

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Ruchatneet Printup:

My purpose really for coming back to Syracuse as an older student was not that we don't have native people in film and media, but we're very underrepresented and we've been largely invisible for a lot of years in film and media. And my purpose really was is I just think right now with the environmental crisis that we're on and the earth right now, I think an indigenous voice is needed in the landscape of film and media right now. I feel like part of my purpose is how can I infuse that in narrative film to kind of expand how we look at the world or how we look at ourselves?

John Boccacino:

Well, folks, as we are heading into commencement here at Syracuse University, I am thrilled, nay honored to welcome on our guest here on the podcast. He has a fantastic story to tell you of overcoming adversity, working hard to meet his goals, and accomplish a career that is really going to take him far. I feel like once he graduates from Syracuse University, he is a film major in the Department of Film and Media Arts. He's also one of the prestigious university scholars and he'll be delivering the speech during the College of Visual and Performing Arts ceremony, taking place for Convocation Weekend coming up later on this week, Ruchatneet Printup is joining us here on the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. It's an honor to welcome you on, sir, how are you holding up these days?

Ruchatneet Printup:

I'm doing good. It's a busy semester like all the others.

John Boccacino:

I find your story is atypical compared to the people that you're going to school with. So, our audience has a little perspective. You're a little bit older than the typical undergraduate classmate you've got there. Give our audience a little background on yourself and what makes your story so unusual.

Ruchatneet Printup:

I decided to come back to school at a later age, and I had originally started an undergrad at Rochester Institute Technology when I was fresh out of high school, but I knew that it was a biomedical computing major, and I knew immediately that it wasn't something that I loved. But I didn't know what I wanted to do, and I told myself if I ever come back to school again that it would be for something I love.

And about a year before I come back to Syracuse here, I started here in the fall of 2019 and almost a year prior to that, it was really the first time that I thought of I could come to Syracuse as a film director, had always been interested in film and I had done some... I was in a theater group when I was in high school and then I had done some acting work when I was in my 20s and 30s, but it just never seemed to come together. But even during that whole period, I never once thought that I could be a director. But when it came to me, it really felt like I had found what I was looking for. So that was exciting for me.

John Boccacino:

It's commendable that you realize pretty quickly that the degree that you earned at RIT. And I want to give you a little background for our audience here too. It wasn't just, you're really a great guest to have

on as far as overcoming adversity because you're a first-generation college student in your family, the first to go away, you grew up outside of Buffalo on native lands on a reservation. Did you grow up thinking that college was even something that would be an option for you given the hardworking nature of your family and the blue-collar jobs that your dad and your family held?

Ruchatneet Printup:

I did well as a student. I started off at the Tusker Nation School. I was born and raised in Tuscarora. I really didn't know a lot of non-native people until I was going into sixth grade when you're around 12 years old. So, the first six years of my elementary school experience was going to an all-native elementary school in my community. So, you don't get exposed to a lot of non-natives, just maybe some of your teachers, my parents didn't have... Most of the people they hung out with were family, our community members. And because I had done reasonably well in school... When I look back, it just seemed like a natural progression to go to college. But I didn't realize at that time there were two things I didn't realize, and one was how impactful that can be to go away to school, not having... I mean, my mom did a little bit of community college, but she had, it's just a lot of kids and it just didn't work out for her.

But it does profoundly change you and the other thing I didn't realize is how much it would change me at that time. I was kind of naive about that, but it kind of taught me a couple different things. When I kind of finished my time at RIT was that if you don't have a strong identity yourself, then college will try to create that for you. And I don't know that it's intentional, but it's just kind of what happens in that environment is they're kind of molding you. And RIT was very much a career-oriented kind of school. And when I got out of school, I knew that I didn't love what I was doing, and it didn't take me long to realize that the money going to wasn't going to fulfill me. And it was a good lesson for me because when you're a first-generation college student and my father being an iron worker, they make good money when they're working.

