

What's Next? Podcast

Melva Treviño Peña, Ph.D.

[Snip-it's from Podcast] Melva: We also have those issues here in this country. Like our own communities in this country, are facing very similar issues but because it's not like some exotic location, like, would you rather go to Flint, Michigan or would you rather go to Esmeraldas? I mean, we don't value the work here in the United States as much as work that is done internationally, because there's like, I don't know, some...

[Bouncy theme music plays.]

[Introduction] Welcome to the What's Next? podcast. Let me just start off by saying. Not everyone has the same background. There is no road-map for success. Life begins at the edge of your comfort zone. Leaning into your curiosities. It does suck when you grow up. We're all still figuring out who we are. You can't just sit back and be silent. Black lives matter. It is the little stuff that makes the biggest difference. Do you have another hour? [Laughs]

[Bouncy theme music fades.]

Cody: Hello, Beaver nation, and welcome to the What's Next? podcast.

I'm your host, Cody Stover. Our guest today works at the intersection of nature and humanity, conducting research on the relationships between people's livelihoods and the environment. Of course, she's a 2018 Ph.D. grad, Ph.D. in geography from Oregon State University representing the College of Earth, Ocean and Atmospheric Science, and now is an assistant professor in the Department of Marine Affairs at the University of Rhode Island. Dr. Melva Treviño Peña, thanks for joining us on the What's Next? podcast.

Melva: Yeah, thanks for having me.

Cody: Yeah, I'm really excited to hear more about your work and just kind of your journey in general to how you got into this field and the really impactful stuff that you're doing.

Before we get into that, I would love to hear a little bit of your background. Where are you from originally and what kind of led you into this this field of study?

Melva: I'm originally from a border town called Piedras Negras, where it is I think it's one of the five main ports of entry to into U.S. - Mexico. So it's a small town, but because it's a border town and in the port of entry, it's kind of a known town.

I also really like to brag about this, and I, I think it's cool that everyone will know that is where nachos were invented [Cody: Wow!] and like in 1943. Well, so yeah, Piedras Negras. So if you're going on a date or something, you can impress them by telling them where nachos are from.

Cody: That's wonderful. OK, so that's where you started out and then you actually went to Oregon State for your Ph.D., but you had a couple degrees before that. Take me through that journey. Like, how did you kind of land at OSU?

Melva: Yeah, my path is super non-linear. I come from the small town on the border. My dad is actually he was a Methodist missionary. And that's why we moved to the United States in 1998. We moved actually to Ferguson, Missouri for a year. I didn't speak any English, but I didn't have a lot of kids I could speak with in my classroom. So I had to learn it very quickly if I wanted to make friends. So within like six months or so we were like interpreting for my parents everywhere we went.

Then we moved. We bounced around from like Texas for a year. And then we settled in Las Vegas, where I ended up going to middle school and high school. And then I ended up at the University of Nevada in Reno. And I was very confused about why I was even there and I didn't really know what to do. So I actually started out as a business major because I guess I sounded like I would get a job when I graduated. And I was pretty miserable in that major. Was not doing so well in school. And I ended up doing this. I was, I think, international business. So then I switched to this very interdisciplinary

major I learned about called international affairs, which is really funny because I hadn't traveled or anything. But the types of classes I took in that major were so broad and covered so many different types of topics. So I ended up graduating from the University of Nevada, Reno, with a major in international affairs and a minor in French.

And that's actually where then I found geography in a very unusual way. I really didn't know what geography degrees entailed. I didn't know what it meant to major in geography, the classes you take and the geography department. But I took a class in history department and it was called environmental history. And essentially, even without knowing it, I learned and fell in love with along with learning what geography was and I fell in love with it. But even though it wasn't called that in the class, when I look back, that was geography. So I ended up kind of thinking a little bit about geography.

As I was graduating, I my parents had moved to the Midwest and southern Illinois, which was so far from what I had ever lived in Nevada for like 11 years in Nevada. So I ended up with 11 year. No, sorry about that, it was like eight years, I don't know. But anyway, we ended up going to Illinois with my parents to figure out what I was going to do next after I graduated and a professor of mine that I took a geography class with in Reno knew the chair of the geography department in southern Illinois, and she put me in touch with her. So I met with that woman and she was like, you should just apply to our program. And I was like what? I'm like, no, I'm not ready for this. And she was like, you should just apply, just do it. And it was like May. And I applied and I ended up getting in and I had an assistantship like a TA-ship. So I ended up just kind of stumbling into this master's degree. [Cody: Wow!] Yeah, it was not planned, but it ended up being awesome. I was a lab instructor for a weather, climate and society class, and that's when I really learned that I actually really loved teaching.

