

Harrisburg Huddle

Episode 105 – Ph.D. in American Studies

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[Host] Welcome to the Harrisburg Huddle, the Penn State Harrisburg Podcast. This week, Dr. Charlie Kupfer, associate professor of American Studies, sat down with Dr. Jamie Noerpel, recent graduate of the doctoral degree in American Studies on our campus. Together, they discussed her experience here, achieving this terminal degree, and how it has affected her life after graduation.

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[Dr. Charles Kupfer] Hello! I'm Charles Kupfer, associate professor of American Studies at Penn State Harrisburg, and we are going to talk today about our doctoral program in American Studies. We're very fortunate to have with us an alumni of said program, this is Jamie Noerpel, who I will say is Dr. Noerpel. Welcome, Jamie.

[Jamie Noerpel] Thank you so much for having me.

[CK] It's nice to see you.

[JN] Yeah, you too.

[CK] So walk me through, it's been a while, even though I sort of do remember the broad outline. You come in one day interested in a master's degree, and you leave another day with a doctorate in hand. What happened?

[JN] Yes, so I was teaching high school history, and I was interested in developing my content area. So, the American Studies program has great classes, great papers that you have to write that are actually applicable to your life, things that you're interested in. I had a couple of friends take the courses and get their degrees, so of course, I hit them up and said, "Is it a really good program?" Everyone vouched for it. So, that's like the first red tape, right? Do your friends actually like it? Yeah, they do. So, I came to my first class, I believe it was either... Oh, it was Dr. Bronner, and it was over the summer, and I was hooked after that. So, I got to research what I was interested in in my classes, and I finished the master's program and couldn't get enough. I decided I still wanted to continue to get the PhD and got it done. Three years for my Master's and three and a half for the PhD, so it's attainable for people who are busy.

[CK] That is great to hear and at a few levels. First of all, I'm glad you mentioned Dr. Simon Bronner, who was our, if you will, moving force when the program was born, and it was a part of his vision, which I think the program still epitomizes, that we would be more than just another professor-in-training program. We would have all the accoutrements and rigorous demands of a Master's and have a doctoral degree that students would meet, but we would

also be attached to our area, which is central Pennsylvania and the Mid-Atlantic more broadly. And, of course, he did his work in folkloristics, concentrating on this area to a large extent. So, I'm also pleased to hear that you had some word-of-mouth advertising, which, as you say, is a good method for attracting good people. And you did all this while employed as an educator yourself.

[JN] Yeah, working full-time, and it was not easy. It took a lot of time management, but I was able to work full-time, and then a part of the PhD program does require a residency, so you have to be full-time and take three courses for two consecutive semesters. But the professors understand that their clientele were mostly working adults or we have families or we're involved, so the workload is not easy, but it's manageable. And I think as long as you're willing to put in the work, you can get it done within a reasonable amount of time.

[CK] That's also gratifying because to go back a little bit institutionally, this campus was originally founded during the 1960s to cater to working adult students, and at the start, it only had graduate programs. And then over time, it sort of backfilled, so then now we have, you know, from freshman students who were at the prom a few weeks ago, all the way through to PhD students like yourself. But I think particularly graduate education, we've never lost that original notion that the campus needed to be accessible and to make higher ed and graduate education accessible to professionals. So, I'm glad about that. Why don't you talk a little bit about your research because research is obviously at the heart of any graduate endeavor, particularly an academic program like American Studies. How did you hone your interests? How did your agenda unfold over time? And how did you, if you will, refine your skills?

[JN] So I could give you the stuffy 30-second elevator pitch, like, "Here, here's what my research was on."

[CK] Well, I was on the committee, so I remember.

[JN] But frankly, I was interested in why people raised chickens. I know that sounds so silly, but I was in Dr. Bronner's class, and we had to study material culture, and so we read Henry Glassie's classic, you know, text looking at barns and sheds up and down the East Coast. And I thought, well, why don't I research chicken coops because I know people like myself who had a white-collar job, and we had these chickens. And I didn't understand the draw of, well, why?

[CK] And specifying this is not an agronomy degree, you're looking at these as cultural manifestations, right?

[JN] It's ethnographic in nature, studying people, cultural, historical. But then one of my family members had what he called the Taj Mahal of chicken coops, like he had invested, you know, fifteen thousand dollars.

[CK] I hope his chickens were appreciative, right?

[JN] So I started researching, and I realized that I could write a paper just analyzing chicken coops.

[CK] Yea!