But my dad had gotten hurt a few times and so we went through stretches where we struggled. And so, you feel like money is going to somehow fill that void, especially when you've experienced struggle at times in your family. But it was a good lesson for me to learn because even when I made good money, it didn't fill that void for me. And so, I didn't spend the rest of my life kind of looking for that job that was going to give me the money because I'm more focused on what would be more fulfilling for me at that point. And so, it was kind of a process of self-discovery through my life to figure that out.

John Boccacino:

All students of all ages, not just a non-traditional student like yourself. It's easy to think what you want to do. And the field that you had gone into at RIT where you got your degree was one that seemed to have viability as a career, your traditional safer programs. I think you would agree it wasn't something that you felt you could get a career afterwards and make some money, but that wasn't satisfying for you. You did mention having an interest in film and even from growing up watching TV and movies. I know TV didn't play a large role in your life, but can you describe a little bit when you first got the bug for film and for movies and was there a movie that really stood out to you that it sparked your interest in this realm.

Ruchatneet Printup:

Growing up in a family, my mom was a teenage mom by the time she was 20, she had three boys and then my sisters were born in her later 20s. So, my two sisters were born when I was 10 and 11 years old. So, weren't a family that went to the movies, just weren't taking five kids to the movies for recreation.

Our recreation was playing outside, just being in the neighborhood. But I started work at a young age. I was 14 when I start working and by the time, I was 16 I was able to afford a car. I actually bought my first car before I turned 16, a couple of months before. So, as soon as I turned 16 and I had money, I started to go to a lot of movies, me and my younger brother especially. And we would go to the movies a lot and it really... I think I had an interest when I would watch TV, but I didn't really go to the theater a lot until I was a teenager.

And probably the first film that I think really impacted me was the first Star Wars movie when it came out, it wasn't... As a filmmaker now when I look back at the history of it, George Lucas, the contemporaries at the time, there really hadn't been anything like that at the time. And he had showed it to several directors and the only one that said that they thought it was going to be a hit was Steven Spielberg at that time. And of course, Steven Spielberg wasn't a big, huge director at that time either. And it did, it just kind of introduced a whole new genre of types of film.

And the other film that really kind of surprised me and made an impact on me was Steven Spielberg when he came up with Indiana Jones, the first Indiana Jones movie. Again, nobody really seen that coming. I had seen most of the films that had already been out, and it was kind of like, "Oh, we haven't seen this." And so, we went to see and it just kind of blew me away. It was the first time you really... Not the first time, but the amount of special effects, the kind of thriller adventure kind of movie. So, those two movies stick out to me of being impactful movies of when I was younger.

John Boccacino:

Those are two staples, they're two legends. If you ask any film head or cinematographer fan, I mean the visual components of both of those and the drama, they really launched the modern-day film epoch, if you will, for moviegoers and getting into film, you didn't think film was something you could make a career out of. I mean, this wasn't something that kind of early on sparked you a little bit.

Ruchatneet Printup:

Well, I kind of had early dreams that I could get into acting in my 20s after RIT and I knew I was on the wrong track. I think I was going to go back to school and get a degree in acting, but our community was kind of going through a civil war over gambling and it really forced me to self-reflect. I realized for myself, you're looking at our community was wrestling with is money going to make a difference for us? And I had to kind of self-reflect on myself because I was working, and I didn't enjoy what I was doing. I was strictly doing it for the money and so I had to pull myself back. And so that was the gift I got out of it is it really pulled me out of my job because it really forced me to look at what was really important and what was really going to provide that fulfillment that I was looking for.

And I thought that film was going to be it. But I really spent the next seven and a half years just working part-time and really traveling a lot with our elders and knowledge holders and just really getting another education in our culture, which was amazing for me and helped me in my journey. But when you look at the film industry at that time there was not very much diversity in film. And my exposure, my dad loved the Westerns, but the first feature film was the Squaw Man. And again, it was a native film and I think it was 1910. So, between 1910 and 1960s, the major genre of film were Westerns, and it really was through the lens of a colonial view. And so, they were kind of rewrote history through these movies of that the native people were the aggressors and that the native people were somehow victimizing the colonists are those that were expanding into the west, which was not the truth.