Like I love, loved working with students, teaching students new things. Like I just really learned, like, OK, this is what I want to do. And it kind of that was like my advice. So there was this amazing woman who I'm still friends with. She still I still talk to her regularly, but she was the first person who, like, put it in my mind, that little seed that, hey, you should you should really think about getting a Ph.D. And I was like, what, no, never like I never even thought about getting a master's. So she was like, no, you really

should do it. And at the time, my partner and I were moving to Oregon. We started to look at schools in Oregon and I found Oregon State. And I liked the, I like that they had a lot of different types of professors that I would have liked to work with across campus. Like people in anthropology. I found some people in sociology and I found this really awesome person who became my advisor, Larry Becker, in the geography program at Oregon State. And I ended up doing that because I thought I wanted to teach. And I do. I still love to teach. And I just, yeah. I didn't really plan it and it's kind of embarrassing to admit that. But it wasn't like I always wanted to get a Ph.D. and become a professor. Just kind of one thing led to the other. And I ended up at Oregon State from 2014-2018.

Cody: I have to ask you, because it sounds like you have from those dots you were just connecting for us, lived in the southwest, in Nevada, in Illinois and then up in the northwest. And now you're at the University of Rhode Island in a completely different part of the country in the northeast.

So it seems like you have a probably a really great understanding of how, you know, just living in different parts of our country. What do you what's your take on that? Or like, I guess how was how did Corvallis kind of fit in the mix of you went from these arid landscapes to this rainforest in the Pacific Northwest. How's that been?

Melva: I think this might because we moved around quite a bit when I was younger. I feel like I just became really adaptable to new places. And I mean, like, this is so crazy. But when I was in middle school in sixth grade, I went to three different middle schools: one in El Paso, Texas, one in and I'm sorry, one in Eagle Pass, Texas, then El Paso, Texas. Then we finally settled in Las Vegas. So like my whole life, especially at that age, like I was like around 10, 12 when this was all happening, I just we bounced around and I don't know, I feel like I just really opened to new places. I totally understand how scary it can be to move to a new place.

It's always very difficult to completely uproot your life, move somewhere else and start over. But I don't know, I just kind of got easier. I've also learned that there's like really cool places all over the United States.

We have a very diverse country. And every place that I've lived that essentially has its own culture, even Vegas from obviously the border of Texas is very different from Vegas, very different from even Reno, southern Illinois. Like I remember when I got to southern Illinois, I cried a lot because I didn't really want to live there. And then when I left, I cried a lot because I didn't want to leave. I found amazing people, amazing friends. So, you know, it definitely it was different.

And Corvallis was I miss a lot of things about Corvallis. Still, I got really lucky that when I was doing my Ph.D. because I had all this free time, I guess I was working at the farmer's market on the weekends. I worked for Denison Farms and it was the best job I could have had. It was I didn't care how because I loved going to the farmer's market. And that's something I really miss about the culture in Corvallis.

Like, the market is amazing and just the people that go to the market, the people that work at the market. So I felt very, very. I don't know, like it was a very different culture from what I had lived in and I really enjoyed being a part of it and I really miss that. I think one of the things I miss the most about Corvallis is the farmers market.

Cody: I think it took me till like my junior year when I was at Oregon City in Corvallis to go to the farmer's market and that, yeah, it was such a special little thing there. And I was like, why? Why did that take me so long to find this right?

Melva: Right? So when I was a T.A. and then I taught this course at Oregon State that a professor named Steve Cook has been teaching for forever. It's called sustainability for the common good. He had this assignment where he would make students I think it was extra credit, actually, where he would make students get extra credit if they went to the farmer's market. And they always were like, what? I never knew about this. It's amazing. And they loved it.

So when I actually taught that class one of the summers, I taught that class for three summers, one of the summers, I had a field trip where we all walked from Oregon State to the downtown farmer's market. So instead of like going to class, our class was, wow, the farmer's market.

And I had them, like, talk to vendors. It was really cool. And they all loved it because I when I was in college, I never went to the farmer's market either.

Cody: Uh huh, yeah. That's the thing about a fun field trip. And you think the field trips are just for the kids in elementary school. But let's go down to the farmer's market.

Melva: No, that was the best. Imagine over lecturing in class. There was a group of, it was crazy. There was like I think it was like thirty five of us walking as a group.

Cody: That sounds like a special memory from your time in Corvallis. Are there any other things on maybe the academic side or other aspects of being at Oregon State that kind of stand out of you to you as like especially formative experiences in your time there?

Melva: Absolutely. When I was. So I've been in the United States for since 1998 and actually didn't become a U.S. citizen until my first year of my Ph.D. But it was in 2016 there was like a lot of stuff happening with the elections and all that. There was an event on campus called the Speak Out and it was organized by three undergraduate students. And it was it was just it was meant to be a space where students of color at Oregon State could speak about their experiences at Oregon State. And I think for some people, it was very eye opening. For some people it was like, OK, we all know this is happening.

And I that was for me, like I said, I'm a Mexican-American. I grew up here. I understood some of those experiences, but not really because my parents were socialized in Mexico. They grew up in Mexico. They came here, settled. So a lot of the experiences even that they had, they didn't really like it was like none of us really talked about it or understood them. So that Speak Out was for me, like really it was just like it was like kind of like something clicked. Like I was like, OK, yes, this is what's happening here. And I started seeking opportunities to learn more about some of the issues that were happening.