[JN] And then the next class I took was popular culture, and so I looked at the consumerism behind raising chickens and how a few years ago, the Washington Post came out with the next elitist symbol, which is the chicken. So we have this juxtaposition of people who are in the backwoods that just raise chickens outdoors for eggs, and then others do it for the status symbol. And then that compounded into American Studies PhD with a focus on agriculture, environmental studies, local history, ethnography, race, because then we looked at inner-city folks and people who didn't have access to gardens. So the cross between class and race. Yeah, so I think you're drawn into study whatever you're interested in, and then you're able to, as you say, see the forests within the trees, the bigger connection to American society.

[CK] That's really good. So listeners or viewers won't be surprised that I know you a bit, and I can see after the fact, but it made sense even back then why you were attracted to these questions because you yourself are pretty rooted in your community, and you're somebody who has sort of one foot in the rural environment and one foot in the urban environment.

[JN] Yeah, yeah, I am. This is kind of an indirect way of commenting, I'm the first in my family to go to college, come from a very working-class family, which is another reason why I like the American Studies program because it's not intimidating as long as you're willing to work hard. The professors meet you where you're at, but then you end up developing these skills. You know, I was, again, first in my family to go to undergrad, let alone graduate, let alone doctorate. And because of the reading and the papers and the lectures and the conversations, I found myself using words like juxtaposition, you know, and it was a really nice way of finding myself in an environment where I could intellectually stimulate myself and then bring those concepts back to my family. Sometimes it was hard to navigate those two worlds.

[CK] Sure, certainly the topic, too, I think would show people and maybe please them that their pastimes, their avocations, or their modes of life were worthy of academic studies. Sometimes people aren't really accustomed to thinking of themselves as the subjects of scholarship. So that leads me to my next question, and we've had this conversation before multiple times in class and elsewhere. It's an impossible question to answer, but if you had to define American Studies in a one-size-fits-all way, what would you say?

[JN] In a one-size-fits-all? So, the American Studies program at its heart is interdisciplinary, and that means that there are elements of history and folklore and anthropology and, like for me, environmental studies. And I like to picture the program as all these concentric circles that overlap, and you finding your niche. I can almost guarantee that almost any interest you're going to find it within the American Studies program, and I think that's what I like the most about it is I did not research the same thing that my colleagues did. We all had these different fields, but we'd all evolved.

For example, one of the... I'm sure people who are listening are interested in, usually, for every class, you meet once a week for three hours in the evening, that's what I did because of working, and you typically had to read a book, and then you had to come to class with talking points or answer a discussion post. And so I would be in these classes of, you know, 10 to 15 different people. We all read the same text, but we all came with such different interpretations and different points that we wanted to make, and that was so stimulating to just hear other ideas, but then also the classes aren't so big in that you have a platform to share your voice and not just, you know, be a number up in the bleachers.

[CK] Now, that's important because I will tell anybody that particularly in a liberal arts graduate environment, the seminar, the graduate seminar is the heart of the student experience. And it's funny because we live in a time where lots of people want to talk about modern approaches to doing things like flipping the classroom. You certainly know about this as a teacher, and yet I tell them, you know about 150 years ago in Europe, they started something called the graduate seminar in Germany, and they imported it to the United States through Johns Hopkins University, and it is the gold standard for how we do what we do in class. So -- describe your seminars a little bit because they're sort of de riguer.

[JN] Um, what's, uh, first and foremost, you get your syllabi, you know, week one, so you know I could plan out every week when things were due, what I had to read, um, because I know that let's say I had a field trip that I had to prepare for or something that you might have within, you know, your work, I could start reading the books weeks in advance, and a lot of the books also are available in Audible, so I would listen to them instead of, you know, always having to sit down and read them. Like that's a lot.

[CK] It's allowed, It's a good idea.

[JN] It's hard to cite, um, a little bit of extra work but, um, so then you would go to class, and I always would grab as a coffee bar downstairs, so I would come with my coffee, which was nice. Sometimes I even grab some sushi, and then you go to class and discuss what you read. There was usually in some classes some type of discussion posts you had already begun to jog your neurons and thinking about what you wanted to say, and then it all culminated into this final seminar paper that at the end of usually about 15-16 weeks, you had to write a term paper which was about 15 pages long. I mean, when you first start you're thinking 15 pages, how am I going to have so much to say, but by the end, you're like, I have to cut it so it's not over 20 pages.

[CK] You know, so it's sort of in the realm of an academic article in terms of heft, right?

[JN] Yeah, yeah, um, and that what's nice is that professors, including yourself, and I don't know how many office visits I made if I was lost or didn't know what I wanted to focus on, you said come to the office and we would just sit and talk. You would have these books behind you, you know, and you would pull out a book and say, "I think you might like this," and before you know

it, I had ideas going in the back of your mind. You know, when you wake up in the middle of the night and you begin thinking about things.