But when you're a native young guy growing up and these are the images that you see, if you're not getting a different story in your community and your family, it can wear you down. And so, the industry

wasn't that much different even into the '70s and '80s wasn't a lot of diverse films being made. There were exceptions. And so not only was I not ready to be a director, there were things I needed to work out within myself. There were skillsets that I wouldn't have had at that time that I think you need as a director, but I don't think the industry was also there either at that time. I mean it was just challenging for anybody in the industry and never mind to be a person of a diverse background that challenges were even greater.

John Boccacino:

I'm glad to hear you say about the challenges because one of the reasons I was so impressed with your story and having you on as a podcast guest is it's a different journey than you hear about, and I commend our non-traditional students, but you did turn to your roots to have a pretty influential documentary debut. There's a film co-produced in 2009 about Native American boarding schools. Can you give our audience a little background on, because that seems to both blend your cultural heritage and the creative interests that you had in film. How did this project come to be and how did this kind of serve as a springboard to get you into where you are now?

Ruchatneet Printup:

So, at the time I was working for Native American Community Services in Buffalo, New York, and it's a native nonprofit and I was the director of Community and Cultural Services and the director at that time, Michael Martin came to me, and he had seen this proposal, this grant proposal request that had went out and it was supposed to be a short documentary and there were certain areas, and one of them was diverse stories or underserved communities. But there were several criteria. And he came to me, and he asked me if I would write a proposal for us to potentially get this documentary made. And so, we talked a little about, "Well, what do you think we'd want to do a documentary on?" And he was actually the one that had mentioned, he goes, "Well, one time we're having a community discussion and somebody in the community had been to boarding school, and they just mentioned it for a second and then they just shut right down and didn't go any further."

And he said, "It might be interesting if we did a documentary on boarding schools." And this was a time when there hadn't really been a whole lot of work, especially on the US side, around our history with boarding schools, which are called residential schools in Canada. And so, I wrote the grant and there were like 28 applicants and only four got chosen and ours was one of them. And I got partnered with a graduate filmmaker from the University of Buffalo named Ron Douglas, and I arranged most of the interviews and some of them through some of the people working at the native center contacts that they had, contacts that I had. And so, Ron and I just would go out and we would interview these elders that had been to boarding school or children of parents that had went to boarding school. And we quickly realized that these were just heartbreaking.

Many of them were heartbreaking stories and many of them just really exposed us to a lot of what went on through these individuals that we had interviewed. And we knew, we realized pretty quickly that this was a story that needed to be told and we got a lot of footage, and we end it up to be 30 minutes. We always had the intention to go back and do a longer one. And it didn't happen. Maybe it'll happen in the future, but what was good about this 30-minute documentary was we thought it was short, but it was a very impactful documentary. And because of the length of only being 30 minutes, we found that it was something that could be shown easily at community events, it could be shown in classes.

So, the guidance to do a shorter film actually turned out to be more usable for education purposes and for people just to get some history on what had happened to our people and how it had impacted us in ways that we didn't realize. Because a lot of these kids came back, and their families weren't asking

them what happened to them, and they weren't talking about it. And there were still people that didn't want to talk about it even when we interviewed and tried to get interviews. But the ones that were willing to talk about it, many of them hadn't been asked what happened to you.

And so, it was really an emotionally impactful experience for me. I learned a lot about different things and how our communities had coped with this history and how it had affected our families of having a lot of our children not being raised with parents and being kind of conditioned to not feel good about their culture, not feel good about their language, and having to come back for many of them and reintegrate into a community that they hadn't been raised in since they were young for many of them. Many of them had lost their language, not all of them. And then it was also learning how to be a parent again for some of them that had went really young and hadn't been raised by parents since a young age. And so, it did cause a lot of social issues for us, but I also commend just the survival and the resiliency of these community members that came back and had to start that healing process and just kind of enable our generations to be able to continue on.

