

Life Skills 101 Podcast – Ep. 2 with Sissi De Flaviis

Becca Weston – BW

Sissi De Flaviis – SF

BW – 0:00

Hey, I'm Rebecca Weston and you're listening to the Life Skills 101 podcast from the Student Experience Office.

We will be joined by Sissi De Flaviis, a Carleton alum. Sissi studied Journalism with a double minor in Italian and Political Science. Sissi was an active member of the Carleton community, taking on volunteering and leadership roles. She is currently a reporter and editor at CBC North, writing and editing stories for online radio and television. Today, Sissi tells us how important it was for her to be an active member of the Carleton community and how she wouldn't be the same without those experiences. All the way from the Yukon, here's Sissi. Hi Sissi, thank you so much for chatting with me today.

SF – 0:56

Thank you so much for having me, Becca.

BW – 0:58

So, you recently graduated from Carleton and now you are working at CBC North. What was that transition like?

SF – 1:06

Oh, that's a really good question. As anyone could tell you that graduated recently, I graduated during the pandemic. Yes, last year. So, it's been a couple of months. Just the transition from university to a pandemic world was, it was huge. It was. It was a lot to take in, obviously our way of life changed, my fast-paced life as a student changed. So, there's been a lot of transition in the past couple of months. And yeah, I ended up here at North. I feel like a lot has changed. It's been, what, 14 months maybe since I graduated, and I feel like I've had so many lives in between those months. I've had different roles, different things, different experiences. But yeah, we can definitely get into the specifics. The person I was when I graduated versus the person I am today, it's a whole 180.

BW – 1:59

Yeah, no kidding. Not only did you move completely across the country, but you moved to like one of the coldest parts of the country.

SF – 2:09

Yes. A fun fact, I am studying for my citizenship test. And one of the knowledges, tips, or skills, whatever it is, is what's the coldest temperature in Canada ever recorded, and it's -63 °C. And obviously, it was in the Yukon, which is where I am right now. I'm like, "lovely, a Latina really up North".

BW – 2:30

You must be very bundled up while walking outside.

SF – 2:33

All the time. It's layers. Layers is the skill, it's the tip.

BW – 2:38

When you were in your undergrad, you were very involved in school being a Residence Fellow, being a part of a few clubs and societies. Why did you initially want to be a part of the Carleton community?

SF – 2:50

For background knowledge, I am from Venezuela. So, I moved to Canada when I was 15 years old. Back then, I didn't speak any English. Yeah, learning about a new culture, a new language, just the way people got together, it was a huge learning curve and culture shock as well. So, by the time I started at Carleton, I was already three years in Canada. And even then, I was a little lost at the beginning. I realized that once you become part of a community, you feel more welcome and you feel more at home, so I was determined to make Carleton my home. So, I established that I was able to cultivate that community by getting involved in clubs and societies. That's how I first got involved at Carleton. Carleton University Journalism Society. JSOC. I got involved first with JSOC and I was able to foster that community with my program. And then I found the Latin American Club, which is HOLAS.

But yeah, that's how it started. It made me feel very welcome, made me feel very at home. And then from there, I just kind of spiraled. Once you get connected, you start meeting people, and they're like "Oh, you should come try this one thing." And then this one thing just became a web of connections. It just made my university experience so joyful that I wouldn't change it for anything in the world.

And if anyone ever asks me, I would say go to Carleton. We have one of the best communities ever, and you will feel so at home. It doesn't matter if I'm 1000 kilometres away from my actual home, or if I'm just a few kilometres away from my mom. Carleton became a home and to this day it still is even.

BW – 4:24

That's amazing. And you slowly started to work your way up to pretty high positions within the Carleton Community. And then in your last year, you were the vice president of Student Issues for CUSA. While you were moving up, did you expect to get so far? Was that your end goal? Or were you just kind of going with the flow, letting things happen?

SF – 4:47

Yeah, great question. So, funny story, when I was in my first year of Journalism, my first thing I was like, "I need to find something that I can be involved in." Even in high school, I was very involved with volunteering. I think that's one of the things in Canada, people really push the volunteering part of the community. They're like "Get involved." But that's how you meet friends and all this, so the Journalism Society was kind of like my goal. And then I found out that we have a Latin American club, so those two things were like my foundation for first year. And as I mentioned before, it became kind of like this web of connections. As a first-year journalism student, my goal was to be a journalist, and I needed to start writing for the Charlatan. I need to start getting my foot in the door and getting journalism opportunities. So, student politics was never in my mind.

