Episode 8 - Inside Our Heads - Mental Healthcare

Fri, Apr 07, 2023 2:59PM • 24:34

**SUMMARY KEYWORDS**

grinnell, people, thinking, teague, anthropology, students, working, folks, field, grinnell college, experience, graduated, san francisco bay, share, life, related, ended, interested, started, occupational therapy

**SPEAKERS**

Meredith Benjamin, Teague Craig, Nicholas Lampietti

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:10

From the center for careers, life and service at Grinnell College, welcome back to going forth. I'm Meredith Benjamin.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:17

And of course, I'm Nicolas Lampietti. Today we're coming to you live from Grinnell College.

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:22

Well, we always come to you live from Grinnell College.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:25

But today, our guest alum does too.

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:28

Nicholas and I sat down with Teague Craig, a staff counselor here at Student Health and Wellness and member of the Grinnell class of 2009.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:36

We discussed Teague's, circuitous journey from anthropology to mental health care, the changing landscape of mental health in recent years, and the vital but challenging roles that mental health providers play.

**Meredith Benjamin** 00:48

Stay with us.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 00:59

Thank you so much for chatting with us today Teague.

**Teague Craig** 01:02

Yeah, thanks so much for inviting me really happy to be here and to be talking to you all,

**Meredith Benjamin** 01:07

we're really excited as well. Um, so some people may know you, but can you just start by telling us who you are, what you do and what your time was like at Grinnell?

**Teague Craig** 01:19

Yeah, sure. So my name is Teague, Teague Craig. I am a staff counselor at Student Health and Wellness here at Grinnell. I started just a little over two years ago, right before the pandemic really took off around here. So it was an interesting time to get started. As a staff counselor, I see students primarily for short term counseling, I see students who are experiencing crises. Yeah, I mean, that's that's pretty much it. I'm happy to share any more about that that you all want to hear about. I'm also a Grinnell alum. I graduated from Grinnell in 2009. I majored in anthropology, has nothing to do with where I ended up, but that's what I-that's what I studied. That's what I was super excited about. And almost 11 years after I graduated, I ended up coming back just seemed somehow like like, the right time.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 02:10

So do you want to give us a little bit more of I mean, we love asking this question. But paint us a little bit of a picture of Teague at Grinnell.

**Teague Craig** 02:20

Oh, gosh, me at Grinnell this feels so, strangely, not that long ago, and also, so very distant. I was involved in a lot of student organizations, a lot of LGBTQ focused organizations and other sort of, I guess, diversity related organizations on campus. That was kind of my my group of folks. My I was in my second year that the-the drag show got started and was involved in that and participated every year following as, as a participant, that was probably one of I would say, probably my favorite legacy that I could say I wouldn't, obviously was not solely responsible, but was participant and really have enjoyed hearing from students in the past about how that's continued to go forward. As a as a sort of Cornerstone event. at Grinnell, I would say I was trying to figure a lot of things out as a student at Grinnell, I, you know, at the time that I kind of was experience experimenting with different aspects of my identity I, you know, shaved my head for the first time and I've done it a few times since then. Just yeah, it was kind of trying to find my place in the world. I think I started abroad in Tanzania first semester, which was a very transformative experience. For me, I spent a lot of time sleeping in a tent, sleeping on the ground. I did archaeological field school, I was very into the Anthro thing during that time. And even though I said it has something to do with what I do now, I think that probably did play a significant role from an academic standpoint, in terms of just my interest in the human condition, really, and how are humans? What are humans Like? What is the what is the range of ways of being as humans and and why and how and all these kinds of questions that I think have continued to interest me, I guess, since that time.

**Meredith Benjamin** 04:12

That's really interesting. Yeah, when you put it like that there, I can totally see the thread between anthropology and mental health care and what you do now. And so can you just elaborate on that and maybe share with us what your path looked like after Grinnell or the steps that you took that kind of led you to, to what you're doing now.

