

INTRO

Stephanie Jackson: Now That's INTAresting. This podcast is about the Georgia Tech Sam Nunn School of International Affairs, its graduates, their careers, and how the Nunn School has helped to shape their future. Take a listen.

Stephanie Jackson: Welcome back to *Now That's INTAresting*. I'm Stephanie Jackson.

Sydney Piwonka: And I'm Sydney Piwonka.

Stephanie Jackson: And in this episode today, we are continuing our discussions with Nunn School alumni that completed their degrees with minors in STEM related fields. And today, we would like to welcome Aarij Abbas who finished with a degree in Economics and International Affairs—that's our EIA degree—and a Minor in Biology.

Sydney Piwonka: And while at Georgia Tech, Aarij participated in multiple organizations including the Theta Chi fraternity, serving as president and house manager, the Georgia Tech Student Ambassadors, and the Ivan Allen College Ambassadors. In addition, Aarij was a Research Assistant at the Center for European Studies, an Intern at the International Rescue Committee, and a Legislative Intern at GeorgiaLink Public Affairs Group. Following graduation, Aarij was the Senior Aide and the Georgia General Assembly, a Peace Corps Volunteer, a Communications Fellow for the Fair Fight Action, and is now an Assistant PR Representative for the Veritas Group.

Stephanie Jackson: Thank you for joining us today, Aarij.

Aarij Abbas: Thank you guys, so much. It's great to be here.

Stephanie Jackson: You have really had a wide variety of experiences. And we want to hear more about all of those, but we would like to begin our conversation today by talking about your major and minor choices. So, if you can remember back when you came to Tech, what was your major?

Aarij Abbas: So, when I first enrolled in Tech, my major was the International Affairs and Modern Languages major with Russian being my modern language, and I was a Summer Session student. And I actually, during my registration, switched to Economics and International Affairs and decided to take Russian on the side, instead.

Stephanie Jackson: Okay, so you decided to switch to the EIA degree with Russian as your language, but what did, what made you decide to choose to pursue the Minor in Biology?

Aarij Abbas: It's something that I always really enjoyed. It was my favorite science in high school. And one of the options I was considering after school was a public health degree and a public health track, and I thought, you know, a Biology Minor would be a step in that direction. And I just really loved biology. And you know, I had the extra credit hours. I had the availability. So, that's why I decided to take it. It was really a, yeah.

Stephanie Jackson: Good.

Aarij Abbas: I took it because I can. End of decision.

Stephanie Jackson: Well, that's, that's a good choice. I mean that's a good reason. Like you said, you had that flexibility in your degree to pursue other interests, which is what we want to see our students do. So, did you see any overlap between your EIA degree and your Biology Minor at all?

Aarij Abbas: Not strictly, like in the coursework, of course, but, you know, my Biology Minor, did help me gain a few perspectives on just global affairs global, especially Global Health Affairs. And I think it really helped when I joined the Peace Corps more than anything, because health is a major part of every Peace Corps Volunteers' mission. And so, just having even a foundation of biology, like basic biology knowledge, really helped me understand some of the issues, issues that we were talking about on the ground there.

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah, I'm glad you mentioned that we're gonna come back to talking about your, your journey towards Peace Corps. But, my final question about your minor is, in terms of thinking about back when you were pursuing the minor, did that impact any of the other decisions you made about other classes that you might take maybe in, within INTA or other electives or any, did it help shape your thoughts about internships in any way?

Aarij Abbas: I did spend a lot of time looking for internships that were kind of more of the public health field. I was not ultimately successful in that, but I think it helped my course, my course selection and kind of that process and just reminding me that there's so much else to learn out there. And that if I have the time and the like, energy to, like the ability to do that, the privilege to do that really, because I know some of these students at Georgia Tech don't have time to, you know, engage in other coursework, than I should. Because there's, you know, no such thing as, in my opinion, it's one of the things that I really like to do. So, it encouraged me to look outside of my field.

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah. Okay.

Sydney Piwonka: Yeah, that's so great that you've been able to have that experience throughout your minor. And so, now we're going to move a little bit on to some of the internships that you have held. And so, you were an Intern at the International Rescue Committee, and what was your role during this internship?

Aarij Abbas: I was in, on the Economic Empowerment Team, supporting them. And so, that team's role is to find, help the refugees on this side on the US side, once they get here, help them find work, help them build their resumes, help them find education programs. Honestly, I mean, the overarching mission is to help them find economic stability, so that they can be providing for themselves and their families here.