[CK] Yes.

[JN] And I think that's kind of the hallmark of a good program: when you find yourself personally invested in what you're researching because you get to guide it and lead it yourself.

[CK] Excellent, you know it, it's a good answer, in my opinion, for several reasons, but among them, maybe at the heart is that to me, and this is the way it was for me, and I had such a wonderful time myself in graduate school, it needs to be a bespoke experience, it cannot be a one-size-fits-all experience. You are not in a big lecture hall with 150 students studying tort law where everybody needs to take in the same information. There's so much, if you will, agency offloaded onto the students, and the seminar in some ways looks to an outsider like a relaxed environment because the professor is sitting there sort of in a circle around the table with the students and the students are doing a lot of the talking, but in some ways, it's also somewhat of a crucible or a pressure-packed environment because it means you come to class prepared to really go in up to your elbows and on the ideas that the book brings up.

[JN] Right, and explore it more. And back to it, you're talking about the term paper, if you know what you're going to study for your dissertation, you can begin writing about it now, you know, earlier on I, you don't have to, of course, but it does help because then what I found was, you know, for the eight to ten classes that I took, by the time it was for me to write my dissertation, I had kind of like my playbook. It wasn't ideal, it wasn't perfect, but it was at least outlined in that I had been building. And so the dissertation I was able to write in a year, and that was because, again, I was given so much autonomy on what I want to research, but there's also guidance of, "Well, why don't you haven't thought about this element within your, um, dissertation, why don't you focus on this," because the faculty here, you guys, I don't want to say you've been around the block, but you're not newbies, you've been doing this for a while.

[CK] You know, maybe we've been around the block.

[JN] But you, you, you are able to reference so many different books and articles that it wasn't just, "Oh, well, we'll see what happens," and then when it's time for me to submit my dissertation, you make me rip it apart and start all over. There's so much scaffolding that leads up to it.

[CK] There should be, and I'm glad that you had that experience. It sounds very much to me like what you've just done is described a very important concept for new graduate students to be aware of, which is the research agenda. Which they may be hard-pressed to describe on day one or even in the first semester, but all of a sudden, at some point, they realize, "You know, I've been working on this, and that was followed by this, and that was followed by this, and suddenly I find myself, uh, you know, plowing a furrow that begins to make sense.

[JN] Right exactly. Well, and, you know, I went to school with folks who, one of my good friends was a doula, and so she wrote her dissertation on the conception of the placenta. But then someone else, you know, Kong was interested in trench art, right, and she looked at World War II, or World War I art within the trenches, right?

[CK] Artifacts that soldiers made out of materials that were at hand.

[JN] Isn't that cool? And that's what was cool is you would sit in these seminars, and of course, grad students always find ways to talk about their research, but it was interesting, you know. And it was by the time you got your cohort got to the end, it was so celebratory because you'd been with these people for, you know, three or four years in some cases. My particular cohort, there were four of us who got together and started sharing articles that we wrote for class that we were trying to publish, which we were, some of us were able to do, which again is another, like, double dipping, you know, you write papers for class, but then you can also get them published or take it and present at various conferences, um. But to have that network of people who are willing, willing to support you. It's not the program is not one of those tear down, "I'm comparing myself to you, I'm trying," the professors don't set you up to compete internally, it's very supportive.

[CK] I once met someone who was a former professor in my old undergraduate program, and he said, and I was rather surprised to hear this because as a sort of callow 19-year-old, I didn't have this memory, but he said, "Oh, that was a real shark tank, you students went after each other." So I'm glad we don't have that, but it's an interesting relationship because I will tell students at the beginning of the seminar that we're going to get to know each other, perhaps not broadly across all walks of life, but rather deeply in some interesting ways through these three-hour conversations. And I think maybe there's something to be said for cultivating a core group of, if you will, comrades or colleagues who are, you know, pulling the rope in the same direction as you.

[JN] Yeah, absolutely.

[CK] So there's a spirit, I guess you're telling me.

[JN] Yeah, well, and people, I think, you know, professors like yourself accommodate that relationship too because I don't know if you're still doing this, but at the end of the semester, you invite the students to your house?

[CK] Oh, I do, yeah, yeah.

[JN] I mean, you talk about a bonding time where you're sitting across from a dozen people, and you have food, and your wife is so sweet, you know, and I remember walking in, and you were trying to stop your cats from getting on your couch, and you had electric blankets.

[CK] It wasn't just getting on the couch, it was doing something which I don't think is appropriate for the camera.

[JN] Oh no! That's terrible.

[CK] It was somewhat of an arduous campaign.