**Teague Craig** 04:33

Actually, it was a pretty circuitous route, I would say. I think like many Grinnell students, when I was getting ready to graduate, I kind of felt like I needed to know what I was going to do for like the next five years or something. I applied. I was thinking I'd probably go to graduate school. I had brought it up with one of my faculty that I was interested in potentially pursuing a PhD in anthropology. I wouldn't say I was discouraged, but some there was some kind of framing of just what the reality looks like for folks who, who do pursue a PhD in anthropology and kind of the-the limited options out there in the world as far as working in academic environments and thinking about some of those limits. And that was a moment, maybe my third or fourth year at Grinnell, when I started to take stock and rethink, you know, what did I want for myself and thought through a lot of different options, tried out a few different things. I applied for one master's degree program in journalism, which I had almost no background in, I did do some student publication work in high school and in in, in college, but not really journalism. And understandably, I did not get in, which was a tough blow, I would say to my ego personally. But there was there was a reason I didn't get in, it was not the right fit, I graduated in 2009, the economy was in a not so great place at the time, there were not a lot of jobs. For people with limited professional experience, it was a I would say a very difficult time as a new graduate to be going out into the professional world. I found that to be a very difficult transition. But I was fortunate enough to be able to move home for a little while and kind of feel some things out. I took some classes at my local university started thinking more about other practical fields. After having I wouldn't say my dreams shattered of working in academia. But I did kind of re-rethink that. And started thinking more about other practical routes that I might consider. I had long been interested in in healthcare, I did a lot of my favorite sort of research projects in anthropology were around medical anthropology. So I started thinking about different fields related to that, actually got into a program in occupational therapy, which I felt like might be a nice balance between physical health and yeah, working more on rehabilitation and these kinds of things. As I was getting ready to head into that in the fall, the following year, I decided to take a job. Just as a paraprofessional, working at a at a medical daycare, actually, in Omaha, where I'm where I'm from, and was working with children with disabilities. And I was thinking about this as a as a way to get more of a sense of what's it like to work in health care. I also had long been interested in working with kids, I had done previous, quite a bit of previous volunteer work with kids. That was that was an interesting experience for me. Something that I discovered about myself in that experience was that I really was more interested as opposed to focusing in so much on something like occupational therapy, I was really interested in, zooming out and looking at the whole child, the whole person, and decided not to pursue that occupational therapy program kind of trying to cut to the chase here. But at the same time, I was in a relationship with somebody who was getting moved to California for work. So I moved from Omaha to the San Francisco Bay area, but this person, that relationship ended, but I stayed there for a number of years. And at the same time that I was planning to move there, I ended up starting a master's program in actually an early childhood education and focus on early childhood special education and also Child Life in hospitals. So I did this program, got to spend some time working with kids got to understand disability more, understand health care in a different lens, and eventually ended up working at a large hospital in the San Francisco Bay area as a child life specialist, which just to give a very brief basic explanation of what that is really focused on supporting children's coping within the healthcare environment. I did that for a few years. I think something that's characterized me and maybe is connected to my thinking as a Grinnellian, I've kind of always been pulled to want to know more and want to understand more deeply whatever it is, whatever environment that I'm in. So you know, in the in the medical daycare, I kind of realized for myself, I want to understand the emotional well being for example of how young children's health care experiences impact their emotional well being and that was something that I noticed a lot and was concerned about, that came up for a lot of kids. So after doing Child Life for a little while in the San Francisco Bay area, then I had a friend who I had done my first graduate program with and he started doing this Master's in Counseling Psychology program. And at first I thought that was like a totally wild idea why would you go back to grad school again so soon? What are you doing to yourself, but as I as I heard more from him and about his experience and kind of also saw the shifts in his ways of being able to work with kids and families, I was really impressed by that. It was also I was going through some other things personally in my life at the same time, that may be kind of rethink, take, take a moment to take stock of where I was at, and I ended up the year after him starting the same Counseling Psychology program. That was a two year program that I did I can share more about kind of the process in general, if that's of interest to you, but my, my experience was, you know, I got to learn more all about all of these things, right? Like, again, interested in the human condition from a biological and cultural perspective, and then diving more into maybe a little bit more of an individualist perspective in the field of psychology. Yeah, I started working with kids. I graduated I started that program in 201 and I graduated in 2018. And spent a lot of time working with kids, I worked with kids in crisis programs. In the San Francisco Bay area, I worked with kids and families in hospice settings, school based settings, providing mental health services, and other kinds of outpatient settings. And yeah, got to got to get a feel for a lot of different environments. And at some point, really the the motivating factor, a couple of motivating factors for me, and coming to Grinnell were really that I am from the Midwest, my family is still in Omaha, I spent about nine years in the San Francisco Bay Area, and wasn't really able to make it home as often at a certain point that became something that felt important to me. And I started thinking about making my way back in addition to some other some other disadvantages to living in the Bay Area, I found myself kind of overworking a lot of ended up working a lot of jobs to make ends meet. And actually, at some point struggling to really make the most of it and enjoy it to the extent that I wanted to one morning in November of I guess that would have been November of 2019, I randomly got onto the Grinnell College website thinking I was thinking about places where would I maybe feel comfortable moving back to the Midwest. And Grinnell was a place that came to mind. And I just happened to look on the website and happen to see that there was a staff counselor position open and apply for it and interviewed on campus a month later and started in February of 2020. That was a that was a long, kind of convoluted way to get here. But

**Meredith Benjamin** 11:59

I mean, it's fascinating. Everybody's just done such interesting things. There's rarely a linear path. We listen to these interviews. And we're just astonished by kind of all of the additional expertise and experiences that our guests have that Grinnell alumni have that isn't directly related to whatever they're currently doing. Because you know, people just have such full lives. So

**Nicholas Lampietti** 12:20

let's jump into what you're working on. Right now. As a staff, counselor, I'm sure you get this question all the time. But we're going to ask it anyway. How has the pandemic COVID-19 changed the landscape of mental health care?