I found this seminar discussion series called Race in America and I attended a couple and I can't remember Terrance's last name, but he's from the Black Student Center. They held together. They had these like sessions where people would just get together.

And it was a focus on the African-American experience. But that was really eye-opening for me. And at the same time, I joined the program that completely changed my life, which was the Social Justice Education Initiative with Jane Waite at Oregon State.

Many people, especially faculty, I would say, but also grad students have gone through the trainings with Jane Waite. And that was really just completely transformative for me. She really taught me a lot about social justice, about inequity in higher education, allowed me to really understand my own experience better and to put words into some of the feelings that I had and memories that I had. But I couldn't really explain. And it was kind of like of those little events happening, one led to the other. And then. Yeah, Jane Waite just that that was one of the people that had probably one of the biggest influences on me at Oregon State.

[Bouncy theme music plays.]

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[Bouncy theme music fades.]

Cody: I also know, too, in reading up on you that you were part of a group called Professional Learning Community at Oregon State, PLC, that also delve into some of these conversations around topics related to social justice, diversity, inclusion. Can you talk a little bit about that or what that group stands for?

Melva: Yeah, OK, so at the same time that I was in going to the Race and America discussion series and attending the Social Justice Education Initiative, when I started that was all of 2016.

And I met another woman who was also in the College of Earth, Ocean and Atmospheric Sciences, but she was an oceanographer. Her name is Alejandra Sanchez

Rios and she and I were kind of like we knew each other, but we weren't really friends. And we started meeting each other at these at these events. And we were like, wow. Like, first of all, it's amazing, like what's happening. And it was, you know, that she's from Mexico and she grew up in Mexico. So it's a little bit different because I mostly grew up here.

But like, we were having a lot of conversations about what it was like to be women of color in our college, how a lot of people that like basically just like the experiences of graduate students in college that are still predominantly white because it is the geosciences, you know, just a little bit ago or I think it was last year, a paper came out saying, like geoscientists like the whitest field and we could feel that. So we started to be like, wow, these like these discussion series are amazing. Like we could do that, like, why don't we have some here in our college?

We can do this and we talk to Jane Waite about it. And she was like, yeah, you guys could find like a professional learning community. And we were like, what is that? So we looked it up and we learned that basically in the world of education, they have these professional learning communities which are meant to be as the name states, learning communities where people get together to learn about a specific topic. So, for example, like pedagogy or something.

So in our in our case, we were going to have a professional learning community to address issues of social justice and higher ed, but specifically STEM. And we started it with our college. So I was myself and Alejandra and then my best friend that was doing the Ph.D. there with me in geography, Melissa McCracken. The three of us just kind of started putting these ideas together. We met with people who were we kind of knew, and then we got to know them. And these were people who eventually just really allowed us to like they were they helped us lay the foundation. So one of them was Marisa Chappell from History, who had organized Race in America. We met with Natchee Barnd from Ethnic Studies, Joseph Orosco from Philosophy. So we were like meeting with these people and being like, so this is our idea. This is what's happening in our college. Is this how we feel? This is what we want to do? What do you think? So by talking to all these people, we put together a proposal that was actually really hard because in the spring of 2017, I went to Ecuador to do my fieldwork like the last leg of

my fieldwork. And I was like with limited Internet. We were like working. Melissa and Alej were over here in Oregon working on the proposal a little by little. I was in Ecuador. I got back and then like July, we started to like meet with our team and started conversations about launching it and they launched it that fall.

So it was really quick. Yeah, it was it was a lot of work. None of us had the time to be doing this. But it was so amazing to be a part of that and to do that the first year, which was actually very sad for me because the first year we launched it was the only year I was there was 2017 to 2018. And we had like these amazing sessions. People were really interested. There was a lot of interest in the college from faculty, from students, and then I left.

So that was pretty sad. But my friends were there and Alej and Melissa, they took over. There's been new women from the college who have taken over. I'm still working with them. I'm still talking to them. We were actually going to meet tonight. We're meeting tomorrow now. But, you know, it just became like this community and like this linkage that I still have with students there. So it was amazing. It was it was one thing just led to the other. You know, I went to a talk and then I went to the sessions and then I went to the trainings and then we created our own professional learning community. So it was awesome.

Cody: I think I speak for all of Oregon State when saying thank you for diving into that work and also, like you said, like it. It kind of was just something that you put the pieces together, you fit it in while you were also doing your course studies and core research. And so, yeah, thank you for all that you brought to that. And we hope to see that continue to grow to at Oregon State.