[JN] But my point though is that you, you really get to see your professors and more than just, you know, guys that stand up in the front and lecture at you. It's very conversational and um familial in a way.

[CK] I'm glad. There is something I think that is in a sort of an odd sort of way to describe it maybe, but there's an intimacy in doing this kind of intellectual work because at some level you are developing ideas that are not formulated, and that means you're in a kind of a vulnerable position for a while. You're trying things out, and then you may say, no no I backtrack on that. I'm going to try something else. And you need to be with people whom you can trust to listen to you, to evaluate, to give good feedback, right? And I think this goes for students as well as obviously professors.

You know it is it is a part of the American studies conversation though people will always say, "Well if everybody's doing all of these different things is there any binding tie what makes American studies if it is a unified field?" And you seem to say, as you said before that it's the interdisciplinarity, it's the very act of combining different methods of interrogation.

[JN] It's also very interpretive, you know. It's an art form, so instead of having a history paper that's just, you know, dead guys and dates, instead, you look at, you know, what is the deeper meaning? How does this reflect American society? As a high school history teacher, my kids come into my class sometimes lamenting history because it's just been spoon-fed to them.

[CK] Oh no, when was the Barbary Pirates War?

[JN] Ah, yeah, right. Well, you know, the classic 'when am I ever going to use this,' right?" But in the American Studies program, it is that classic, "Here's how you're going to use it," because now I better understand. I was able to study in my local community, and I can apply what I did for my academic research to my own personal life to better understand redlining and to better understand food deserts, right? And so you're able to apply, and you can see why it does matter.

[CK] I was always interested in that about you and maybe about York County in general. We've had over the years, I think, a healthy cohort of people from York County who have looked at some aspects of the region's history and culture from remarkably different directions. I never knew that York County at one time had a something of a fashion industry. I never realized how much of York County and York City's physical plant was defined by the tobacco business, um, and I think maybe that gets to your interdisciplinarity question. I like the idea of a food desert,

of redlining. We get into questions of access to food, ways of the history of race relations and the injustice in the country, um, all tied together, maybe in a contemporary way as well.

[JN] Yeah, well, and, um, I hope the people who are listening to this are also like civically engaged, you know, in their own communities or even Penn State, for that matter. Because I wrote a paper for one of the classes on a farm-to-table in, I'm not going to say the name, but it's a very bougie farm-to-table, and so my paper looked at that contrast of "we're from the Earth, but you're going to spend forty dollars on this plate of food," right? Exactly. And so I submitted it to be published in a local journal for the History Center, and the committee said no, they turned me down, and that was disappointing, but the member of the committee was also the editor of the York Daily Record, and he said, "But Jamie, we turned you down for this because it's not historical enough, but you're a good writer. Would you want to be a local blogger and have a local history blog?" And so now I'm a freelance writer, and I write this blog. It used to be once a week, now it's more like once a month, but, and I'm paid for it, and I wouldn't have been able to do that if it wasn't for, I mean, a fluke chance of writing a paper for grad class.

[CK] So you're picking along your steps, and you're finding footholds, and the next thing you know, you're in a new, very modern place that you hadn't anticipated, right?

This is helpful because American Studies, since it began maybe during the Depression or Cold War, as people thought American culture needed some kind of systematic analysis, has always been asking itself, as I've asked you, you know, what is this field about, what does it do, and also, how can it keep fresh? And at some level, I like what you say, well, at all levels, I like what you say about being civically engaged because clearly that's been a big part of what American Studies has tried to do over the last generation.

Historically, I like that answer very much because Penn State is a land-grant institution. We are, of course, use the old-fashioned term and R1, a big research powerhouse, but we are supposed to be engaged with the Commonwealth, and we're supposed to do things that make life in Pennsylvania as well as the world, better. And so, um, I think that in some ways, you've, you've gone in a, if it's possible, you've sort of gone in a circle and also moved ahead. I like that. That's good for American Studies.

[JN] Oh, good. Well, and, you know, part of getting this degree is also, you know, you have that Ph.D. behind your name, and that has also opened doors for me. Um, after I got my degree, I was asked to be on a number of boards, and of course, you know, the Ph.D. opened the door, but then I had to show up, and I had to prove that I deserved the spot and I was a contributing member of the executive committee. But I'm sure you know, the people listening to this are also thinking about like, well, I'm getting my Ph.D., what, it's going to be a lot of work, what is in it for me, right? And part of it is also the clout, that you're respected, um, you also know how to do research, yes, so for like a tiny personal um, anecdote, my husband and I had our first son two months ago.

[CK] Congratulations.

[JN] Thank you.