John Boccacino:

Growing up in the States, I didn't hear much about this story, so I can't imagine if you don't know about it, you need to make yourself aware. And that's what the beauty of film and documentaries, you can educate people on topics that they might not be aware of. And that's why, again, I commend you because you want to make representation more readily available. You want to be able to tell more native stories and not have it just be during Native American Heritage Month. What kind of voice do you think you bring you're going to hope to bring as when you graduate and make your mark on this world? How do you think you can make a difference with film and representation?

Ruchatneet Printup:

Well, my purpose really for coming back to Syracuse as an older student was not that we don't have native people in film and media, but we're very underrepresented and we've been largely invisible for a lot of years in film and media. And my purpose really was is I just think right now with the environmental crisis that we're on in the earth right now, I think an indigenous voice is needed in the landscape of film and media right now. I feel like part of my purpose is how can I infuse that in narrative film to kind of expand how we look at the world or how we look at ourselves infusing the philosophies of how our people have lived in relationship to those around them and to the natural world. We're much more a community-based type of culture. Our inclination is more the whole and then the individual.

And in our culture, it really stresses the interdependence that we have, not only amongst people but amongst the natural world as well. And I think that finding creative ways to infuse that and storylines can be helpful as we move forward because we're not going to do it alone. If we're going to make any serious change with how we're approaching our relationship to the earth, it's going to take all people in order to do that. It's not going to be one group, it's going to need to be everybody to turn that tide. And so, I see narrative film as being something I'm really focused a lot on while I've been at Syracuse, but I've also done a fair amount of documentaries while I'm here. And documentaries I feel are something that's very accessible. I think they're important to do. Narrative films just take a lot more people many times to do a narrative film.

You're talking about a whole crew cast script documentary you can do with a handful of people. You could even do it by yourself potentially. And that's one thing about the education at Syracuse is you get a really well-rounded education as a filmmaker. And so, they teach you every aspect of filmmaking and you can specialize in a certain area, but you do get exposed to all aspects of it. So, doing a documentary on my own or maybe with one or two other people is accomplishable because I can, I've learned the

skills and there's always room for improvement, but I've learned the skills to be able to do that, and be able to fill in the holes if I don't have a certain person as a part of that crew.

John Boccacino:

And how tough was it when we talk about your career going from RIT you work, you hold a job with a nonprofit for more than 20 years, getting involved back with your community. You even were driving a truck for The Buffalo News for a while that tell us about that story with the news and truck driving and how that may be made Syracuse more of a realization.

Ruchatneet Printup:

Well, like you said, I worked in the nonprofit field for 20 years or so and just worked with all different groups of people from students in high school I worked with elders, I worked with prison programs, people with mental health, developmental disabilities. But as I developed through, it was really my more my passion to work in culture and language as it evolved through. And then I did that for a number of years and developed programs in that area. And then I just started to feel like I needed a shift. I was really feeling like I needed to do something different. I wasn't being fulfilled in the same way, and it was just time for a shift. And I left working in nonprofits and a friend of mine was actually working for The Buffalo News and he said they're always looking for people to work and drive.

And so, I got a job with The Buffalo News as a driver. And because I had education, people just assumed I was writing for The Buffalo News, but I'd actually gotten my CDL through The Buffalo News driving. And what really helped me about truck driving was I knew that I was looking for something different. I didn't look at truck driving really as what I was going to do, but it was a union job, it paid well. And it was interesting when I got my CDL, I felt like my dad was more proud of my CDL license than any schooling that I had gotten, which is interesting, which may not be true, but he was excited about me getting my CDL license. So, I was working and part of the reason I was driving was because I could listen to podcasts, I could listen to kind of things that just stimulate my mind to think about expanding myself.

And I was really searching for what my next move would be. And I've done a fair amount of meditation since I was in my 20s and I was meditating, and it just came to me. It said you could go to Syracuse University and be a film director, and it just instantly, it was like a bell went off. It just felt right from that moment. And I didn't know if I could get into Syracuse. Syracuse is a top 20 film school in the country and it's very competitive to get into Syracuse's program. And so, I didn't know if I was going to get in, but I still felt like I was probably going to pursue it whether I got into Syracuse or not. But I just felt going back to Syracuse would fast-forward me learning more about the film, craft of filmmaking, and just the business of filmmaking.