Melva: Yeah, I think the women who took it or, you know, at the end of the year, we invited our professor from Ethnic Studies and Geography. She's the chair of ethnic studies at University of Oregon. Her name is Laura Pulido and she's also a Mexican-American geographer. We invited her to do like the big keynote talk. We had like over one hundred people. She talked about racial capitalism in Flint, which was her research, and then she had a small session with just the Unpacking Diversity P.L.C. And one other thing she said there, I really I needed to hear it. It was this was probably like June

of 2018, like I was about to defend a week later. So when she came and she said... Defended my dissertation. She said something like, you know, sometimes as a student because someone asked a question along these lines and she said, sometimes students create these big movement, at their universities, and it's really difficult to leave like all the all that work that you do and all the everything that you put into it, like, you know, like the sweat and tears. You know, you put all this work into it and then you leave. She said you have to trust that the people who are going to take over it will continue that work. And she also said it's not you know, you just move on. You know, you take that with you, that you take the experience with you.

And, you know, that's part of it, too. So she was very right. I mean, first of all, the women that took over are doing an amazing job. Like they're doing things that we never even thought of. So I'm so proud of them, so thankful that they were there to take over. But then, like Laura Pulido said, I came here to University of Rhode Island and had conversations with a couple people in my college, College of Environment and Life Sciences, about what I did and CEOAS and they were like, you should do something like that here. So we started another professional community and I started here with a friend. And we have its called Voices, Voices of Inclusion in Communities of Education and Science. It's somewhat similar to what we did at Oregon State, but it's also different. The Oregon State one was student led. This one is faculty led because I'm one of the founders here, but we work with a lot of grad students and faculty and we work together to host different events. So it's kind of its similar. But at the same time, it's fitting different needs. It's a new place, a new college, a new university. So it's kind of it had to be customized to fit here. But I couldn't have done what I did here if it hadn't been for the stuff I did in CEOAS.

Cody: Mm hmm. And when you're telling the story to that, it's so true what you said about how I guess it's maybe the nature of academics is that you're typically you are earning a degree or you're researching something and you're moving maybe on to the next program, into the next program. And so, like you said, yeah. Could be tough to, you know, kind of visualize leaving some of that, quote unquote behind. But, yeah, wonderful what you said about trusting, trusting the next people in line. And I think probably, too, for listeners out there who are in different fields, this could be something that is challenging even when going from job to job. Maybe there's a project that you

really connected with at this job and you're moving to the next job and you kind of still feel this connection to that. I think that's totally something that could be exported to a lot of different industries, too.

Melva: Yeah. I mean, we form attachments to the work that we do, to the places that we're at the people that are around us. And it's part of being human. And I guess maybe part of it was me moving around as a kid and learning to be attached to a place and then just detaching from it or learning to move away and starting over somewhere else. But I mean, you just you take those experiences with you. You know, you like you. That will always be a part of you. I just feel like sometimes, you know, it definitely was stuff, though. I'm not going to say that it wasn't when I first got here, it was very challenging. And, you know, they were my friends were having, like, these awesome sessions. And I was like, one day I remember I was crying and I was like, I just miss you guys. Like, I wish I were there. I mean, it's really hard to leave that stuff behind you now. Yeah, I think with time I've learned to be okay with that.

I've been here for two years now and I'm starting you know, I am with a new community here, a very likeminded people to the ones that I worked with at Oregon State. But again, yeah, it's just and then we'll see wherever I go from here what I take from Rhode Island to wherever I end up.

Cody: So maybe that's a good point to transition over more towards what you're doing now at the University of Rhode Island, or URI, and in the Department of Marine Affairs? What I guess, take me through what what's your research currently or what kinds of projects are you working on right now?

Melva: Yeah, so the Department of Marine Affairs here is very interdisciplinary. I am the only geographer and I'm actually the only geographer, URI, because there's no geography department here.

So that's definitely a bit challenging. But my department is, again, very interdisciplinary. We have a historian, a political scientist, an anthropologist. We have an oceanographer, we have a lawyer. Like we have colleges, like we have a lot of people. So it's pretty

interdisciplinary. And we focus on some of the policies and the human uses and management of marine resources, marine environments.

And I ended up coming here because it's kind of actually when I tell it, like when I even when I talk about my master's work was like rural, like rural cattle ranchers in southwest Mexico. So, like, when people are like, wait, now you're in marine affairs, like it doesn't make any sense. But you know, it again, things just ended up here.

When I was in Oregon, I had a professor in anthropology, John Groves, who worked in Ecuador, and she did a lot of food sovereignty studies, but she mostly worked in if you go to Ecuador, it's really funny, but everything's like super centralized, like all the resources and all the big universities. And like the big focus on research is in the Andes. And I would say secondly in the Amazon and then third, maybe the Galapagos or maybe the Galapagos just before the Amazon and then the coast, like the coast, is such a historically it has been like a politically and socially and culturally very distinct place from the other regions. I had this professor who had done research there who had friends and connections. So I ended up going with her to a conference in 2015 and I ended up connecting with people and finding I did an exploratory trip where I found this project on the coast, which was looking at the impacts of shrimp aquaculture development on migrant dependent communities.

And I learned a little bit about them and that ended up being my research project. So because I did my Ph.D. research in this coastal setting, I was a competitive for this marine affairs. I was I was a good candidate for this marine affairs program. So I still feel sometimes like I don't fully fit in into this marine affairs world, because geography is I call it a very terrestrial field. I feel like a lot of geographers, most geographers, my argument is their research ends like at the coast, like they don't go past the waters. AS soon as the water starts touching their out of there. But there's a lot of coastal geographers, but they're geomorphologist there's not a lot of coastal geographers who are also social scientists compared to other fields.