Sydney Piwonka: Yeah. And so, I think you kind of touched on this a little bit, but where did you see any of your either EIA or biology coursework overlap with this internship?

Aarij Abbas: Yeah. I think, especially the EIA coursework, they overlap quite a bit just from the standpoint that in international affairs, we do study refugees a lot and, like, those crises. And seeing that, seeing people that have been displaced, talking to them, you know, I was interviewing refugees on a daily basis to learn about what they did in their, in their home countries, and what kind of skills they had so that we had a better idea of what kind of job to look for, it really gave me a lot of clarity into what we're actually talking about when we talk about refugees and migrant populations. So, I think that's the biggest overlap there.

Sydney Piwonka: What advice do you have for students who may be interested in either working at the International Rescue Committee or other, similar nonprofit organizations?

Aarij Abbas: I think this one does get thrown around a lot, but just you know, send in your applications all the time, because honestly, the International Rescue Committee was one of like, 100 applications that I filled out that summer. And I didn't even remember applying until I got the interview. I, so that, and look high and low. I'd say look at home, too. If, even if you're an international affairs student, there's so many organizations in Atlanta that are doing work, development work. If you want to go into the nonprofit field, any kind of development experience is going to be super useful. So, if you see mutual aid groups, or any kind of groups that are trying to help the people of Atlanta, even that experience is going to be pretty, pretty useful, pretty invaluable as well. So, don't limit yourself to the big name, nonprofits that everyone tries to go for.

Stephanie Jackson: I think that's really helpful advice, because you're right, sometimes it's the smaller organizations that really need, you know, the, the labor support to get some of the work done. And so, if students can either intern or volunteer with these smaller organizations, they A) might even rise up within those organizations into, get promoted into a different position, or would certainly be a steppingstone to get into some of the larger organizations about later point in their career paths. so, that's a really good point you bring up. I want to ask you now about some of your positions, and your time exploring the political system in Georgia. So, as a student, you were a Legislative Intern with GeorgiaLink Public Affairs Group.

Aarij Abbas: Yeah.

Stephanie Jackson: And then once you graduated, you held a position as a Senate Aide with the Georgia General Assembly. So, tell us a little bit about each of these experiences.

Aarij Abbas: Yes. So, my internship with the GeorgiaLink Public Affairs Group was my first exposure to state and local politics. And it was invaluable in teaching me like the power of state and local government, because it's honestly something that is not talked about in, in school, in college, like in any of our courses, any, any of my courses. But and so, I think that was my biggest takeaway was just how much power these people have over the lives of Georgians and getting to see that system work up close was very eye opening. Very fast paced. Enjoyable, but also, you know, a little troubling at times seeing the way our state government works--or any government works. And I went back as a Senate Aide, just to have a different perspective from the state government side, because GeorgiaLink is a lobbying group, and so I wanted a, like a more inside perspective. And it was nice. I mean, it was fun being on the Senate floor. I got to meet some pretty interesting state senators. and some senate staffers and, you know, got some more clarity. It helped me position, like, center my beliefs more and gave me a little more encouragement that what I believe should be pursued and can be fought for like at the state and local level.

Stephanie Jackson: So, what influence did any of those roles have in your pursuing a communications fellowship with Fair Fight Action later on in your career?

Aarij Abbas: Yes. So, I think, for a little bit of perspective, so I got evacuated from Peace Corps around like in 2019. And then Coronavirus, happened, and I was kind of floating around looking for, you know, honestly looking for work. And I saw this, this fellowship come across, it just caught my eye as I was

looking for jobs and stuff. And I have always enjoyed writing. I've always enjoyed communications a bit, just on the side for my personal level. And I applied, I sent in my resume, and I got a call back. They did a, they did a writing sample.

Stephanie Jackson: Right.

Aarij Abbas: And, you know, a full test. And yeah, I was lucky enough to get that fellowship, it was an awesome experience.

Stephanie Jackson: So, what were your, what was your, what were your responsibilities? What did you do in that role?

Aarij Abbas: I supported the Communications at and for Fair Fight Action. And a lot of that involved, I got to take the first stab at drafting talking points for Stacey Abrams and Lauren Groh-Wargo, the CEO of Fair Fight. And I got to craft press briefings. So, you know, Stacey Abrams has a lot of press coverage. She does a lot of interviews. And so, I got to do that. And I, I just supported, yeah, I kind of got to do the first pass at everything when there was time enough to give me the opportunity. And then, I would get feedback, and it's really kind of helped me grow in that kind of communication field just to build my skill set. And my bosses were great at giving feedback in that.