In fact, I remember this one time I attended one of the debates and I saw one of the people running for vice president. She ended up crying after the debate because it was so intense and I remember I told myself "I am never going to run for student politics, this does not seem pleasant." So, it's funny that I ended up running for student politics. But the reason why I ended up there, just through opportunities through meeting people. One club led me to the next thing, so with the Journalism Society, I met... Well, I already knew this person, his name is Matteo Peralta. He's one of my best friends, we went to high school together. He's older than me, and he kind of encouraged me to join the Journalism program. So, I did, and once I was in it, he's like "Oh, you should try the Journalism Society." So, I did. And then he's like, I want to try being a res fellow, you should do it with me. And so, I did. So, I feel like having a mentor really helped me, and I was just following him, being where he's going to end up type of thing. So, being a Res Fellow really opened a whole new world within Carleton. And for me, I met people from different backgrounds, different programs, different lives, ages, stages, everything. And yeah, for meeting people, I just wanted to get deeper into the community, getting to know more people, helping people transition from high school to university.

And yeah, from there, people would just come up to me and be like "Hey, would you ever be interested in running for RA, which is the Residence Association." At that point, I had already been a Res Fellow for two years, so I was like "Sure." And then people saw how hard I worked as a Res Fellow, and they were like "Oh, would you ever be interested in running for CUSA?" And at that point, I was advancing my career. So, long story short, politics was never my end goal. But just being very deep into the community kind of helped me scale up my way through, and yeah, my biggest advice would always be get involved. You never know where you're going to end up.

BW – 7:37

While you were running for vice president for RA and CUSA, what was the election process like for you? Because I know, for a lot of people, it can seem really overwhelming. But as somebody who wasn't planning on going into it, and then doing it, how was that?

SF – 7:53

Yeah, very interesting. I think we take it very serious at Carleton to be honest. Carleton becomes our whole world. Everything that happens, it's like a death or alive type of situation. So, at the time it's just like a game. It's very fun, to be honest. It is a very intense process I would say. You have to gather signatures, you have to stand in the tunnels for long hours talking to people. You have to come up with policy ideas and all of this nitty gritty stuff. So, that will be a very intense part of it. But the reason why I ran for student politics is because I wanted to leave Carleton in a better place than I found it. And usually, most of the time, the easier way of doing that is to have a position where you can actually make real change. So, that's why I ended up running for both times for RA and for CUSA. It's because I wanted to make Carleton a better community for the students that came after me. When I was running for RA, I always had that in mind. For me, it was always about what can I bring to the table, what kind of acts of service I could do for the community and the student body at large. So, for me, it was a very useful process.

And to be honest, extended long hours in the tunnels were like my favourite part because I got to meet so many people, and I am 100% an extrovert. So, I was fueled with energy all throughout the two weeks of campaigning. It's honestly like a month long process. But both times, that was my favourite part. Just being in the tunnels, talking to students, hearing their actual issues and their perspectives. So, overall, I would say if your heart is not in the right place, it can seem like a very draining process. But for me, it was very rewarding.

And one of my favourite experiences, I got to meet so many Carleton students and to this day, so many people are like "Oh, I met you in the tunnels years ago." So, definitely a fun experience. The unique thing is that if you run for student politics, you're not running by chance. Obviously, at the beginning of my Journalism Carleton career, I didn't want to be in student politics. But once I approached that stage in my life, I deeply cared. And I ran for a reason. I feel like most of the people that run for student politics also do that, right? We want to make the community better, there's an improvement we want to see. So, we run for those positions, and people that do get elected, I think it's only 1% of the university population ends up being student politicians. Maybe less than that, because there's only a few...

Anyways, it's a selective few people that get that privilege of running and representing the student body. So yeah, honestly to this day, I'm very thankful I had those chances and that people voted for me. I feel like that's the biggest thing. Obviously, I wouldn't have had those chances if people didn't trust me and didn't vote for me. So, I'm very thankful for the people who did and also the people who didn't.