So, you know, I didn't I didn't have, like classes on fisheries management when I was a Ph.D. student or I didn't really like. It's so interesting to be in a department that is like so fisheries focused because I'm I sometimes feel odd. But what I'm doing here is...

I'm sorry, Cody. I feel like I could my stories have like a very deep beginning.

Cody: No, this is amazing. Thank you for showing all the context to each piece of this because it's so interesting to hear. So, yes, please.

Melva: Well I ended up doing my work in my program and I still am trying to continue that work. I actually was going to go there this January, I'm sorry, June. But with the pandemic, I was not able to go. I was going to take a student that I had in my undergrad student and I was looking for a second student. And I was really excited because I've never I've never traveled with anyone, let alone students. So that was going to be a really nice experience. But the pandemic happened. But I'm still trying to figure out how to continue doing my work. And, I went back in 2019, so after a year and a half doing my fieldwork, I went back to the community that I worked with, presented the findings of my research, talked about a lot of stuff. So it's been it's been good. And I'm still in touch with a lot of people. But what happened here? Like I said, I'm still figuring out how to continue doing projects in Ecuador.

But I started also working in the United States, which is very different for me. When I went, I go to the annual meeting for geographers and it's the American Association of Geographers, Agee. And in 2016, I believe, or 2017, it was there was a conversation about 2016 about creating a new specialty group within geography called Latinx Geographies. So I went to that session. It was just a conversation about, well, should we do it? What are we going to do? And I was totally an outsider. I just joined and listen.

In the next year, I show up and they we have the first year that there was that Latinx Geography group. They had some sessions that talked about, well, what is what our Latinx Geography group? What are we even talking about here? So something that was really eye opening to me, listening to some of the people speak now, Laura Pulido who came to Oregon State for the Impact and Diversity series. She the speaker she was there to. So one of the things that really impacted me was they were talking about how a lot of times in geography people go work with like these quote unquote, like marginalized communities, like these vulnerable communities and like Black and Brown communities and like the deep that, you know, the global south.

And like we travel all the way around the world to, like, go study like these inequities and like how differences created in natural environments and how access or inequities impacts people, access to resources, all these things.

But they were saying we also have those issues here in this country, like our own communities in this country, are facing very similar issues because it's not like some exotic location, like, you know, who cares? You know, it's like, would you rather go to Flint, Michigan or would you rather go to Esmeraldas. I mean, I, I remember the first time. So it was kind of really interesting because I was like, yeah, that was me. Like, of course I'm really happy I sought out the opportunities to work internationally, but it kind of got me thinking, like how that's actually very true.

Like we don't value the work here in the United States as much as work that is done internationally, because there's like, I don't know some I don't really know why. But I feel like definitely when we think of international research, especially like in the social sciences and geography, anthropology, like there's like this, like it's like so cool to go to these faraway places. But we also have those issues here. You can study the same kind of stuff here in the US, though, in thinking about that, I it was at the end of my Ph.D. in 2018 that I was like, OK, well like I got to think about like how can I start also looking at the same types of questions that I'm asking in the global south like or Ecuador, in this case, that was like what kinds of questions would I be asking in the United States with communities of color, with Latinx communities?

So when I came here to Rhode Island, again, being surrounded by these people to talk about fisheries and all this ocean stuff, I kept on hearing a lot of like researchers or just faculty members and just people in general talking about research they had done. And they interviewed fishermen and they had worked on this and that, and they interviewed fishermen. And I kept on asking, OK, well, who are the fishermen? And they would tell me and I started to pick up on a pattern. And that was that there was a lot of people doing research with fishermen, but it was like only white communities of fishermen. So I was like, well, they're leaving out a lot of people that live here because the people think that New England when I was coming here, people were like, well, New England is very white.

Well, yes, New England is very white. New England is culturally and I guess geographically to kind of close off from the rest of the country. And, you know, we make I make fun of New Englanders here now because I live here and I can. But New England people love New England, but they'll never leave New England. Like if they leave, they'll come back. But I think it's really funny.

So, like, I guess, yeah, like I said, I think that that's where, you know, culturally they're so close in a way. But one of the things that I also learned was, yes, New England is very white. We're so far north. But there's also a lot of communities of color here. But what I recognize that it's not just the New England is very white, but there's a history of erasing communities of color from the east, from the landscape. There's a lot of Native Americans. I live in Narragansett. That is the name. I live in the town of Narragansett. That is the name of the tribe here in Rhode Island, the Narragansett. This was their land. Now they live in a dumpy area that is kind of swampy, that they can't really grow a lot of crops that can really live.