And I applied to Syracuse, and I applied as a transfer student and within two weeks I had been notified that had been accepted at Syracuse. So, it's just that reaffirmation again that I was on the right track that this is what I needed to do. And I knew right from my first day when I walked into my first lecture that I was on the right track. I knew instantly when I walked into that lecture, just the material we were looking at, what we were studying, it was like, "This is what I've been looking for." It just had a completely different feeling than that first class I walked into when I was at RIT.

John Boccacino:

The fact that obviously, you had some experiences as both being an actor and doing documentaries and being behind the scenes with a film camera. What was the adjustment process like for you?

Ruchatneet Printup:

There were so many adjustments, I guess because I've always challenged myself with different jobs that I do realize that it's going to feel uncomfortable at first and you just got to get used to that uncomfortableness and then you'll kind of settle into it. And it was really challenging to walk back into a classroom and have primarily 17 and 18-year-olds as your classmates and to come into a field where it's evolving very quickly. It's a digital industry primarily now. There's a lot of software, there's a lot of technology with filmmaking and it really was, for me, a process of catching up. I felt like I've always been a decent writer, so those types of assignments were easier for me. But there's so many different things that we use now, just simple things that are common, getting more commonplace using Google Drive, and then all the software with Adobe and then just the technology of using cameras.

But I think it was kind of an adjustment for me coming in and kind of defining what was my experience going to be like because wasn't a teenager coming in for looking for the same things that I looked at the first time I went to school where you're experiencing this youth independence and this experience that you're expecting to have at college. I had been through that already. And so, it was really about what was this experience going to be like for me as an older student and defining that. And it was an adjustment. I think probably the most challenging part for me was getting up to speed on the software, getting up to speed on just cameras, editing. I think those were probably the biggest challenge for me. And I kind of had to hit the ground running mean, just things as simple as Photoshop and After Effects and it's learning another language and I'm going to school with... And I'm not saying everybody were experts in that, but many of them had a significant experience in editing already, or they were already very familiar with equipment and cameras.

And so, I really felt like I kind of had to hit the ground running and really work hard. I'm thankful for the instructors, I'm thankful for my peers. I didn't like that vulnerability of feeling in some ways early on. I was kind of dependent on them in a way when we're doing certain parts, because we were at Syracuse, right from the first semester, you're making films and it's something that's kind of evolved in the film program where they've really pushed it where you're going to do the art of filmmaking from freshman year, first semester and it's good. But for me it was daunting. I had to jump right into that, but I had to be somewhat fearless. I couldn't shy away from things I wasn't comfortable with. I had to keep pushing myself to delve into uncomfortable technologies and just learn. And as I quickly picked up the skills that I needed, I felt less and less dependent on the students around me.

John Boccacino:

Is there anything you thought that, unlike the technical advantage that your peers might have had, is there anything about your story that you think might have given you a heads-up when it came to acclimating and adjusting?

Ruchatneet Printup:

That's a good question. I think there's a few things there. I think one thing is I came to Syracuse as a filmmaker with a sense of purpose and I've been having more experiences and getting to know myself more I think gives you just some more comfortableness with stories and some comfortableness with what you're trying to tell. And so, as I'm going through these classes, I'm thinking about how I can relate this to the type of stories that I want to tell. I think a huge thing for me is meditating, and I think I'll get myself overwhelmed, but since I really work to meditate each day, it kind of resets my mind and takes away that overwhelmedness feeling and allows me to keep pushing forward.

And I think honestly, having been raised in a native community with a different culture and then having to adapt to another culture off territory and going back and forth between these cultures and then adapting to a lot of different jobs as I went through my career, I think helped me to adapt more. I had to strengthen that skill even before I got to Syracuse to adapt to different situations. And I think as a native person and I think any person of diversity, you're constantly adapting because you're walking into situations where most jobs you have, you're not surrounded by your community members, you might be the only native person in the room. And so, you have to adapt and to these types of situations. And it helped me as a student to be able to do that.

