

Transcript for: "From Being Unhoused to a Earning a Master's Degree: a Sac State alumna's story."

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Danielle Slakoff: Welcome to Building Justice. A podcast by Sacramento State University's center on race immigration and social justice, also known as CRISJ. We explore critical issues affecting our communities with the hopes of creating a healthier and more just world. Your hosts for today are me, Danielle Slakoff, assistant Professor of Criminal justice here at Sacramento State, and Erica Amaya, a recent graduate of the master of science in criminal justice program here at Sacramento State.

Danielle Slakoff: Erica: Thank you so much for being here today.

Erica Amaya: Thank you so much for having me, Dr. S, and it's a pleasure to speak with you again.

Danielle Slakoff: Okay, Erica, let's jump right into it. So, you recently graduated from the Master's program in criminal justice here at Sacramento State. You are a first-generation Latina student, and this your master's degree was a lifelong goal for you. So, can you tell the listeners a little bit about your path to Sacramento State and to your master's degree.

Erica Amaya: Yes, yes, of course I feel that my story is a long one, but I feel that it is very important to disclose all parts of it. So, I am originally from Sacramento. I grew up in Del Paso Heights, to be exact. I attended Grant Union High School and graduated from Grant Union High School as well, and so my path and my eagerness and my passion for education, all stemmed from attending Grant Union High School. I went through a difficulty period in my life, and I was during my freshman year of high school, me and my family. My mother and sister experience homelessness.

When we first experienced homelessness, I wasn't a fan of school, I didn't really see a future with school. I just was on the path of survival for a very long time, and when we faced homelessness I will always remember--One night we were, we were set up at a church. That was where we were after the week, and so, as I laid myself to lay down, and, you know, fall asleep, I will always remember the look that my mom had in her eyes when, you know, she was basically saying good night to me. And so that night I told myself that, not me, nor my family, not my sister, and not my mom, would ever have to experience such difficulties again.

It was a painful, painful era in my life, but it pushed me to love education because it kind of forced me to redirect my path and think about my future, which is not something that living in Sacramento and living in a low income and impoverished area, really ever gives you a chance to do because we're so focused on surviving the day to day. And so, when I realized that I had this love and eagerness for education, I decided to apply, and looking into actually going to a college.

And so, I went to Chico State. That's when I was in my undergrad, and while I was in Chico state I also realized that I didn't want it to end there, and something that I don't really share is that in high school, my junior year in high school, I actually mentally created a Ten Year plan. And so, my Ten Year Plan consisted of getting my bachelor's degree, getting my master's degree, and eventually moving to Los Angeles.

And so, once I got to Chico state, I was then faced with different obstacles, an obstacle of going to a university that wasn't as diverse as my home city. And so, with this it brought a lot of attention to me,

and just looking at the differences that we faced, that the struggles that we faced, and realizing that it wasn't just a Sacramento problem, it was an entire world problem. And so then that pushed me to look into getting my masters, and something I've always really been passionate about is criminal justice reform.

And so, being passionate about that, I decided to get my master's in criminal justice, and what better place to go back to my home city and get it from there. And so that's that's kind of my story of how I left Sacramento, but found my way back, and I got my master's there.

Danielle Slakoff: That's awesome. Thank you so much for sharing that, and for sharing about your experience being unhoused, because I know many students at Sacramento State also are struggling, or have had that happen, and it may be something that they haven't talked about with their professors, or even their fellow students. So, I know it'll mean a lot to the students that listen to this to hear that. So, thank you so much for sharing that and sharing that part of your story especially.

And you know I, as somebody who worked with you closely in your master's program, I knew about your ten year plan. But I also think that's really cool, that you were able to make that a reality. But we can talk about your next steps in a bit.

This master's degree program here at Sacramento State, you went the thesis route, which means that you went the research route to complete your master's degree program. And in the program, you wrote a thesis called "When Home Isn't Safe. A content analysis of stories about Covid-19 and intimate partner violence." I would love to know how you decided to study this particular topic.

Erica Amaya: Yes, yes. Oh, man, I feel like it was a lifetime ago, but it was not. When I first started the master's program, it was a semester before the pandemic. So, I was one of the first cohorts that had to kind of transition through that pandemic online learning. And so originally, I had some ideas has been brewing, a little bit different ideas.