You know, they were removed from the best parts of the state to go to the swampy parts of the state. You know, but the tribe is here like there's still there's the smallest tribe because we are the smallest state, but they're a vibrant community. They still have very strong traditions attached to the landscape, attached to the ocean and the seascapes. So I started to pick up on that. And something else that I also learned is there is actually a very fast growing Latinx population here in Rhode Island. I just heard something like twenty percent, I think, of Providence, which is the capital of Rhode Island is Latinx, mostly Dominicans, a lot of people from Vermont. And I also noticed that there were a lot of people who were fishing. So they were English. They were just fishing off the coast.

And with all this like the what I learned from my next geography, thinking about like, OK, how would I approach questions here in the U.S., I did a pilot research project in 2019 in the summer interviewing fishermen and we interviewed people from Cambodia, people from Guatemala, people from the Dominican Republic, and there was people from Laos that we didn't get to talk to people from China that we didn't get to talk to because they didn't speak English.

So it was it was really it was really neat just to kind of see, like, the diversity that is actually here and to try to understand, OK, like, why are these people fishing, like, asking questions like what are some of the barriers that they may have to access in coastal spaces so that they can fish?

And why are they fishing and who do they fish with and where do they learn to fish? I asked a lot of questions about those types of topics, and I'm really excited about it. I feel like it was weird because a lot of people were not asking those questions. I'm like these people have been here for like 40 years, but no one was really asking those questions. So that's kind of been something that I'm moving towards and further exploring here in Rhode Island.

Cody: Do you have any findings on that or what were some of the maybe the interesting takeaways from that research where people accessing the natural resources and specifically the marine resources differently based on their background?

Melva: So I would say the biggest finding is that a lot of the literature that talks about Englander's or fissuring, I don't know what to call them, people of color who fish, let's just say that a lot of them has been carried out in L.A., New Jersey. A lot of research has been done in the Great Lakes with not just Latinx communities, but also African-American communities, Vietnamese community. So there's like there's been research out there. And what the literature pointed towards is that they were subsistence fishers. Now, subsistence means that you're fishing like that is that's how you subsist, right? It's almost like. Well, the funny thing is we did ask people because the literature said that they're mostly subsistence fishers, like they're not doing it for recreation. So what I mean, like, you're not going to catch and you're not going fishing for catch and release.

Cody: You're literally going to eat this fish that.

Melva: Yes. You're catching. But it was interesting because when I asked people like in the end when we were asking them last summer, are you a subsistence fisher, they almost were like offended.

Like, no, like I almost felt like they were like what? Like, I'm not poor. I can I can afford food. OK, like, kind of that was like sometimes a reaction. And it was really interesting because I went to a meeting in Hawaii and there was a woman there from North Fisheries who we were talking about this research, she and I, and she was like, yeah, we did something similar here with the native Hawaiians. And she was asking me, she was like, what did they say when you asked them if they were subsistence fishers?

And I was like, I kind of think they almost were offended. She was like here, too. So it was really interesting because there's like I feel like there's these categories of fishermen, like, obviously commercial, like, well, these people are not commercial fishers. And then there's the recreational fishers who do it for like catch and release and really for fun, whatever. And then the third category that we have is subsistence. But I feel like there isn't really like and I talked with her about this, I guess in Hawaii, they were thinking about the term cultural fishers, which I don't know if I liked, but they're trying to come up like and that's what she said. She was like. We're working on this report. We'll talk later. But I thought it was really great to talk to her about it, because I, I did find, like, I don't have a category like what are we calling these people? Because they do it for recreation. Sure. It is for fun. It is. It's a family outing. They do it because they enjoy it. They do it because they want to be out in nature. A lot of them talked about why the fishing, the good fishing sites are in the southern part of the state. And a lot of them would talk about, well, providence is really hot and would like it gets really hot in the summer. So it is a nice way to get out of the house. And they would be fishing where they usually like their wives or their children there. So it kind of felt like it was not all the time. There was also sometimes just guys fishing with guys like hanging around, but a lot of them were doing it with their family.

So it was as a recreational activity. But it was also they would talk about because they eat the fish and they liked fish. Yeah. The cool thing about it, a lot of them were from coastal places in Guatemala, like I said, the Dominican Republic, Cambodia. So they were Puerto Ricans, even though that is the US. But, um, so they were people who grew up doing it wherever they lived. And then they came here and there they are doing it here because that's what they know, you know.

Cody: Right.

Melva: Yeah. So I think the coolest finding that and that's what I'm reading a paper about, because my argument is like there has to be another name in another category, like we can just have this I don't know, like these categories are just outdated.

Cody: Right. Melva it makes me wonder, too, and this is just listening to you tell that whole story from start to finish and you talking about how, like you mentioned the example earlier, of how sometimes maybe on our end of the spectrum, it seems more glamorous or for some reason the research seems more valuable to go to a place like Ecuador and do this international research.

And rather than you said, like even though some of these same challenges or problems exist or things that need to be studied exist, like you said, in Flint, Michigan, here in the U.S. And so I'm curious, in your opinion, do you think that this kind of dynamic or kind of the ability to easily overlook some of the challenges in our own country is something that kind of permeates and a lot of different places of research and study in America? Is it kind of something that we are prone to do in more than just this specific situation? And I'm just really curious.