Stephanie Jackson: So, did you find that, you know, your undergraduate major or minor helped prepare you for that in any way?

Aarij Abbas: Yes. I mean, I think international, that my major and minor have not too much to do with what I'm doing now. But the skills I built, pursuing that major, mostly the research and writing skills that I developed during my International Affairs degree, have helped a lot. Because a lot of my role now is doing research and writing like kind of briefings, reports, and like digging through the internet to find information that's useful for whatever work I'm doing at the time. And that was definitely built off of writing all those papers when I was an International Affairs student.

Stephanie Jackson: So, if you could give any words of advice to students who might be thinking about pursuing internships or a career path in politics, what would you say would be some good advice for that?

Aarij Abbas: In politics, I think, I would say do not limit yourself to the mainstream institutions, especially if they don't align with what you believe in. There are so many organizations that aren't readily available or, you know, you don't hear about them every day. But these small, niche organizations are, might be doing more impactful work. And if they're more in line with the work that you want to do, then put in the extra time to find them, instead of settling for, like, an establishment institution of some kind.

Stephanie Jackson: Okay.

Sydney Piwonka: Yeah, I definitely think that trying to pursue your interests when you find those internships is super important. And so, going back a little bit to your time on-campus at Georgia Tech, so you were both a part of the Georgia Tech Student Ambassadors and the Ivan Allen

Aarij Abbas: Yes.

Sydney Piwonka: College Ambassadors. And so, tell us a little bit about each of these experiences.

Aarij Abbas: Sure. I think Ivan Allen Student Ambassadors was a great experience, very near and dear to my heart because I got to help, you know, that organization does a lot of high school outreach. And the main goal is to get more students who are pursuing the liberal arts into Georgia Tech. And I got to talk with students who had been in the same position I had been in high school, which was, oh, do I want to go to Georgia Tech? It's a STEM school. It's all math and science. I don't like math and science. And so I got to have conversations with those kids and help them, just give them more information about what liberal arts at Georgia Tech mean. And that's why I honestly enjoyed all the events we did, all the tours I gave for that. Georgia Tech Student Ambassadors was a little bit different. It's geared a lot more towards kind of alumni relations, but also external relations. So, there were tours, and more so just lots of events involving alumni and other significant people. So, that was also enjoyable. I got to meet a lot of, I made some good friends through Georgia Tech Ambassadors, and I got to give tours to some great, great alumni. I learned a lot about their time at Georgia Tech. But yeah.

Sydney Piwonka: Yeah, that's awesome that you had those amazing experiences while on campus. And I think you touched a little bit on this, but how did having these positions as the Georgia Tech Student Ambassador and as an Ivan Allen College Ambassador impact what choices you made while at Georgia Tech either in some of the opportunities you pursued for internships or in your coursework?

Aarij Abbas: Okay. So, I think, as far as internships, these organizations kind of just gave me a network, you know, all the other people that are kind of in the same boat as me as far as we're all looking for internships and stuff. So, it's a great way to exchange information, just like, oh, I saw this opening, I think you should apply, etc, etc. And as far as some of the choices it influenced while on campus, I think it kind of kept me on campus a lot and involved with the things that were happening in Georgia Tech. And it like drew my focus towards those current events, situations, whatever was going on on campus at the time, as opposed to me perhaps being more engaged outside, in the city of Atlanta a little bit more. And so, I am grateful for like all of those experiences, but I wish that I had spent a little more time looking out into like the rest of the city, I guess.

Sydney Piwonka: Yeah, and so, what advice would you give for students who may want to get involved in similar organizations on campus while they're at Georgia Tech?

Aarij Abbas: Always apply even if you think you're not qualified. Again, with Georgia Tech Student Ambassadors, it was something I applied to not really expecting a lot out of it. And like, I didn't expect it to go anywhere. I, but I got it, and it was a great experience. So, don't, don't be afraid of like the oh, what if I get rejected, etc. Like, nobody cares. Everyone gets rejected from lots of things in their life. And, and, again, I'll repeat this one. Don't settle for something that's seems more prestigious or seems like it's a better spot on your resume. I think, you know, if I had to go back and do it again, there are probably more or different organizations that I would focus my energies on and apply, like, apply to join and get involved in that org. Because I see, looking back, but they, they would have helped me develop some of the skills that I'm finding I need now, or some of the experiences I wish I'd had.

Stephanie Jackson: Okay. So, now let's talk Peace Corps.

Aarij Abbas: Okay.

Stephanie Jackson: I do remember you being very interested in the Peace Corps. I remember that. So, you

Aarij Abbas: Yeah.