But what'll really helped me really finalize my choice was when the Master's program Chair was able to host a virtual meeting, and I was able to meet all the professors that were on board and willing to be a thesis advisor. And so, when I came across your presentation, and when you introduced yourself to all of us, I just knew that I wanted to work with you and being able to talk with you about your career focus and kind of what I like to focus on as well, which is impoverished communities or individuals that don't have necessarily representatives. Just, for example, like women of color, that's somewhere where we were able to connect. And so, the more we talked, and we were able to kind of finalize that. Well, I wanted to do something that consisted of qualitative analysis. And so, I wasn't able to have access to real humans because we were dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic. So, then you kind of offered the idea of newspaper articles, and I, of course I would have never thought of that.

But that was so amazing, just because for me it was something different. And it was a way that I could kind of lose myself in the research, but not necessarily have to go out of my way and leave my home of safety to be able to kind of encounter that, and so, looking at intimate partner violence was somewhat of a new topic for me. But it is something that I realized was so prevalent in my community and growing up. And so, a kind of mixture of all of that really helped me decide on that on that final decision.

Danielle Slakoff: I know, and it's tough. I mean, I don't think we've talked about this on CRISJ podcast so far that Covid really did change a lot of people's research abilities, just to keep people safe on doing

research, but also with people that are in violent relationships. They might not be able to zoom about those relationships, right? Because they might be at home with their abusers. And so that was something that I know you and I had to talk through was, you know, "How do we access? How could we access people right now?" And it was really difficult, because the reality is that it's really difficult in the pandemic to do so, especially with groups that are high risk.

So, I think that's kind of important and an interesting conversation. Just how much research itself changed during especially the early part of the pandemic before vaccines and everything else, you know.

Erica Amaya: Oh, yes.

Danielle Slakoff: So, you mentioned your thesis, and how you got there-- I would love to know, and I'm sure the listeners would love to hear what were some of the key findings that you had from your master's thesis.

Erica Amaya: Yes, so the first and foremost, qualitative analysis is just amazing. I fell in love with it. There's just you never know what you're going to find.

And so I had many, many codes, as in what I was looking for--- themes. Themes is a better word to use. I had many different themes as I kind of went through their research, and so the most significant key findings for me personally, and what I really enjoyed writing about most importantly was how COVID regulations and conditions affected victims of intimate partner violence, because during Covid-19 there was a push out that home was the safest place for everyone to be, that home was where everyone was secure, safe, and had no --Basically, they highlighted home as the most safe place anyone can be.

And doing that research, you would know that being at home is actually the least safe place to be.

And so really, seeing that the media actually portrayed that and talked about how specifically the Covid regulations of staying at home, staying in proximity of only those that you might actually see day to day only created bigger risk for those facing intimate partner Violence, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Another one -- two more that were actually really interesting was the way the media also talked about essential services and so essential services for individuals facing intimate partner violence would be, for example, emergency and intimate partner violence hotlines, or the domestic violence shelter, where one can hopefully leave their home and go and find shelter.

And so, as it is both of these essential services don't necessarily have the funding that they should have to be fully equipped and ready to combat intimate partner violence. And so when Covid-19, the pandemic, hit, everyone realized how much these services were basically being even further negatively affected.

A lot of them worked with, you know, volunteers or with getting grants from specific programs. And so there wasn't, necessarily funding available for them to keep up with everything. Nor was there actual resources that they even could then resort to, to better house their population of help.

And lastly, one of the ones that I did find interesting was how the media talked about, not necessarily in the terms of coercive control, but they talked about how intimate partner violence is-- It consists of many things. They can be mental, mental abuse, physical abuse, emotional abuse, financial abuse, and

they were able to kind of not necessarily like I mentioned--not say the word coercive control-- because that's still a little bit of a newer term in the research world, but they were still trying their best to kind of word that, and and make that evident for everyone reading, because for a lot of people they weren't getting their news from anywhere, but maybe newspapers or online articles.