[CK] I believe Otto is home and where he should be.

[JN] Hopefully, he can listen to this in 18 years and apply to the Penn State American Studies program, um, but he came early, and I was in the hospital for about a week because of some complications, and the professors or [rather] the doctors would come in, and they would spout off these names of things that were happening to me and my body and my baby that I had no idea what they were saying. But I could look it up, and because of my research skills, I was able to scrutinize resources and navigate this world with better footing because of the education that I got, which is not something that I feel like the American Studies program can put in your pamphlet, like, "This will help you when you're in the NICU and your doctors are telling you things about your son." But there's a confidence level that comes with the education that you're going to receive.

[CK] So the skills you developed enhanced your confidence in a handful of ways around personal and professional advancement?

[JN] Yeah, yeah, exploring a world or an arena that you have zero footing in because you come with so many tools in your toolbelt.

[CK] There is an old saying that a master's degree is sort of an opening up degree, it exposes you to more information, and you come away with a broader awareness, but a Ph.D. gets to be a very, if you will, deepening degree, perhaps even a narrowing degree because you learn something absolutely stone cold, and I maybe there's something to be said for being able to tell yourself, you know, on this particular subject, there may be some people who know a lot about it, but there ain't nobody who knows more than I do, right?

[JN] Yeah, the confidence that comes with that, that's good. I remember depending on having a pep talk with Mike, my committee chair, beforehand with Dr. Haddad, and he said, people are going to challenge you so defend your good choices. And I have that written down still in on my desk for my personal life: defend your good choices,

[CK] That's good. I tell the students before theirs, never apologize for those choices you made, yeah, and stand up for them because, again, they were good.

Well, so let's talk about some of the traditional hurdles that you have to surmount or doors that you have to go through, if you will, thresholds in the program. You come into the program, you talked about here I am in a seminar, and I remember myself being a little taken aback my very first seminar, everybody was using words, and I didn't know what they were. And they kept talking about historiography, and I thought, did history and geography have a baby, and I wasn't told, and then eventually, I realized, no, this is, this is great, this is the most fun I've ever had in

school. You do those seminars, then at a certain point, you have to take certain exams, and then you have to write a dissertation proposal. How did those unfold in your experience?

[JN] Yeah, before I, I go through the steps, just another quick comment about like the imposter syndrome, this idea of you have to know everything all the time. Once you get your Ph.D., screw that, like, I have my Ph.D., I don't have to prove anything to anyone anymore, so that just feels good.

[CK] Well, that's good.

[JN] Um, but so you decide you're going to enter the Ph.D. program, and so you put forth your application, um, which is a little like doing your taxes, you gotta cross your T's, you know, and dot your I's, and put forth writing samples and whatnot. Then you begin coursework. You take your residency, which is that full time, and then you take your um, your exam, the candidacy exam, which is daunting. I mean...

[CK] It's such a black box, you don't know what you're getting into, and even though the exam itself is, I always try to tell people, it isn't that hard, I say, how hard can it be, you know, everybody has to take the same exam, yeah, it's that first sort of test, so everybody panics. It is normal.

[JN] It's just, you know, as an adult, when's the last time you were tested, you know, but I think the professors, they'll give you enough breadcrumbs that you have an idea of what to expect. They don't spoon-feed it to you, but there's enough to figure it out. So then you go in, you sit at the computer with, you know, all your friends that you've made over the past year, and you sit down and you take this three or four-hour exam. You answer the three or four questions, um,

[CK] Essays.

[JN] Essays, yes, essays, and again, you have an idea of what to expect, but you can't use anything, which I think is good. I think it should.

[CK] You mean, there in the room, you can't.

[JN] Thank you, yeah, you can't have any resources or papers or books with you. Um, which I appreciate because there's a level of you have to know: you are getting a Ph.D., you have to have a base level understanding of what American Studies is.

[CK] I always tell people it's like a citizenship test in some respects, you're now explaining that you know the basics of the field of American Studies, of its methods, of its theories, and that you have entered into that community in the manner of speaking.

[JN] Exactly, yeah, yeah. And one during seminars, I mean, if you take notes during those classes, you have your signpost, you know.

[CK] Which you should.

[JN] Right, right? Then you begin to sit with your committee and look at your comprehensive exams, so they'll put together about 100 books that fit into three different subfields.

[CK] Now, that's different because that's meant to be entirely custom-made. I tell students that if you open your comprehensive exam and you're surprised by what you see there, something has gone wrong. You should look at this and say, "Only Jamie could possibly handle this exam, but wow, Jamie knows this stuff well."