Stephanie Jackson: Mentioned a little bit, a little bit earlier how you were evacuated. But first, let's talk about what drew your interest to Peace Corps.

Aarij Abbas: It just seemed like a very fascinating opportunity to, you know, go and work in another country, get some really cool skills, some really useful skills and experiences. I will say, my expectations for Peace Corps like it, it's not what I expected going in, but it was a great experience. It was just something I've always had in the back of my head. Like I said, I probably, yeah, I did mention it to you, Stephanie, I'm sure a few times. And when, it got to my last semester and everyone around me was applying for jobs, and I was like, oh, man, what do I do now? Like Peace Corps. Okay, let's, let's do it. I can't figure out like, you know, what else but this is a good steppingstone to basically any career.

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah.

Aarij Abbas: So that's kind of how I got there.

Stephanie Jackson: So, what, what, what role did they place you in? And you were in Liberia, is that correct?

Aarij Abbas: Yes, I was in Liberia as an Education Volunteer. And so, my role, we were the first group of volunteers to teach English literacy. So, not, not spoken English, but reading and writing because, like, English is the national language of Liberia, but the literacy rate is, needs some help. And so, you know, that was, that was what we were doing. It was a really fascinating experience. I love teaching. It was great.

Stephanie Jackson: So, at that time, you know, you'd, you were finishing up your EIA degree, and you also had your Minor in Biology, had you initially thought about maybe using that Minor in Biology or some sort of health curated placement might be better suited for you?

Aarij Abbas: Yes. And that was one of the sectors I put as my preferred. I put education, economic development, and health as my preferred sectors when I filled out my application. But I also didn't want to limit myself by just putting health or just putting economics, which is why I chose to put all three and, you know, leave myself open to the possibility that I might be better off in a different position that Peace Corps wants me in. And so, they did. And I still got to use some of my health and economic background while serving in Peace Corps, so that was nice.

Stephanie Jackson: So, you said earlier that you were evacuated. So, how long did you actually serve?

Aarij Abbas: I only served for six months before we got evacuated.

Stephanie Jackson: So, you served for six months. Did you have your three month training also?

Aarij Abbas: Okay, I guess I'm counting my three month training. So I served for three months, I was only

Stephanie Jackson: Okay.

Aarij Abbas: At site, on my site for three months. And I had, yeah, my three month training before that. So yeah, that was very unfortunate. When I got back to the US, I immediately applied to a different country, because we actually, this was not a COVID-related evacuation. This was a few months before

that. So, I applied again, and I got accepted into Peace Corps Paraguay, but then Coronavirus happened. And

Sydney Piwonka: Oh no.

Aarij Abbas: Then, Peace Corps issued its like first worldwide evacuation.

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah.

Aarij Abbas: Which I'm sure, you know, made the news a lot. So.

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah, it did. So, thinking back to your time, when you were applying for Peace Corps, or considering it, any advice you have for students who might be thinking about Peace Corps?

Aarij Abbas: If you think you're going to, like change your community's life, or be like a savior, if that's what you want to do, this is not the organization for you, at all. It takes a lot of like, you need to be very humble, if you are going to go into Peace Corps. And you might be disappointed, like in what you find there. So, just don't have any, like set in stone expectations when you apply. And just remember, it's not about you. It's about the community you're serving. So, yeah, I think that would be my biggest piece of advice. And the second, again, don't go to the countries that you think are like going to be the most fun. Don't limit yourself. Just leave yourself open to some possibilities.

Stephanie Jackson: Okay.

Aarij Abbas: Yeah.

Stephanie Jackson: Great.

Sydney Piwonka: Yeah. And so, moving on to your current position. So currently, you're working as an Assistant PR

Aarij Abbas: Yes.

Sydney Piwonka: Representative at Veritas group. And so, tell us about what your role

Aarij Abbas: Okay.

Sydney Piwonka: Is in this position.

Aarij Abbas: I, yeah, so I'm a Assistant Public Relations Representative. And my role is half administrative. Public relations is like client-related, so, you know, the administrative side, is we're a pretty small firm. And so we rely on the people in my role to kind of do a lot of like keeping the Google Drive organized, making sure all the like emails get triaged, etc. like doing some of the administrative stuff that every firm needs to keep running. And then, on the other side, we also get to work with clients. And we're in on, you know, all client meetings. Our input is greatly valued. And I do a lot of media press relations for a couple clients, so setting up interviews with reporters, making sure we're being covered well in the news, or our clients are being covered well in the news, event production, a lot of these clients, you know, now everything is virtual. So, we're doing virtual events to, for fundraisers or awareness, whatever we do, we're a top to bottom PR firm. And so, we do really anything in that scope that the client needs. And there's a lot of different work that I've been a part of.