**Teague Craig** 12:36

It's been a lot. I mean, it's been a lot for everybody right across contact. This is a little bit of a side note. But even as I was getting ready to move out here, there was a sort of urgency for me to move out of the Bay Area. And at some part of me has this feeling of like, yeah, some part of me knew that things were about to happen. And I needed to get I needed to get closer to home. Yeah, it was a very strange time. I think I was actually seeing students in my office for about three weeks before we got the notification that we were sending students home. Really, I mean, I would say I was in a total state of shock. And then one of the biggest challenges as a mental health provider is, I mean, frankly, some feeling of helplessness because part of what happened was our our licensing is tied to the location of the person that we're providing services to. And so that meant that everyone that left the state of Iowa, even though we rapidly transitioned to being able to do telehealth, all of the students who live out of state, we had to stop seeing in a really crucial moment. And I think, yeah, as mental health providers that was challenging for us. And knowing that students were really struggling, right, like I definitely saw students in between that time when the notice went out. And then the time that students were actually sent home personally, I would say I never previously, I had any interest in providing telehealth and then did it for about a year and a half of telehealth services. It wasn't as bad as I thought it was going to be. I think, me personally, I probably catastrophize it. And now I'm kind of seeing also the benefits of being able to reach people in diverse sorts of circumstances. You know, even if people, for example, if students are in isolation right now, which can happen in these moments, we can still provide services, if they're feeling up for it or feeling like that would be something that would be helpful to them. So I think there have been some useful advantages that have come out of that. But I think the impacts on oh, gosh, I mean, they're just so vast the impacts on mental health, I would describe it as a lot of increase in acuity. It's how I would describe it from a clinical lens, a lot of worsening of issues that some that some folks already may have been dealing with new symptoms that people might not have had before. Right like we put a lot of people in situations of feeling helpless and isolated. It's a recipe for the experiences of anxiety experiences of depression, if anyone already had, you know, symptoms related to, for example, obsessive compulsive disorders and things like that, right, like, it's almost inevitable that those are going to be accentuated and worsened by the context. And I think none of that comes as a surprise. But I think we've really experienced that in coming back to campus this past fall, and, and seeing it play out. And I think a lot of folks are still trying to figure out how to recalibrate and kind of act like things are normal, but also feeling like things are not really normal, you know, not even to mention the global crises that that come up in a nutshell.

**Meredith Benjamin** 15:38

I mean, I guess that that brings me to a question, which I think could be really relevant to, for people to consider if they if they are thinking about pursuing, you know, a path in related to mental health care, which is just, you know, how do you balance self care when your job revolves around the care of other people?

**Teague Craig** 15:56

Yeah, there's, I mean, to be really frank, there's a huge risk of burnout in this field, and especially within the first few years of, of working in the field of mental health. The data show that for that reason, it is really important to have to have skills to be able to manage that. And I think, you know, for me, one thing that I would share is, it's important for me to know what my boundaries are, know what my limits are, in terms of, you know, as much as I really want to see this, this one more student who's just come in and want to keep working with them, I have to know what my limits are both in terms of my time, and in terms of my energy, right, and I'm not going to actually be doing somebody, the service that I want to be providing them, if I don't have anything really more to give, there's that part. Also being able to not take things personally, I think that's a huge part of being able to move through this being able to be flexible, to the extent possible, I'm somebody who likes predictability, I like a sense of kind of knowing what to expect, that's always something that I have to I have to work on as a human is being able to move with whatever's in front of me, and, and to be flexible with it. So there's that part of things. There's also kind of how do I take care of myself outside of my time at work, things like making sure that I, you know, get fresh air is super important. I spend most of my day sitting in one room sitting in a chair, right. And so getting fresh air, making sure that I have a balance between things that, you know, kind of helped me disconnect from work, but also opportunities that helped me reflect I do practice some, some mindfulness and meditation myself. And I also do things that kind of helped me just totally zone out. I'm a big fan of languages. And I like to, that's like one of my favorite things to do that helps me just disconnect from, from the work, right? Because I have to I have to recharge.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 17:46

Yeah, that was a super comprehensive answer. And we want to take it to the flip side. So what are some of your favorite things about your job?

