant again in 2023. It was not an easy pregnancy and it was considered high risk. I had to take blood thinner injections on my belly every day until the day that my son was born. It was not easy to go through that and to be in school. But as I said before, I had a mission and I never gave up. And I never stop thinking about my mission and imagining it. So I kept going and did not lose my faith. My family, my husband and Dr. Breckman all supported me to make it during this time until Raja, my son was born. Being a mother is the most beautiful thing that I have experienced in my life. He's the center of my universe. Of course, it's hard to be in grad school while being a new mother, but I feel that I have developed a much better routine ever since having him. Given that his nap schedules are, for the most part, consistent, then I know exactly when during the day I have time to work on my school stuff. So when he's asleep I work on school. When he is awake, I spend time with him and take care of him. And he he has given me a very consistent routine during the day that I feel like I did not have that before.

Chelsey: Congratulations to you and your husband. That is exciting. I really praise you for still pursuing your education while going through all of that because you have enough to deal with just pursuing the degrees minus all of the different medical issues that you had to go through.

Star: Absolutely. And I mean, I think that this is definitely not a kind of a journey that you can go through alone. It's really important to have a good support system. And that's why I want to emphasize that if I didn't have my husband's support, if I didn't have my mom and my siblings support, and if I didn't have an understanding and compassionate adviser like Dr. Bergman, I could not make it. It's just a lot. It's very heavy for one person to do all of them. So having a strong support system is very, very important.

[TRANISTION MUSIC]

Scott: All right. Well, now I have to make a Star bracelet, too. I mean, what an incredible story she has.

Alicia: I know. And I love the fact after everything she went through in her pregnancy journey and having her son while working on her Ph.D., she got to walk the stage on Mother's Day. How fitting is that?

Scott: Seriously, I'm sure Star’s Family made it a full day celebration. She certainly deserves it. After persevering through all that, we want to thank Chelsey Gilbert for bringing us that interview and encourage you to check the show notes for a link to Star Story to read about all of our other great grads that we couldn't squeeze into this episode.

Alicia: All right. Time to wrap things up with our Q&A segment. You all know the drill, Scott and I take turns answering a question and then you all join the conversation by emailing us at podcast at Unity. Edu or calling 9405654341 and leaving us a message. Scootle Mcdoodle. What's our question today?

Scott: Our question is, what were your career goals when you came to UNT and how did that get you where you are today?

Alicia: So when I came to UNT, I kind of had an idea of what I wanted to do career wise due to my love for food. So I was like, okay, you know, U.A. has a dining services. So I applied to a job there and I got it. And it was in social media and it was the field I wanted to be in. So I thought, okay, let me see what I can learn from this experience. And as I was in the job, I, you know, constantly was taking notes, mental notes for the future for what I wanted to do, because, you know, full time student, part time worker, it's that balance. And so I had to do that in order to, like ultimately figure out my career. And the job kind of made me hone in on the social media skills. And I took an internship, which was specifically social media, and that led me to just wanting to focus that. So I spent most of my time researching all, all that you had to do to achieve that career and turned it in to job I have today at UNT. So, yeah, working here for almost two years and I'm loving every moment of it.

Scott: Nice.

Alicia: Here I am today achieving my career goals. So, yeah. What about you, Scott?

Scott: Yes. So I transferred to UNT in 2008 and did not really know what I wanted to do. But I knew I liked writing. I always enjoyed, like, English class and stuff in high school. And then when I was in community college, so came in and figured I'd give, like sports journalism as a big sports fan, big hockey fan. So I started out with that and actually got to work in sports journalism for a little bit. My first job was with FC Dallas, so I got to do that for a few years. And so, you know, dreams do come true, but dreams don't always pay the bills. So after working at FC Dallas for a few years, I switched to a corporate job for a couple of years that paid better, but was also a little bit soul sucking. And then that's when I came to UNT And things have been magical ever since.

Alicia: Dream big, y'all. Well, now that you've heard our answers, we want to hear yours. So email us at podcast at UNt.edu or call us at 9405654, three, four, one. We want to hear your stories.

Scott: Absolutely. And while you're at it, if you enjoy the show, we'd appreciate if you can help us grow this thing by telling a friend to check it out, sharing it on social media, or leaving us a rating and review wherever you listen.

Alicia: Yes, we give a mama her star and I guess give Scotty something, too.

Scott: Yes, we will take maximum stars, please. All right. Well, that does it for us today. So until next time, we hope you have a happy Friday, North Texas.

Alicia: And Go Mean Green.

Scot: 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 Jill King, Lisa Sciortino and Chelsey Gilbert. For more information, visit UNT.edu/podcast.