[JN] And you talk about getting to know people, and build relationships, the professors get to know you so well that they can pick 30 books that are tailored towards *your* interests. I mean, I remember opening the my list up and thinking, "Wow, my professors actually know me and what I'm interested in because I personally want to read these books." It's not, it's not hard to get through those hundred books because you're interested in it. It's your topic, you chose it.

[CK] Good! And then your, of course, next step is you've, you've passed your comprehensives. Everyone tells you to remember that....

[JN] You jumped over that too fast. It was a hard.. comprehensive exams are all hard. It's like four days of these essays that you can use your books, you can use your resources, but there's an elevated level of expectation.

[CK] That is true.

[JN] Um, I remember my mom making me a survival kit, you know, of these like brownie bites and peanut butter, you know, and it was challenging, and you have to get in a very Zen mental space.

[CK] 96 hours to do the six questions, return them, then expect two weeks later an oral conversation. Some use the word defense. I think that sounds a little nerve-wracking, but it is.

[JN] It is, yeah.

[CK] And you discuss your answers and extend your remarks.

[JN] Yeah, yeah, and talk about the books and yeah, your answers. And I, I still remember leaving the defense, you know, the conversation after the comprehensive exam, and just the breath that you can take afterwards, it's been unparalleled to anything.

[CK] Although I tell people ABD --- all but dissertation --- is not the three letters you came here to get. So how did you then maintain momentum and move on to your dissertation phase?

[JN] Yep. So, um, I had begun plotting an outline of what I wanted to write for my dissertation since I was in the master's program. You don't have to do that, though. There are plenty of people who figure it halfway through.

[CK] That was me in grad school.

[JN] Really?

[CK] Yeah.

[JN] Um, and then you just buckle down and start doing it. And, uh, one of the best pieces of advice that I had is to find time to write every day, even if it's just 20 minutes because there are not many, a few people my cohorts who are still writing, but the majority of us were able to graduate because there's a healthy amount of, um, what's the word I'm looking for? Like accountability from the professors, they check in with you, right? And they say, how's it going, how are you writing. Or you can even develop a writing cohort where you share, hey, we're going to share chapter one, one month from now.

[CK] I'm in the process of doing something I haven't done before, but I have a group of students, and they're all talented, uh, and they're all ABD, and I think they're all a little bit blocked. And I'm going to gently suggest, which is to say "force" them, to form a little writing cohort to help move each other along and also to check in with me then on a regular basis as a little foursome or fivesome so that they will feel that enhanced, uh, pressure is probably the right word, but handleable pressure, right? Friendly pressure, right?

[JN] Yeah.

[CK] Well, how many times did you have to explain to people either what's American Studies or what are you going to do with that?

[JN] Yeah, um, I think a lot of people don't quite understand American Studies until you've immersed yourself in it, but I like to think of it as history or culture with a bent towards, um, like greater like art form or interpretation. Like again, why does this matter or how does it connect? What's the big takeaway?

[CK] Get into meaning.

[JN] Yeah, exactly, meaning and psychology, and I love that, I love that piece. All the different steps, um, I tell people it's a marriage between history and culture.

[CK] Yeah, I like that very much. The old saying used to be maybe even before my time, history with novels, and I think we've sort of moved on past that. I like very much that you talked about your blogging because one thing American studies has been well poised to do is take advantage of new communications forms. I think academia has been a little pokey in getting its head

around that or maybe having the institution adapt so that, as you say, we're still marching through with reading lists, so that's probably the way it needs to stay at the core. But I think there are more and more ways for bright young graduate students to get their message out there and to exchange ideas with other people because now you're also a part of a community that's really if you will transnational, people who share your interests but maybe in other parts of the world. You can communicate with them.

[JN] I think that too is what I got from the Penn State program is that I'm able to survive and thrive in academic worlds. Like, I can go to national conferences, whether it's the American Folklore Society or even the Pennsylvania Historical Association, It's my next presentation. So you can thrive in those worlds. But I am more interested now in public history.

[CK] Yes.

[JN] Me and two of my local history, um, now at this point friends, we started a video series called Hometown History.

[CK] I love it.

[JN] All we do is go on Facebook live and we make presentations, and it's about 30 minutes long, and we talk about the local history in the area, and where our gear is towards the younger audience, next gen, because we're finding that current generation doesn't love to read articles, so...

[CK] That's a different world, but they learn differently.

[JN] But I don't think that I would have had the know-how to begin that video series if I didn't have the American studies program and learning about all these different platforms, um, to share knowledge, you know?