Danielle Slakoff: Mhmm. Yeah, that's so interesting. And you know, as somebody who has obviously read your thesis, I was definitely struck by these same findings, and especially the one as you noted right at the top about you know how home wasn't safe for everyone, and how the media really had to do this kind of important job of explaining that, right? Explaining that for some people it was actually less eyes on those families to protect them, and that was a really unfortunate reality of the pandemic.

On that note, what did you think from your findings in your research—what did you think that the media did well, talking about intimate partner violence in the Covid-19 context?

Erica Amaya: Yes, I think they did a really a well job on explaining how the Covid regulations might not necessarily be a “shoe fits all” kind of situation, because everyone was pushing that that notion out the media, the news channels, the CDC: Everyone was pushing the notion out that home was the safest place to be.

So when I was reading these stories of these women, you know, for example, making phone calls to the emergency and intimate partner violence hotline, you know, they're in their home.

And there was one woman I remember specifically, she was in the bathroom making the phone call, and she had her body against the door, so that he wouldn't come in. And so for me it was really important that the media not only talked about these stories, but also mentioned in that what was going on, because I feel that it would have been really easy for the media to simply say, “Oh, you know, intimate partner violence happens, and it's a tragedy.”

But no, they went deeper than that. They interviewed real individuals who were facing that problem. They interviewed survivors, and that was actually another finding—they included survivor quotes and advocate quotes. And that was essential for me, just because it showed that the media was also using their platform to be able to give representation to those individuals that couldn't speak up or couldn't speak out.

One thing that they did that I thought was very important, and also significant and on their end, was that they even altered or changed the names of the survivors, so that the story could not be any way kind of drawn back to them, and so they were really respectful about the survivors, and also sharing those personal stories, I think was really really important.

Danielle Slakoff: You mentioned that survivors were quoted in a lot of the stories, but you also mentioned advocates. Why do you think it's important that advocates were talked about? I'm just curious.

Erica Amaya: Yeah, Yeah. So it's really important, Because advocates are the ones—those are their first line defenders. They're on the ground with them. They're not only advocates, but they're also professionals in that in the sense that they understand how intimate partner violence works. Um, the psychology behind it, the trauma behind it. Kind of the path. Everyone's story is different, but they kind of have that sense of “this is basically what kind of happens in in the intimate partner violence cycles.”

And so with them, being able to advocate for the survivors and say, “Hey, you know, at this, at this domestic violence shelter, we need more resources,” or a doctor stepping in and advocating for the psychology behind it. I think that was really important, because the advocates talked a lot about how this would affect not only the individual being affected by intimate partner violence, but any kids in the household, and they were able to kind of give more of a professional outlook--Whereas with survivors, they are just speaking from their personal experience, whereas the advocates were able to highlight kind of the similarities and the struggles that a lot of intimate partner violence survivors face, and their expertise with the subject, I think, is really important to highlight.

Danielle Slakoff: Absolutely. Wow! That's amazing that the media did such a great job of that. I think that is really important and a really cool and interesting finding that you had.

Okay. So we just talked about, “What did the media do?” Well, I'm curious, based on your research, what you found that maybe the media didn't do such a good job of when they were talking about intimate partner violence during Covid-19.

Erica Amaya: Yes! Well, first and foremost, I had a few, a few things that I think the media could have done well, but I'll talk about two that, I think, are that I believe are really important, one being that they didn't necessarily focus on the most affected populations of intimate partner violence. And so, as individuals who've done research, we know that Black and brown women, Indigenous women and women of color, face intimate partner violence at high rates.

And so the news media didn't necessarily highlight that-- it didn't really make that connection to their audience, nor did it highlight the possibility of those individuals even being further affected by the conditions of Covid-19. So I think, in that aspect, in representing the women that face intimate partner violence at high rates, they definitely could have done better in that in that area.

Another area that I myself, I was really kind of even taken by surprise, was that we had a lot of personal with it. We had a lot of personal stories which was amazing right because these survivors are putting their life out there and letting us see, as viewers, letting us listen to their stories. But one thing that was missing--there was never any article that really mentioned any conviction, any charges being placed on the perpetrator. And so for me, I think that's important, because not only do we need to hear about the success stories of getting out. But we also need to hear about those perpetrators that were convicted that were charged because a lot of, and a lot of individuals that faced intimate partner violence, they don't necessarily speak out nor do they report it. And so when someone does, it would have been nice to know what happened to the perpetrator, if anything at all.

