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Jess Olsen and Gabby Cooney

Jessica Olsen 2008

Illinois Wesleyan University

Gabriella Cooney 2017

Illinois Wesleyan University

Council for IWU Women

Illinois Wesleyan University

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Jess Olsen and Gabby Cooney
Council for IWU Women, Women's Summit
February 27, 2016

Jess Olsen: Okay... so Gabby...as we sit here at the Women's Council Summit 2016, what would you say are some of the most important lessons that you've learned in your life so far?

Gabby Cooney: I think...just working hard. That's super generic but I don't know. It's been pretty important I guess in my life. My parents divorced when I was pretty young and it left my mom in not an ideal financial situation. And so I just grew up watching her somehow manage to balancing raising two ridiculous children, while also working three jobs when she went from like working one part-time job to three full time jobs.

Olsen: Yeah, yeah.

Cooney: And still managing to be super involved with everything we did. Like...I was obnoxious and in like seventeen activities. She went to everything and still managed to work like 80 hours a week. So... I just...that was always really important to me and something that I really admired about her was like...as I was growing up...but even still...

Cooney: Even still, she's just...she's pretty cool. And so whenever I am in class and I'm like, "I can't do this," or I feel overwhelmed I'm just like...I-I can. I just gotta-

Olsen: If she can do it, then I can...

Cooney: She did some pretty cool things and I'm a part of her so I think that I can do it too.

Olsen: Absolutely. So one of the other thing that gets brought up here is obviously she is an important woman in your life. Who has been another important female influence in your life so far?

Cooney: hmmm...I'm trying to think. Maybe my grandma. ...there are a lot of guys in my family so it's kind of hard...

Olsen: (laughter) yeah...

Cooney: to choose another woman. But she's...she's not your ideal—or not ideal. But not what you picture when you think grandma.

Olsen: (laughter) okay.

Cooney: She's not fuzzy or cuddly or anything like that. I love her dearly but she has always been very supportive of our family and just helps in the ways that she can...maybe not the ways that you would expect. But there have been many times where I was very fortunate to have the grandparents that I have. Whether it is helping me have a car to drive...you know...after mine breaks down. Or, staying in school when certain scholarships disappear. So...she has also been very cool and she...she came from just about nothing and so and she's doing...you know...very very well. So she's just very admirable.

Olsen: Yeah, definitely. So that said, thinking about those important people in your life. And obviously you're proud of your family, what else is something in your life that you're really proud of?

Cooney: ...I don't know. [long pause] I don't know. My family and I are really close so it's hard to like think of something that just isn't my family.

Olsen: What's something you hope one day that you will be proud of...like looking into the future, what you hope to do that will make you feel that way?

Cooney: I hope to just...continue my education. I don't want to stop. Ideally, I would like to eventually get a PhD in Psychology and that would just be really...really...I don't even know. Just really great for me. No one in my family really has much of an education...so just...I mean even being here is pretty unexpected.

Olsen: Well, yeah. There it is. Be proud of that for sure. Yeah, that's awesome.

Cooney: So... I'm hoping to keep that momentum going.

Olsen: Okay. Very good. And then this kind of a last thought. It says here for new incoming students at Wesleyan, what would you want to say to them? What have you learned so far... that you would pass on?

Cooney: I think the most important thing that I have learned is just that it is okay to be terrified all the time and to feel like your life is a mess because you're not the only one. And it really isn't a mess...you're going to get it together. I don't know how many times I've thought that like because one class didn't work out or because one paper...you know I got a bad grade on it. But like the rest of my track was off course and I was going to be a hobo and live in a box. So just not attributing so much importance to like so many small things. And just, remembering the bigger picture and why you're here.

Olsen: Yeah. Absolutely. I think that's great.

Cooney: What is your earliest memory? (Laughter)

Olsen: I have a vague memory of sitting in preschool and getting a snack and that sounds so bizarre right that I have this vague memory of animal crackers and a little paper cup. But my clearest...earliest memory is when my sister was born. I was four and a half and I remember the transition between my parents' car and my grandparents' car. My grandparents met us in the parking lot and it was late at night- I remember my sister was born really late at night and my grandparents took me to their house and my parents went to the hospital and I had a sister! And I think that's significant because of how much a part of my life my sister is now. So I remember from the very beginning...all the middle times when she drove me absolutely crazy and you know pulled my hair and bit me. And all kinds of crazy stuff. But now she's one of my very best friends. And so I think that has been a really neat thing. And she went to Wesleyan as well so we have a family connection here and that makes this place that much more special to our whole family.

Cooney: Yeah. What are some of the like important lessons that you learned at Wesleyan?

Olsen: I think so much of what I learned is to try different things. To get involved in things that I've enjoy. And not to limit myself. I came in knowing that I wanted to be an English teacher. So I said okay that means I take English classes...that means that I take education classes. Pretty simple...and then I was encouraged to perhaps continue taking German and I tested out of the required classes and I thought okay I am done with that...that's nice. And then I realized oh I can pursue this further. And I did and I finished my minor and then that led me to do my first experience after college which was doing a Fulbright foreign language teaching assistantship in Hamburg, Germany. So I taught over there for a year after graduation and I don't think that I would have done that if I hadn't opened myself up to the different possibilities that are here so that's a big thing. And also just a lot of communication skills. I became a better writer. I think I became a better speaker...better at kind of clarifying my thoughts and working with other people so I think just a lot of valuable life skills.

Cooney: Do you have any specific advice that you would give to like new IWU students?

Olsen: I would encourage them to participate in activities that they enjoy. Create those activities if they don't exist you know new clubs are starting all the time. I think that's awesome. Also to get involved in the Bloomington-Normal community as much as possible. It's great to be on campus and to be involved here but even just a few blocks away there are opportunities. I tutored at Bent Elementary School. You can walk there...you know...in just a couple of minutes and spend time with a little kids which is a welcome break for college students sometimes. I did a lot of tutoring and mentoring at the junior high with my field hours for my education classes. I did volunteer opportunities through APO. So to get involved and to see the bigger picture, I think...and you had mentioned that as well. Like there's- you know, sometimes when we get focused on one small thing and hung up on that...and there is so much more out there.

Cooney: What else do you hope that your future holds for you?

Olsen: Well I just moved to Chicago in the past year so that has been kind of a big change in terms of location. I am still teaching high school English. But...it's been a change in location in a good way. There are a lot of opportunities there...reconnecting with old friends...just the cultural advantages to living in a bigger city I find great. So I hope that my future holds more of that same sense of- I want to see what's out there...and keep wondering and asking questions and seeing what's next...I want to travel more... as much as possible anyway. I want to go back to school in some capacity...maybe get another master's degree...maybe work on my PhD...maybe I don't know and there is something really great about that and so I think that just seeing what's out there and what's next is scary as we have talked about before but also really exciting.

[Interview ends at 00:08:35]