[CK] And I mentioned a few times sort of the roots of the program and one of our very long-standing professors, who is now professor emeritus, was Michael Barton. And Michael Barton, who did not have personal roots in central Pennsylvania but who moved here, uh, because he got a job and also his wife, who's an ophthalmologist, got a job. He made it a 50-year plan to apply American studies methods to local Central Pennsylvania history. And I think that this is an area where American studies still has some work to do, but I think you represent kind of the coming big thing because I think that's an area where American studies, with its interdisciplinarity and its willingness to look at things from different directions, can really make people's environs, home environs, uh, important to them. They can... maybe they're important to them to begin with...but they can sort of explain how they even have meaning that goes beyond the particular county line, right, or whatever it is?

[JN] Exactly, yeah, yeah.

[CK] So, Jamie, you mentioned the breath of maybe relief, maybe fatigue, uh, maybe a mixture of feelings that you took when you finished your comprehensives. I imagine you had something similar when you when you finished your dissertation. I've talked to students, uh, obviously within professional parameters, about their emotional existence as a graduate student. Sometimes they'll say to me, "I'm going to miss classes so much" when they wrap up their coursework, and I say, "No, no, you know, you don't need the classes anymore. Now you know how to do this kind of research and learning and study on your own, and you will find your community of, of like-minded scholars." Uh, talk about some of the emotional highs and lows, maybe some of the challenges, some of the times where you realize, as I often tell people, I say, "Graduate study can be atomizing. It can be lonely sometimes. It, you can, you can find yourself staring upwards and thinking, 'How the heck am I ever going to climb that?'"

[JN] Yeah, yeah, you're not wrong. Um, there, there were moments. Well, I, I don't want to say there were ever moments where I didn't think I was going to finish. Not finishing was not an option. Once you make this commitment, you're gonna see it through.

[CK] That's a good, that's a good way to go into it, I believe.

[JN] Yeah, well, you can't. Yeah, quitting isn't an option. Um, but I still, though, remember having hurdles of, I just have to put this down for a day or maybe I have to go hang out with my friends this weekend or spend time with my family and just forget about it.

[CK] Remember that there's a wider world beyond the book that you're reading at the moment or the exam you're cramming for.

[JN] Well, and for the candidacy and the comprehensive exam, those have deadlines and benchmarks that you have to meet. The dissertation is more on the individual, and you have to make sure, sure that you're holding yourself accountable to get across that finish line. Which is also why I think not everybody does get the PhD. It does take some grit, and you do have to buckle down and sometimes do things, frankly, that you don't want to do. I mean, I missed, like, I love happy hour. I really enjoy having a glass of wine.

[CK] This is, I think this is a good thing to love.

[JN] And sometimes I missed happy hour because I had to go home and write, um, or I would wake up early in the morning and go into work two hours early because I had to write, um, and that was frustrating at times. But when you defend your dissertation and your committee says, "Congratulations, Dr. Noerpel," it's just, uh, yeah, it's just unlike anything, unlike anything I've ever experienced.

[CK] Well, I'm delighted. I think you have more wonderful moments ahead. Let me ask you a sort of an odd question, but from a position that I recall when I was a graduate student, so like you, I had things going on outside of class when I was a grad student, and in my case, I had, you know, gotten married, had children, and some of my peers would say, "Gosh, how could you

possibly do that and this degree?" And I would often think about it, and I think you and I have had this conversation too. I found it somewhat helpful to have people in my life who were not hanging on the next exciting seminar or the next volume of the history of American banking that I was going to have to read because it allowed me, even if I was busy, to sort of be busy in another frame. Um, you clearly, and I say this from deep knowledge of you, I've never seen you not busy with something. You are a hard worker, and you have time management skills that are superb, and you just have your stuff together. Um, did that aspect play into your experience to have your job, even though it would add to the accumulated responsibilities? You knew that you had to get certain things done over here as well as over here. Do you see where I'm going?

[JN] I mean, in some ways, being a busy person helps you get your doctorate because you, you do know how to manage your time, like you said. Um, is either you or Dr. Haddad that told me that they find the percentage of people that finish quickly are adults with families and even children because they just, they know how to get stuff done.

[CK] But Dr. Haddad's wife---pardon me---but she used to work for IBM, and when I first met her, she told me that part of their corporate lore was if you want something done fast and well, find the busiest person in the office, which I always thought was kind of mean when I first heard it, but then it began to make sense to me.

[JN] Yeah, because you know how to get stuff done. I did get to a point, though, where I created a spreadsheet that was color-coded of all my obligations of a month, yes, um. Work. Exercising was important to me, maintaining my physical body as well.

[CK] Sound mind and a sound body...