I think that's really important, but overall um just to kind of go back on the representation. Not only did they not represent women of color, but they didn't necessarily represent the LGBTQIA+ community either. And so it was very just focused on men and women and basically the heterosexual relationship. And so, based on research, I was able to learn that intimate partner violence is actually is very prominent in the Lgbtqia+ community as well, and so only focusing on heterosexual partners keeps from a lot of the reality behind intimate partner violence.

Danielle Slakoff: Yeah, that's so interesting because it sounds like, you know. Basically what you found is that they are talking about intimate partner violence, but not necessarily specific to any individual other than just a man married to a woman. That's kind of interesting that that race and sexual orientation

would be left out of that conversation, when we know that that--Unfortunately, that's what the data shows-- is that women of color and people in the Lgbtqia community are at high risk. So I do think that's a very important basically non-finding, right? You didn't see that they did a good job of that in the media. So, thank you so much for sharing that.

Well, you know, I would love to talk a little bit more about just you know, being a first-generation Latina student in a master's degree program. But before I get there, is there anything else just from the thesis process that you would like to share, you know, to somebody who's listening, who might be embarking on their very first research activity like this? Is there any advice you would give somebody specifically about the thesis process?

Erica Amaya: First and foremost, I want to say that for anyone listening. You belong in the room that you're in. You belong in that classroom, and you belong in that program, and don't ever let anyone or anything make you feel less than, or feel as if you don't have that authority in that classroom, because that is your classroom, and you belong there. And I just wanted to say that.

But for me the thesis part I would say, number one, make sure that your advisor, when you go through the process of picking an advisor is someone that you can genuinely connect with someone that you can have real life conversations with someone that you know you can go to if you have questions.

Dr. Slakoff, you were all of that for me, and if it wasn't for that, I know that I would have probably been very lost. I always had that comfortability with you. I knew that I could always come to you with any questions. I think that's ultimately one of the most important steps, because that's going to be the individual that you are partnered up with for a good year to two years of your program.

And so that's that's very important.

Another--Make sure you give yourself a deadline, even if you feel that you might, you know you have, "Oh, I have a whole summer." Don't let that be the mindset. Give yourself deadlines because weeks will fly by, and then you're looking back, and you're kind of asking the questions of "Why am I still working on this?"

I found that within myself, I started before the summer, and I realized that I wasn't done. I wasn't completed with my, with my with my first steps of my research, and looking back on the time I realized I didn't time manage as best as I could, so definitely time management, picking your thesis advisor, and just making sure it's something that, making sure that your research focuses on something that you're passionate about, because you want to make sure that you're interested because it's going to take up a lot of your time. It's worth it. It's completely worth it, but just definitely making sure that it's something you're passionate about, because it's gonna feel like that's your--kind of like your child. You're bringing in right. You're gonna, you're doing everything, you're building it up. You're talking through the process. And so definitely, those are like the three main things—picking an authentic and someone that you can relate to for your advisor, also time management, and picking something that you're passionate about.

Danielle Slakoff: Thank you so much for saying that, and it's funny, because from my perspective. Being a mentor is such an amazing thing. It's one of the best parts of being a professor is being able to mentor students, but it is true that you spend so much time with that person, and they're there to guide you through so long that the person you pick is very, very important.

And so sometimes, you know, I think that can be something that's maybe not stated to people before they start a program. They may be told. "Oh, Why don't you work with this person?" without actually knowing--is this a good fit for me, you know?

So I think that's really really important advice to hear from somebody who just went through a program. And you know I'm so grateful to have been a small part of your journey to your master's degree. Okay,

So that was that was about the thesis and research, which is, you know, can be very daunting and scary, especially to students. So thank you for talking through kind of that idea about the thesis.

But I'm curious--What would you just tell somebody who is considering getting a master's degree, or maybe is even on the fence about getting a master's degree?