Sydney Piwonka: Yeah, that's awesome. And so, have you seen any overlap between either what you studied in economics or in international affairs or biology?

Aarij Abbas: A little bit.

Sydney Piwonka: Throughout this position?

Aarij Abbas: And just because some of the clients, the work they do is related to like economics, like, economics is everywhere, right? So, that economic education gives me a little bit of strength, a little foundation to work with. And I think other than that, again, the skills that I built during my degree, like the research and writing skills are the biggest contribution, for sure. But occasionally, like the knowledge, the curriculum also comes into play.

Sydney Piwonka: Yeah, I think that's great that you emphasize that not only can it be directly related, but also just the skills that you're building through what you learn either at the Nunn School or in biology directly apply. So, that's awesome. And then, what advice do you have for students who may be interested in pursuing similar positions?

Aarij Abbas: So, I think the PR and marketing area is fairly competitive, but there's also just so many opportunities out there. So, it'll take again, like, a lot of, maybe a lucky break to get your foot in the door. I think, in the meantime, what I would say is, don't be afraid to like build your writing skills and build a portfolio, even if it's, for free. I, I hate the idea of free labor. But unfortunately, in the world we live in, sometimes, that is the case that like, that's what you have to do to show, to showcase your skill set. So, there's plenty of blogs out there that like to have volunteer writers. And so, if the PR work is some, marketing work is something you want to do, and you want your writing to be a part of it, you know, write for those, write for those blogs. If it's, kind of, events or something else, volunteer for organizations. I got into communications because I was volunteering for a political startup and they gave me their like social media. And, you know, I started writing copy. And so, just volunteer and try to build a portfolio that shows kind of, you know, what you can do. And if possible, get paid for building that portfolio, but just know that that might not always happen.

Stephanie Jackson: Okay. So, we're gonna wrap up quickly. We just have a couple last questions. I want you to just consider if or how having this Minor in Biology has impacted the trajectory of your coursework, your internships, your career path. And you, earlier you mentioned initially that you were interested in pursuing possibly public health. So, what looks different, or what is different from how you imagined your career path when you initially begin studying Biology and Economics and International Affairs?

Aarij Abbas: I think a lot looks different. I imagined myself when I first started in college, I imagined myself at, you know, a big nonprofit or international institution, like the WHO, or the State Department, or the UN, etc. And slowly, through a number of experiences, realized that, you know, that is not what I want to do, even if that's what I set out to do. Back when I was like, 18, or 19. And yeah, I think just, it, my, I did not imagine that this is what I would be doing when when I started college at all.

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah.

Aarij Abbas: But I have no regrets. I actually really love the work that I'm doing now, even if it has very little to do with what I studied. I don't consider that to be like, a wasted education. I learned a lot of

great skills. And a lot of, you know, a lot about the world through, through my education. And, you know, it does come into play like all the time. So, yeah.

Stephanie Jackson: So, I would say my, my last question for you, are there any last words of advice that you would have for a student who may be at your at, you know, where you were they started at Georgia Tech or studying international affairs, they may have a STEM related minor in some way. What advice would you have for that person going forward?

Aarij Abbas: I think, more than anything, it's, it's okay if you don't know what you want to do right now. That is perfectly fine. Because I didn't, even when I had graduated. And just go with like, go with your gut, go with your heart in terms of what, what is right for you in that like in that moment of your life, because not everything you plan can be long term. And it's good to have like a general long term plan. But I think if you get too specific, you're closing yourself off to opportunities that you have never even imagined. And don't, don't do that. Leave your, leave the door open for you know, anything to kind of happen.

Stephanie Jackson: I think that's a perfect end to this interview. Thank you, Aarij.

Aarij Abbas: It was great to be here. Thanks, Stephanie. Thank you, Sydney. And yeah, I appreciate you guys.

Stephanie Jackson: Yeah, it's been an insightful conversation. And I think your, your tips about not limiting yourself and, you know, having, encouraging students to follow their interests and develop their skills are really important for them to hear. So, thank you again for joining us. We hope you're staying safe and healthy, and we hope to be hearing more about your future successes real soon.

Aarij Abbas: Absolutely. All right. Thanks, guys.

Stephanie Jackson: Thank you.

Sydney Piwonka: Thank you.

OUTRO

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