BW – 11:10

Because you have been a leader in the Carleton community, what advice would you give to a student who wants to do more but doesn't know where to start?

SF – 11:20

The biggest thing about leadership is that people think you need a title to be a leader, and from my experiences and from what I've learned from the leaders that came before me, you don't need to wait for something to create change. Your actions speak louder than anything or any title. So, if you want to make an impact, I would say first start getting involved, right? Find something that impassions you. Why do you care? Ask yourself, why do you want to create a community? Why do you want to be a leader? And then start taking steps. You don't need to wait for a title to be a leader. I was not the vice president when I was a leader. I was just regular Sissi in journalism class and people started believing in me. And yeah, don't wait for a title. Just start getting involved and start doing things that impassion you.

BW – 12:32

While speaking with Teddy Kozela, and she was telling me how you were doing the Leadership Blitz when it was Spencer West, I believe. And someone who was a part of CBC really liked your Leadership Blitz and that's how your CBC relationship flowered, or is that exactly the story there?

SF – 12:55

Yes, I remember that time. I've always wanted to be a public speaker... And this is so funny. I've always wanted to be a public speaker and I've always wanted to share my story, because I think sharing stories inspire others. And when the Leadership Blitz came, I was so nervous. I was standing in front of thousands of people. And I was like "Ah! No!" But I always remember my Leadership Blitz because it's something dear to my heart. My one minute "What leadership meant to me", it was about helping others. As a leader, I believe the biggest thing you can do is empower others to grow as leaders. You don't want to be just like that one person and that's it. You're just leading our community, you want to create leaders within that community. Because together, it's just more powerful.

So, that was my Leadership Blitz. I talked about my ESL teacher who obviously taught me English when I first came to Canada. And yeah, then how she built me up. So, that was the whole Leadership Blitz, how to build up other people. And the person that introduced Spencer West at the Leadership Blitz at SOAR, her name is Robyn Breshnahan. I feel like I'm mispronouncing her name, but she is a CBC radio host. She's amazing. She does the Ottawa Morning. Anyways, a very respectable journalist. So, she was the one introducing Spencer West, so then obviously, she heard me do my Blitz.

So, then later on, there was something happening in Venezuela. There were power outages, there was just a lot of things happening economically and politically, and she's like "I remembered this girl from Carleton. She said she's from Venezuela, she's a leader on campus. Let's get her on the show." So, then someone reached out to me and they were like "Are you Venezuelan?" I'm like "Yes." So, they had me

on the show. She interviewed me. And it was very powerful being interviewed at CBC and sharing my story and sharing something about my country too. Ensuring awareness. That was just a huge thing. At this point, I was already in my fourth year of Journalism... So yeah, and then fast forward. After I graduated, I was working in the Raven Magazine, and this is like a full circle moment. I was working at the Raven Magazine for Carleton, which if students haven't seen it, you should definitely check it out. But anyways, at this point, I was part of the magazine and they sent me to interview Robyn. So, I was doing a story about Robyn and how she became a very known journalist in Ottawa. So, it was full circle because she interviewed me about my Venezuela experience and then I interviewed her about her journalism experience a whole year later. So, yeah. It was a full circle moment. And then from there, I just fostered my relationship with CBC and here I am at CBC North.

BW – 15:48

That's amazing. That's a really good story in there to show students how, when you're not really expecting it, something amazing can come out of being involved with campus activities.

SF – 16:00

I would say every job, and I had hundreds of jobs at this point. But every opportunity I've had, it's because I was involved at Carleton. Every single one of them. And connections are the biggest thing. I think that's a thing in Canada, that's a thing in Carleton, where you have this amazing community. It's a very niche community, obviously at Carleton. But you can connect with so many people, whether it is through a mentorship program, whether it is attending events, whether it is just saying hi to people in the tunnels was like... Every opportunity I've had. And I'm so thankful for Carleton, it's because I was involved in university.

BW – 16:35

If you hadn't been as involved in campus activities or just being on campus in general, how do you think your time would have been different?