Erica Amaya: Oh, man, I think first and foremost definitely kind of going back to my own experience, being a first generation Latina, being the first one in my family to pursue a master's degree, and coming from the neighborhood that I come from. I didn't see too many people that I immediately knew kind of pursuing the same thing, and so I will admit -- imposter syndrome did, it did affect me. I did feel sometimes like, "Do I want to go into this? Am I equipped? Am I ready?"

And so, for anyone questioning themselves or for anyone thinking about it, definitely give yourself the opportunity to go for it, because you deserve that chance to apply and to go for it, and if anything--you tried, right? But first and foremost, definitely, it's important to make sure that you know definitely what area of study you want to go into, because different colleges offer different things especially based on the program that you're interested in. So doing, doing your research is essential, making sure that you're going to go into a university that's going to meet all of your needs, and whether that's your ethical needs, your educational needs, your moral needs, your financial needs, right? Making sure all of those are into perspective.

Sacramento State is an amazing school. It offers amazing programs, and I was really honored to be able to be a part of the criminal Justice Master's program there, but definitely doing your research and going for it, and not letting anything kind of keep you behind, especially not self-doubt. Because we are our biggest critics, and so just to go for it it'll be definitely worth it.

Danielle Slakoff: Yeah, I feel like I relate to a lot of what you just said. I went to Cal State Long Beach for my undergrad, and then I switched I was journalism, and then I switched to criminal justice. So I got my criminal Justice Masters at a Cal State as well, and you know the impostor syndrome-- All of those things is so real, you know, and I remember feeling that as well, just for me, I felt as somebody with a journalism degree like, What am I--am in the right place? I feel so far behind on a lot of the theory, especially the Criminal Justice theories were all pretty new to me, and so I felt far behind my classmates in that sense.

Erica Amaya: Yeah, yes. And actually in in relation to that, I also I come from a different undergrad. So my undergrad major, my bachelor's is in communication studies. So similar—I was definitely behind on the theories. That was one of the first classes and for some individuals who majored in criminal justice in undergrad a couple of theories they were familiar with.

And so, Yeah, I definitely relate to that, and also know that if you want to change your path and your direction with your master's program, you can definitely do that. It's okay to jump from one thing to

another as long as that's what you, as an individual, really want to do, like Dr. Slakoff shared, and how I share. We have different undergrads.

Danielle Slakoff: I don't know if I realized that yours was in communication studies. I'm sure you've told me at some point.

Erica Amaya: Yeah, yeah--The only relation was that it was an option in public affairs. So, I had a little bit of kind of introduction to, for example, freedom of speech and like news media. But that was kind of as far as it got to the criminal justice aspect.

Danielle Slakoff: Well, and I think honestly, that's good advice, and that's good for students to hear as well is just that you don't have to stick with that same program you're in now. You can. You can change whether it's something totally different, or maybe something related like psychology, or we have a lot of uh political science, you know, Double Majors, right? That might be considering criminal justice for a master's degree, and that's totally okay. These are kind of the unsaid rules that no one tells you.

Erica Amaya: Yes!

Danielle Slakoff: And there's a lot of those just in Academia in general. It's kind of the unsaid rules that I think as a first-generation student myself as somebody whose parents didn't go to college, there are so many things that I didn't know or understand, and I know that something you and I have talked about as well is just the unwritten rules around college just in general.

Erica Amaya: Yeah, so many of them

Danielle Slakoff: And then I think it almost--you're even more hyper aware of that at the graduate level. I don't want to scare anyone. Everyone should definitely still go for it. But I guess the advice I would give people if they're feeling that way is to find somebody you can talk to and ask questions that you feel safe asking questions, too. And spoiler, it still continues through your Phd and beyond.

So, I would love to know you mentioned earlier your ten-year plan, and you mentioned that you got your bachelors and your masters, so I would love to know what's next for you and what you kind of see on the horizon for you, now that you've gotten your master's degree.

Erica Amaya: Um! So as part of that ten-year plan. The last part I had was move to Los Angeles, and so I've completed that. I'm currently in LA--I'm actually currently working at Tarzana Treatment Center, and so we offer services for substance use disorder. And so there's an array of services that that college provides, and it's and it's amazing.