Melva: That's a really hard question. And I don't know if I'm right or wrong, but I guess when you were when you were talking, what came to mind was. I think when I think of international research, like doing research in an international location, there's a little bit of a history with like imperialism in a bit of colonialism. Right? Like exploring new places, learning about new places and then for what purposes? I guess that's different in exchange with time.

But even especially like I did a lot of work in the field of international development, my research was very much about international development and the impacts of development in these rural communities in the global south. There's a lot of geographers who study development. So I kind of I wonder if part of it is because these fields and I mean, come on, I'm in geography like geography. What allowed colonialism to really expand? You know, like it's such a field with such a colonial history. So I wonder to what extent that mentality of thinking I mean, and I don't know, but I wonder to what extent the mentality of kind of glamorizing, like you said, doing research in

international settings comes from more of like the colonial, imperialist thinking of like understanding like new places. And, you know, like the whole idea of like exotic and like these traditional places. And they're so far away, like, I don't know, like sometimes, yeah. Sometimes we can use those words, but sometimes like to what extent are we just kind of romanticizing how people are? There are just people in another country, you know? So I, I don't know. I don't know if I even answered your question, though, and yeah.

Cody: I don't even know if it was fully a question or more of just myself wrestling with this topic and wondering, yeah. How can I personally be better at looking around at my community and asking the questions of what can we do to be better?

Melva: Yeah, I mean, like I was saying, like with the hope, with international development, like, you know, there's a reason why the field of international development exists, like it has other imperialist foundation, right? And I just wonder to what extent we do research today are like those attitudes still prevail where like, you know, we of course, we wanted to send people back in the 50s or 60s, like think about the Peace Corps, like those programs. Like it wasn't just because we wanted to do good. And the other another poor and poor, quote unquote, poor parts of the world was because the U.S. was like collecting data on these people.

And I mean, there was so much there. So I wonder yes. I do wonder if we still kind of glamorize that research and, you know, it's different. The challenges are different, but that was to me, I was having a conversation with a colleague from the Latinx Geography Executive Board the other day. We're talking about something else. But I'll tell you about this paper with the fishers. And I told her because she was one of the founders of Latinx Geography, and I was telling her about, you know, how I came to this project here in Rhode Island. And I was like, yeah. So like, I went to the meeting and then that conversation and she was like, wow. Like she was so happy that like who would have thought that? Like, she was just like looking for a space for a community within geography that she couldn't find that community. So she just created it herself with another woman. And now it's like this great community that I'm a part of. And like I honestly like having geographers around it. So I'm so happy I have that next geography's because at least I get to interact with geographers in that way. But I you

know, yeah, I think we just we forget. It's like you said, we overlook these issues here and then we wonder why we live in the state that we live in. There's so much inequality here, like we don't even understand our own country.

A lot of people don't understand our own history. They don't understand like they don't understand our society. But we focus so much on other parts of the world when the United States is actually also struggling in some way.

Cody: Yeah, and especially in these times is I think our country as a whole is wrestling with a lot of issues that we've pushed down for a lot of years. And now it's time. Yeah to really take a take a look at them. And so, yeah, I appreciate you diving into some of these topics with me.

[Bouncy theme music plays.]

[00:45:02] Hey Beavs, the What's Next? podcast is a production of OSU Next, an alumni community of recent Beaver grads. If you've been listening to the podcast, it's obvious that when it comes to life after college, the possibilities are limitless and we all have to find our own path. But you're not alone. We're here to support you along the way. Join us at osualum.com/OSUNext. Now let's get back to the show.

[Bouncy theme music fades.]

Cody: I want to jump here before we end the episode with a couple of fun segments. So this first one is called “get some and give some.” So imagine that you just won ten thousand dollars and you get to donate half of it and spend half of it on something fun.

So for the first part, what is one cause charity organization that you would donate that first half to? And then for the second part, what is something fun that you do with the other half?

Melva: Oh my God. Can I start with the fun one?

Cody: Yes!

Melva: I have an idea and I don't even think it would cover it. But I would want to go to Indonesia because I had a student who was actually working in a marine protected area there. And actually I don't even remember the name, but he was showing me all sorts of photos about some of these places in Indonesia that are, I guess, pretty remote and like the most beautiful waters. And I think that would be my I don't know, five thousand dollars will get me there and back. My husband can stay behind, but I'll go without him. I'll spend it on myself. [Cody: Yeah.] And the donate the half to an organization I would donate to.

Oh, my God, that's a hard one.

Cody: Or something that you support, it wouldn't even necessarily have to be a formal organization, but is there something that you support or a cause or. Yeah. This could be anything.

Melva: All right, something that I would support. I feel like my life is so limited by academia because I work in academia and I live in it. But I feel like it would be something in academia and I think it would be funding opportunities for undergraduate students to go to research conferences. That's something I'm really excited about. I think when students get the opportunity to do that, it really changes their lives. So sometimes it's really hard to have funding. Universities offer limited funding to undergraduate students. We don't focus as much on them as we do on grad students. So I would donate it back to marine affairs students at URI. I no, I don't know about that. Maybe all in my college. I don't know. It would be for students here in my own community. Students that I know help them go to conference.