**Teague Craig** 17:56

Yeah, I think the first thing that comes to mind when you ask that is I just find humans so fascinating. And I mean that in a in a, in a very warm, caring kind of way. Like I just truly find people so interesting, the fact that people are willing to be vulnerable and be open and share things and spaces that they wouldn't normally share is very, to me, that feels like a huge honor, I always appreciate that, that people are willing to you know, give it a try and to show up and to let me hear their stories. I mean, I I laugh a lot with the people that I work with, right. And so being able to take difficult situations, and of course not laugh them off, not laughing inappropriately. Right, not make light of anything that people are going through, but be able to bring some levity to difficult situations also, I think, to me feels like a healing experience. Other things that I really enjoy, anytime that I hear from somebody that they that something clicked, right, like I might have been working with somebody for a while, and then all of a sudden, they come in one week, and something has clicked and something is different, and something has changed. And I may have, you know, I may have some role in that. I may have very little, I may have played very little role in that change. But that is so gratifying to me to be able to even bear witness to it in any case. Yeah, there's a lot of there's a lot of really, yeah, incredible opportunities in this.

**Meredith Benjamin** 19:21

And so I'm wondering, you know, and this is something that we always ask, but, you know, being on the inside doing, what you do, what skills and interests and you know, what type of person is a fit in this field, and then on the flip who's not a fit?

**Teague Craig** 19:37

I think the most important thing. I mean, there's such a wide range of, of ways to be a strong, high quality mental health provider. And, you know, in my graduate experience, for example, I had I had classmates who were brand new graduates straight out of undergrad all the way to folks, you know, 60s who were on their second or third career and kind of treating this as sort of like their, their extra career, their their passion career that they were doing after, after all their years of work in other fields. And so I think there's a huge range of of folks who can be really good at this. And in fact that the more range of types of folks that we have, I think the better to be able to suit different people's needs, right? Like, I feel like I'm pretty good at what I do, but I'm not the right fit for every person. And so to be able to have a huge range, I think is is beneficial. I would say, though, the most crucial part is to be clear on what is bringing you to the field, a lot of folks who work in mental health have some sort of close experience with, with mental health struggles, either their own personally with their families, etc. And that can be a huge asset. At the same time, it's really crucial for folks to be aware of whatever baggage that they're carrying with them. And to understand that that's playing a role in that it could be playing a role in their choices to be able to distinguish, what for example, what am I bringing into the space versus what is the person in front of me bringing in. That awareness, I would say is the crucial ingredient, to really be able to see what is the other person bringing, without projecting my stuff onto them.

**Meredith Benjamin** 21:21

That's kind of I feel like that is the constant struggle of humanity, you know, trying to see people for who they are instead of who we are. And I think that that sounds like that's just, you know, very amplified in this line of work. Of course, it makes sense that it would be.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 21:37

usually the way we end our interviews, is asking you to speak to your Grinnell self and to Grinnell students in terms of giving them advice about how to realize their dreams and have a successful career. But we thought since this episode is a little different, we'd like you to speak to Grinnellians, about how they can take care of themselves? We know you can't see everyone.

**Teague Craig** 22:02

oh, I could do a whole episode on this.

**Meredith Benjamin** 22:06

I'm sure you could, I'm sure you could.

**Teague Craig** 22:09

But I think you know, if I, you know, on the fly, try to try to think about a couple of thoughts that I would want to share with folks, it would be one, take it easy on yourself. You know, this life, life is a marathon, it's not a it's not a sprint, right? That's a little bit trite. But I really, I would really encourage folks to understand that none of us is ever going to be perfect. And it's not worth trying to. It's not really worth trying to be perfect. That doesn't mean we don't try to do better at specific things in our lives, and that we don't want to keep continuing to grow. You know, as much as we can try to dismantle that being perfect. That is probably the biggest, the biggest nugget, I would want to share this also, you know, it feels a little bit trite to say but you know, to try not to take yourself too seriously. I know, I know life is serious Grinnell students tend to tend to be right, there's the sort of play hard party hard sort of attitude is pretty prevalent on this campus. The one thing I would say about that is to try to find try to find the middle ground in there somewhere. Right? Like don't, you don't need to take it too seriously all the time. And yeah, be kind to your bodies. You're gonna, be with them for a while, right. And I say that from a kind, caring, non-judgmental space of just wishing the best for everybody to be well.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 23:29

that was a really great way to end thank you really much Teague for for spending a little time with us and sharing all of your wisdom. We really appreciate it.

**Teague Craig** 23:38

Yeah, thanks so much for inviting me. This is a pleasure to get to get to share with you all.

**Nicholas Lampietti** 23:50

This podcast is brought to you by the Center for careers, life and service at Grinnell College. This episode was produced by Nicholas Lampietti. Our executive producer is Katie Kriegel. Find us online at goingforthgrinnell.com. Follow us on Instagram at @goingforthpodcast and on Twitter at goingforthpod. Listen to more episodes wherever you get your podcasts. Go forth Grinnellian. See you next time.