[JN] My outside obligations, and I went to Dr. Haddad, and I said, "Please help me prioritize". What can I cut from this? Because I need to get this dissertation done. I had a goal of 2020. I turned 30 that year, and I wanted to get my doctor before I turned 30, so I had to get it done. And he helped me prioritize things that maybe weren't quite as important at that moment in my life, and that goes back to the mentorship of the Penn State program and the professors that take their time to actually work with you. I'm not going to say it was easy because it wasn't, but it is attainable.

[CK] Well, that's good. So it's something that you aspired to, and it sounds like increasingly as you became aware of it as a possibility, something you determined to finish. And now it sounds like you're pleased, and you're finding it useful. It's not just, "Oh, I climbed Mount Kilimanjaro," but that was several years ago. I assume it has an ongoing, uh, it plays a positive role in the here and now.

[JN] Oh, yeah. It's opened many doors, even down to, I got asked to write a local history curriculum. Keystone Oral Histories, and I got paid for it, um, and I don't think.... I'm a teacher, so being an educator, of course, helps you write curriculum, but I don't think I would have been contracted without the Ph.D. behind my name. But I also wouldn't have been able to provide or

deliver a high-quality product if it wasn't for all the reading that I did within African-American literature that was a part of my subfields or my comprehensive exams that gave me the footing that I needed to get that done. Um, and so I think what's cool, though, about the American Studies program is that I didn't think that I was going to start a video series, or I didn't have this curriculum nailed down, you know, contract written. It's more that it helps give you a launch pad to then open doors and see opportunities that you wouldn't have otherwise.

I mean, even down to I took an ethnography class with Dr. Buccitelli, and one of our assignments was to look at different ways of storytelling. And so it wasn't just the classic open up a book, but he had us go to all these different websites with GIS and videos, and, um, that's, you know, something that I didn't expect.

[CK] One of the areas that the program has made a real push in over the last few years, and I think successfully, has been to expand our offerings and deepen our offerings in gender, and we have two new newish wonderful professors, Dr. Zaborskis and Dr. Kupfner, very similar to my name, but there's an N. Um, so if I may, uh, would you talk a little bit about your experience as a woman in the program. As historically, although fortunately not that recently, academia was sort of a closed shop for, you know, guys who dress like this. Um, what was your, what was your, uh, lived experience as a graduate student as a woman, uh, going into the, what is, as you say, a somewhat daunting, uh, course of study?

[JN] Um, I think the key way to answer that is that I never was overtly aware of my femininity in the classes because you didn't feel ostracized. You didn't like, so for example, I remember when I was 12, I realized I was white. I was 12, and it was when I was in Ocean City, and for the first time, I was surrounded by people of color, and I realized that I was the minority, and that is not what a lot of people of color, if you ask them, when they realize that they're Black or Hispanic or Asian, it's much younger, and I took that for granted for a large portion of my life, and I wouldn't have even been able to talk about what I just talked about if it wasn't for the American Studies program and openly having conversations around race and gender in a way that is not offensive, very opening, but also not individually targeting. You don't feel, you know, you're very aware of your race and your gender in the class, but you don't feel ostracized or targeted in any way because the readings are very broad, and also the students in your class, there's a high level of diversity on this campus.

[CK] So, so you would think the program, uh, is open to a diverse array of potential grad students.

[JN] Of course, and demographically, but also politically.

[CK] Yes.

[JN] Um, you know, my family, when you think typical York County working class, is very conservative, so they would say it's very liberal. But I remember coming into the classes and

feeling like every student did have a voice, no matter what side of the spectrum that they came on. And that is powerful, that you can enter an academic arena and feel like you can share your personal beliefs without being bullied. Frankly.

[CK] I like that. I always tell people that a seminar needs to do two things at once that on the face of it would be tough to combine but must be done. It has to be exciting and challenging intellectually. You have to be able to try out ideas, and they have to sort of be able to go zing, zing, zing around the room, but it also has to be, in some respects, a safe space in which you can try out ideas and maybe run one up and think, "Oh, no, no, never mind, that was a bad idea," without torpedoing your prospects, right.

[JN] Exactly.

[CK] Yeah, well, Jamie, it's been a pleasure. It always is, but, uh, it's been a special pleasure to hear from you in kind of a retrospective and then up to the moment and then looking through the future way. I'm so pleased that your American Studies experience and your American Studies doctorate are holding you in good stead. I'm always happy to always happy to talk, but...

[JN] Yeah, we did it.

[CK] We sure did. And, folks, thank you so much, uh, for watching. Um, again, I'm Charles Kupfer, associate professor of American Studies here at Penn State Harrisburg. And if anything you've seen or heard sparks your interest and you'd like to know more, please look us up on our website, reach out. We are always happy to talk to people about what we do here.

[Music]