John Boccacino:

One of the aspects of your story that I want to transition to is something that you would expect to see on the big screen in Hollywood or on an Apple plus TV show, it's father and daughter living together on a college campus. You were not the only member of your family who was inspired to go back to school. Tell us a little bit about how you inspired your daughter to follow your lead and go back and get a degree.

Ruchatneet Printup:

Well, my daughter was a student-athlete and she wanted... As a routine physical, they picked up that she had a health condition and she ended up having to drop out of school and help herself to get herself back healthy again. And in the process of that recovery, she got evolved into a pretty decent job that was paying pretty well, but it wasn't fulfilling to her. And when I decided to go back for film, it inspired her and she just said, "Well, if you're going back for film, I'm going back for fashion design." So, she went into create a field as well, which was closer to her heart. And I just felt like by me giving myself permission to kind of pursue my dreams, it gave her permission to pursue her dreams. And so, she got accepted at Syracuse as a fashion design major, and she's a junior right now.

She's in a semester abroad right now in London. So, when she was deciding to come and she was applying, I was living walking distance to campus, and I was on a flat and the flat below us became available and I got it. And I offered my daughter the opportunity to move in with me if she wanted to, even for a semester just to transition. I always told her, you can always move out, just a transition. But we ended up living together for two years and it ended up to be probably one of the most memorable parts of me being at Syracuse was to us kind of experience going to school. And she was in her 20s, but she was an older student, and it was a different relationship for us. I mean, she'll always be my daughter, but I also recognize that she's a grown woman and it's kind of navigating that space of giving her the space that I don't have to interject myself into her experience, but kind of experience it.

And when she needs me to be involved more, she'll ask me if she has questions or if she needs something. But one of the things I realized when my kids were teenagers, was that I would do too much for them. And I told them when they were in high school, I'm consciously going to be pulling back because I feel like I need you guys to be more independent for you. And so, it has been a process of my kids are adults now and they're taking care of themselves. And I feel like part of our role as parents is not for them to be dependent on us, but to how to teach them the skills that they're able to be successful on their own and they'll feel better about themselves.

And my daughter has really, her success, and her program has been on her. It's not me pushing her or telling her what she needs to do. It's been very self-motivated on her part. And I can see us collaborating on stuff as a filmmaker. There is that potential for set design or wardrobe design. So, there's that possibility. And she did help me on one of my films when I would've loved for her to help me on my



senior thesis, but she was in England at the time. So, I couldn't draw on her for her help in that area, but I would've loved to had her on set.

John Boccacino:

Well, it's great that she'll get a chance to see you walk across the stage. Your decorated career at Syracuse includes being VPA Scholar, being a Haudenosaunee Promise Scholar, a source scholar, you studied an SU in Los Angeles, you're delivering the convocation speech. It's going to be a memorable part of commencement. Do you have any idea what type of message you want to deliver?

Ruchatneet Printup:

I certainly want to focus on pursuing what's fulfilling to you. I think the abundance will come if you're really in alignment with what's fulfilling to you because you'll just work harder at what you love to do. So, I think that will be part of my message. I'll certainly touch on that. As artists, we are kind of like the whistleblowers in a way. And I think that we have an obligation to talk about the environment, to talk about diversity, to talk about empowering women. And so, those are things I think I would be important. I think it's also important to look at how we're... We didn't get here alone. Each one of us has a circle around us that we don't achieve what we do without having people in our lives that have helped support us and mold us and encourage us and be our cheerleaders if not working with us. So, I think all those things are important.

John Boccacino:

Your life story of just overcoming and finding that passion, finding what fulfills you and makes you feel satisfied, commendable, and I can't wait to both hear your speech during convocation and see what great things you accomplish once you graduate. It's been my pleasure to tell your story, and I wish you nothing but the best of luck with whatever you set your heart out to accomplish.

Ruchatneet Printup:

Thank you so much. I appreciate that.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations podcast.