Cody: Uh huh. That's a wonderful.

This next section of our little fun quick hitters here is called “my quarantine thing.” So this past six, seven, eight months has had everyone doing things a little bit differently than their normal routine. Do you have something in mind that's kind of been like your quarantine thing that you've done that's new in this past year?

Melva: Honestly, my sleeping habits have completely shifted and I hate them, but I'm just rolling with them. I sometimes stay up till 2:00 in the morning, around 11:00 p.m. I really get in the mood for working and it's just so bad.

Like I could start like seven, eight, and I'm really tired. I can't even keep my eyes open. And I'm just like, I'm so fully awake. [Cody: Interesting.] It's really it's it wasn't like this before. And with the quarantine, I just think it just got worse, especially during the summer. And now I'm trying to shift away from it. But I kind of like staying up and working at that time. I feel like there's nothing to distract me.

Cody: I remember I could do that, like all through undergrad. Like that was like my prime time. Like, I would kind of be zoned out trying to study for the first, like, you know, eight p.m. to 10 p.m. and then, yeah, I remember this second wind would kick in and I would be like, you know, retaining so much of this information from 11 to two. And then now I don't have that so I'm almost a little bit jealous that you say that you still have that prime time, 11:00 p.m. on mode that you can kick into.

Melva: Well, you know, I, I guess so. I don't know if I'm... [Cody: Pros and cons.] Yes. This person can't be the one thing that I can think of in the quarantine times a shift. It started in like May or June and now and I'm kind of still doing it.

Cody: Hey, I guess just go with the flow.

Melva: I guess so.

Cody: Ok, so this very last segment here is the 45 second trivia challenge, and this is trivia just focused on OSU specifically. [Melva: Oh, gosh.] But the structure is we're going to give forty five seconds. I've got a timer set here and I'll rattle off some pieces of trivia and you can say, skip, if it's one that you want to skip, but I won't tell you how many is that the record currently right now with our guests. But I'll give you a shot at it.

Melva: I am hoping it's on the low end.

Cody: Hahaha. No, no. OK, Melva, are you ready?

Melva: Yeah,

Cody: OK. Name a professor that you had at OSU.

Melva: Larry Becker.

Cody: Name a Corvallis zip code.

Melva: I want to tell you my support from undergrad, I don't remember.

Cody: No worries. Name a building where you had classes.

Melva: You're making...Bert Hall, Bert Hall.

Cody: What year was OSU founded?

Melva: Is it 1847?

Cody: Close! What was OSA you called before it was OCO. Two answers here.

Melva: I think it was. Corvallis College, but I'm probably wrong.

Cody: Yeah, actually, yes, that was right at the buzzer, you're 45 seconds is up, but you said Corvallis College with one second left and yeah, that was actually so there was two official names. And Corvallis College, I believe, was also one that it was called a little more informally for a brief period. But yes, that it was deep in the trivia there. So good job. You actually, Melva, are tied for the lead at three.

Melva: Oh, come on. I thought zip code is easy one. How sad is that? What is the zip code you have?

Cody: So to I was 97330.

Melva: Of course, that was mine, too.

Cody: Yeah.

Melva: I was going to say 89032 that was mine to go to Las Vegas Middle School and high school. I don't know.

Cody: I was going to say, you you've had a few different university experiences. And so that has to be a really tough question to try to those probably a ton of numbers moving around in your head.

Melva: Listen, I've been living in my house here in Narragansett for almost a year and a half, and I still sometimes forget my zip code.

Cody: Oh, yes. So you actually no one has gotten the zip code one so far. So I just I just threw out there one. But maybe for the next couple of guests, if they listen to these, I'll switch that one out. And so we'll give it a little time to breathe before someone gets upset.

Melva: I was so close to being more right.

Cody: That's a tough one. OK, well, you're tied for the lead. Still very good.

Melva: Yeah.

Cody: Well, Melva, we really appreciate your time and for talking through your whole journey from undergrad, for moving around different parts of the U.S., having those experiences and then, of course, your time at Oregon State and appreciate you sharing just a little bit more to on those projects that you worked on there and helping make OSU a better place for everyone. And also now your time at University of Rhode Island. Sounds like some really interesting research and we look forward to following along more.

Melva: Thank you so much for this. I really enjoyed talking to you.

Cody: Yeah, and to all of our listeners out there in Beaver Nation, we will see you next time.

[Bouncy theme music plays.]

Cody: Hey, listeners, our goal at OSU next to the alumni association is to build community, and that includes creating connections and sharing these unique stories with the rest of the nation. If you found this episode of the What's Next? podcast valuable, you can help us achieve this goal by writing a quick review, leaving a rating and subscribing to the show in your preferred podcast player. We're thankful for your support.

[Bouncy theme music fades.]