SF – 16:45

Oh my gosh, I think I wouldn't have enjoyed university as much. Obviously, we go to university for the academics and to learn about specific topics... But obviously every student is different. We all have our different goals. But for me, if I had just gone to school and then came back home, or go to school, go to my job outside of Carleton, it would just be different. It would just be a lot gray. I feel like I always talk about colours. I feel like if I wasn't involved, Carleton would have just been like a gray space. But because I was so involved, there were so many colours. There was so much music, so much texture and context to Carleton as a community. So, I wouldn't be at CBC. I wouldn't. Yeah, I would have never been the vice president at Carleton, I never would have met the president, I would have never hosted a

debate for the federal elections. Like being involved at Carleton gives you so many opportunities, and even if it's in the smaller scale... It's just so nice and adds so much colour into your university experience.

BW – 17:47

What was the biggest skill that you learned through all of the opportunities that you had?

SF – 17:53

Oh, biggest skill? I'm going to say it's probably a soft skill, but confidence. I think the biggest thing is confidence and to this day, I'm still sort of struggling with it. I feel like I have a lot of imposter syndrome, where I'm always like "Oh, I'm not good enough for this or how did I end up here?" Even when I won as a vice-president for student issues for CUSA, I was like "Am I even qualified for this position?" So, there's always this self-doubt. I don't know if it's in everyone's head, but it's definitely in my head most of the time. So, I think just confidence. Every time I did something, I'm like "Okay, I'm good at this." I had people reinforcing my skills or my ability. So, yeah. I think throughout every year, I can tell you how much I've grown personally, and the growth professionally, personal, and all this stuff every year with the experiences I had. So, yeah, just confidence first. And even if you feel like a lot of self-doubt inwardly, at least outwardly I can express that I'm confident. So, definitely a really good skill to have.

BW – 18:56

What was the most helpful tip that you received that you still use to this day?

SF – 19:01

If you're looking for a professional tip, I would say follow up. Whenever you meet someone, the most important thing is to follow up with that person. You want to be on the top of their heads. So, if you meet someone at an event, get their number, get their contact, and then afterwards just follow up and be like "Hey, it was nice meeting you." All this stuff. And the reason I say that is because first or second year of university, there was this CBC reporter coming to one of our classes, and she was talking and she talked about just being a journalist, how to enter the field, and all this stuff. And I had approached and I said hi. And anyways, I followed up with her alter, we went for coffee because she said a comment that still to this day is still stuck in my head. It's about accents and immigrants.

Anyways, we went for coffee, and that was six years ago and to this day she still remembers me. We still text each other on holidays, or whenever. She was a huge mentor when I first heard about CBC, and it's all because I followed up. So, every time you meet someone, follow up. Especially if it's a professional endeavour. There's definitely so many other tips that I've received, but that's the first one that comes to my head.

BW – 20:12

Wow, that's amazing. That's a great way to end off our podcast. That is it for my questions today, do you have anything else that you'd like to add?

SF – 20:21

Yes, obviously I am a very extroverted person, so that's why I was very involved in university. But I understand that's not the case for every student. We all come from different walks of life. Even some people might not feel confident speaking in English, or being outwardly in the community, and that's okay. I would say, try to find your community, try to find where you belong, or where you feel welcome to be honest. You don't have to do it all. I know I was extra involved in university, but your journey is your own life. You don't have to follow other people's journeys. You can mimic them, you can learn from them, hear from their stories, but at the end of the day, you're the main character in your own story. So, don't ever compare yourself to other people's lives. You don't have to be vice president of CUSA to create change or to end up at your ideal company. You don't have to have 100 clubs under your belt to be involved. Just do whatever makes you happy. But yeah, overall, definitely do get involved. Sometimes stepping out of your own comfort zone is a challenge. But I would say that's the best way of growing, connecting, and learning. So, yeah, anyone that listens to this, just be yourself. Find your niche, find your community, and don't compare yourself to others.

BW – 21:39

Thank you so much Sissi, it was amazing talking to you today.

SF – 21:43

You as well. Thank you for having me and good luck to every student listening to this. It gets better and better. Yes, have fun in university because it goes by really quick.

BW – 21:54

Amazing, thanks again.

And that's all for today. I'm Rebecca Weston. This podcast comes from the Student Experience Office. Thank you to Sissi for joining us today, thank you to the listener for tuning in, and we'll talk soon.