NARRATOR: The right academic major can be a pathway to a dream career. In today’s edition of Intersections: The RIT Podcast, professor Tina Lent, director of RIT’s museum studies program, talks with 2019 alumna Katherine Hensel about how her degree in museum studies led to her dream job as a U.S. national park ranger.

TINA: I remember from almost the beginning of the time you were in the program that you had an interest in being a guide, being outdoors telling people about things. I’m wondering how early this desire developed to work for the National Park Service.

KATHERINE: Yeah, so it became a goal of mine to get into the National Park Service very early on. I think it was about my junior year in high school when I figured it out, definitely by senior year. So, when I was applying and looking for majors for colleges, I had that in mind. Specifically, how I got to RIT and the majors I chose, what I did that was very helpful for me is that once I figured out that I wanted to be a park ranger, any time I went to go visit the parks I always found a ranger and said this is what I want to do. How do I get here and what do you recommend I do? And one of them told me about museum studies. So, I started looking at programs, originally at the master’s level, and then I realized that RIT, which was where I wanted to go anyways, had a museum studies program. So, it worked out pretty perfectly for me. When I came into RIT, I knew right off the bat I wanted to double major in biology and museum studies. And then building my internship, building my senior thesis to have the experience I wanted for getting this next internship at Grand Canyon that I could draw upon very real practical things that I had done during my time as a student to kind of land me this position there.

TINA: When you heard museum studies as a route to becoming a ranger, was there an initial, “Well how is a park a museum?” Did that person mention public history at all? Or was that something you began to understand once you got into the program?

KATHERINE: Yeah definitely. He didn’t specifically mention public history, but looking back to that experience I wouldn’t be surprised if it was on his mind because this was at the Philadelphia Freedom Trail – one of their historic sites there, so he definitely had kind of a view of public history. And then once I got into the program it made it clearer how it isn’t always inside in a structural museum that we often think of. We talked a lot about the importance of memorials and interacting with the public as well. And that brought in the idea of sometimes it’s a stand-alone fixture, sometimes it is a specific event that can go on in memorials, a lot of the examples that we talked about in that time, but also just different kinds of demonstrations as well. And we talked a lot about, “How do we remember events?” And that brought into my point of view about how public history gets out there and how its perceived in the media as well as just socially as a whole.

TINA: I can see now how this played directly into your senior thesis project because you took these ideas of the national park and working with people to develop your project. Why don’t you give us some more description of that?
KATHERINE: So, my senior thesis, I wanted to look at location-based learning as well as public interaction and how you connect people to a place as well as the significance of that place and how that significance can have a lot of levels to it as well. So, I was looking at the National Women’s Rights Historical Park in Seneca Falls and their proximity to the Erie Canal, and how the town’s history as well as women’s rights, suffrage and various other social rights issues were connected to that location. And I built a project creating an audience-centered experience using a tour to show people that place as well as give them personal stories from that time period from people they don’t normally read about in history books.

TINA: So, Kate, having worked with the National Park Service in Seneca Falls for your thesis, how did that help you, or did it help you in transitioning to getting the job at the Grand Canyon?

KATHERINE: I definitely think so. It gave me a lot of the background lingo that was really useful for me to put into my application when I was looking for this internship, and using the right language is often very important. So there is that aspect on a surface level as well as on a deeper level of knowing the structure of how a park works, and showing continued interest and showing that this is the career path I want. And I was able to show that experience as well when I was doing my interview with Grand Canyon. I was able to draw upon things from that experience as well, and it was a lot easier to answer questions coherently and with meaning. One of the other useful things about my senior thesis and being with the park service so early, and specifically my experience at Seneca Falls, was that it gave me experience doing interpretive work. So, I’m looking at becoming an interpretive park ranger. There’s a lot of different types of park rangers that make parks work. Interpretive are the ones you more commonly interact with when you go and you visit a park. It’s the people at the visitor center. It’s the people giving programs, giving tours as well as, sort of all the educational material you’ll see. So, I knew I wanted to go into interpretation. I was really interested in educational theory and being able to connect with people. So, my experience building a tour with my senior thesis was really useful because it gave me tools for understanding how you balance this amount of information with this amount of activity, which was really important for when I got to Grand Canyon and building my programs there. I gave three programs, one a day usually – a geology program, a program on California condors, and then an evening program, which I made two of those. One was on artwork of various expeditions that came through the Grand Canyon, kind of human connection with the canyon. And then another program on endemic species, so animals only found in that area – Grand Canyon or just Arizona. And they all had different goals when I was making those programs but they all were really important to that location. So that location-based learning came through in each different program I had. The geology one, which was the one I struggled with the most personally – I’m not crazy about geology – but it was really useful to think, “What do I find important about Grand Canyon? What are things that shock me about this place?” And I was able to use my personal relationship with Grand Canyon to build a program that would, hopefully, invite a lot of other people to enjoy Grand Canyon and then open up to issues that we’re facing.
Either with allowing people to connect with the canyon, to conservation issues, to just continued interest with the National Park Service as a whole.

TINA: Did you choose those topics, Kate, to work on? I do remember when you started the program, the thesis on Seneca Falls, that you had talked briefly about the geology and the formations of the canal, but you never developed that and you went more for the social history. So how did you come to these topics at Grand Canyon?

KATHERINE: So, we get a lot of freedom, especially on the North Rim of the Grand Canyon where I was working. It varies a lot park to park, but my supervisor there was really for our personal growth and letting us go where we want with the program. She thinks it helps us build better programs. So, we had to give a geology program and we had to give a condor program, however, what we did with that was totally a free-for-all. And that was a little daunting because when I showed up, they were like, “Okay you have a week and a half to develop a program and then you’re going to give it to the public.” So, it was a little difficult in that regard, and the evening program was completely whatever you wanted it to be. And that’s also our longest program that we give there, so that one took a little bit longer for me to develop. For my geology program I ended up focusing a lot on depositional history and the color of the canyon, whereas for my condor program I was more interested in looking at how we assign values to things and how that impacts how we choose to conserve as well as just where we put importance.

TINA: I’m curious, when you had designed the tour for Seneca Falls for your thesis project it was – you completed the project, but as I remember you never led a tour. So how did it feel actually leading a tour when you had all these visitors to the Grand Canyon?

KATHERINE: It was definitely satisfying to be able to get to the Grand Canyon and give those programs to an audience. I've definitely found my interpretive ability – my ability to speak and educate and connect people with the historic and natural resources of the park – I really improved through that experience. I often think back to my senior thesis and how I would've changed different sections of the tours to bring it kind of up to the standards that I have for myself now.

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