Eventually my long-term goal would be to get into policy work, that that love and passion for criminal justice is still very, very dear, dear to my heart, and so as of now, I'm kind of in that position.

And let me just say this, actually, really quick because as a first generation student, we have been on survival mode for so long, and we're always asking ourselves "What's next? Okay, What's next? You've done this. What's next?" And we're in our own mind so much. And that's something that I realized once I got to Los Angeles. That once I got here, and I applied, and I got my position at this new company. I myself was asking myself, "Okay, Erica, what's next? What are you going to do next?" My own family was asking me "What's your next plan?" And when you've accomplished so much, personally, right-- Those personal goals of yours of getting your bachelor's, getting your masters, and then starting your

job. After that, it's okay to rest in it for a little bit, because for me I thought that I was going to come here, and I was going to-- I'd have to just start right into policy work, or I'd have to get a position in the DA's office, and I had to just hit the ground running.

But I'm learning that as I'm going through the motions, I'm learning that right now, I actually want to kind of take a breather, at least for like the first year post-graduation and work, and be happy, and be content with what life has so beautifully blessed me with. But definitely still want to look at the policy work.

So look out for me, Doctor S, cause I'm coming back. I'll be—I'm sorry, not sorry not coming back to Sacramento, but I'll be back on your radar. I'm definitely going to be going into policy work. And so once I'm here with this company for about a good year or so I'm either going to try, because it's a very innovative company. I'm either going to try to integrate a program or maybe look elsewhere, but definitely going to keep that that path of policy work and policy change in mind because I still feel that there's a lot of reforms and laws that need to be put into place in order for people from the communities like mine to be able to have resources.

And so for me, it always goes back to resources, because if we don't have the resources, we can never actually pursue higher dreams or higher goals.

Danielle Slakoff: You know it's interesting because this is the CRISJ podcast and one of our big things that we focus on is social justice and change and bettering our communities, and you've hit on so many of those topics and what you've talked about today, you know, and intimate partner violence is such a heavy topic. So I really appreciate that you talked about that today as well, but also what you're looking forward to in the future. It's really cool to hear that, and it's great for people to hear what your dreams and goals are, you know, beyond Sacramento State.

And I love what you said about resting. I think that that's very very wise advice, and at this time right now, you know, we're in 2022. Covid-19 is still around, and it's been a hard couple of years, you know? Globally. So, I think the idea of resting and taking care of yourself is really important, and you're going to be so much more ready and prepared for the fight ahead, if you take some time to focus on you.

Erica Amaya: Definitely, definitely. And just being around individuals that are already working for a change. At the end of the day as long as I'm working toward impacting people's lives in a positive way—I think that's always been at the core of me, just helping individuals, helping others, and even even back when I was at Grant, I mean I was volunteering and doing things that my friends would always question me about. But, hey, for me it's always about people, our people, my people, my community, that I come from just really important for me.

Danielle Slakoff: And we know that so many--speaking to your current job--we know that so many people that struggle with substance abuse, have had experiences with criminal justice, whether it's victimization and other things. And so, you're still very much doing the work in criminal justice, you know.

Erica Amaya: Yeah, I love that perspective. Actually, I really like that. Yeah, definitely. And I hope--I'll see, I'll see once I'm there for a little longer, but they do allow different programs kind of become created, and so if there's any way I can, maybe then try to get into possibly finding and looking to give

substance use disorder information, or classes to even people who are incarcerated or kind of out of incarceration. then I would definitely work in that area as well.

Danielle Slakoff: That's so amazing. Well, Erica, it has been so great chatting with you and catching up. I know that the CRISJ listeners are gonna feel like they learn so much about you and your story and what you accomplished at Sacramento State, but also what you're going to keep accomplishing beyond Sacramento State. So, thank you so much for being here. I absolutely loved having you.

Erica Amaya: Thank you so much for having me, and I really enjoyed this as well.

Danielle Slakoff: All right, listeners. Thank you so much for being here and for listening. We hope that our conversation today sparked, understanding, empathy, and motivation to join a struggle for a better future. For all this is Danielle Slakoff, of the CRISJ Podcast. Thank you for listening.