

Sophia Falco Podcast

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JANET WEBER: This is journeys of learning where we talk to students that have taken unconventional pathways to reach their educational goals. I'm Janet Weber, and I'm your host and a counselor at De Anza College. And I created this podcast so that students will feel less alone on their own journeys of learning.

We are here with Sophia Falco. And Sophia and I first met at Foothill College maybe seven years ago? And she came to see me as a counselor. And I remember that she was thinking about biology as a major. She doesn't remember that. So we're not sure who's right. But she wasn't sure what she wanted to study. And we worked together and I'm going to let you take it from there if you can just tell us a little bit about your background and how you came to Foothill College. And your educational journey from there.

SOPHIA FALCO: All right well thank you Janet, for having me on your podcast. And Foothill College was

definitely an amazing experience and I was able to join a bit early for Foothill Middle College. But prior to that it took me a little longer to graduate from high school I had to repeat my junior year and take some time off for mental health challenges. So things took a little longer but it's important to stick with it and explore through Foothill what major could suit me because I was pretty uncertain. And then I was given a poetry project in middle college. From there, there was no turning back in regards to poetry.

JANET WEBER: I would second that. So tell us a little bit about your journey through Foothill College. It was not as straight and narrow path for you. Tell us about your beautiful windy road through it all.

SOPHIA FALCO: Well, as the Professor Allison Herman, she was my introduction to college writing professor, extremely influential to me. And to this day I admire her and expect her as a role model and professor. And felt she heard me, she really did. And so I started in a way beginning intro to college

before 1 A, and was progressing from there. And really awesome professors like Professor McCormick, she encouraged me to submit my poems places. And I really started to excel with the creative writing aspect in Professor McCormick's class. And she even nominated me for an award in the Literature Department. The Anne Paye Award they selected me out of all of the English classes. So you start from the very beginning you just got to keep trying to work your way up.

JANET WEBER: From what I remember when I first met you, you were very shy and confused about what you wanted to do. And during your time at Foothill College you started to find your love for English literature and especially for poetry. And met some great professors that really saw your talent and encouraged you. And what were some obstacles that you came upon while finishing up at Foothill College?

SOPHIA FALCO: Well I'm a mental health advocate person foremost and a poet, living with Bipolar Disorder 1 for over a decade. I'm open about it I think we need to shed light on it and um -- talk

about it more. Um -- so really people can start to fight the stigma and seek life-saving treatment. People with bipolar are more likely to drop out of college in general and even worse things so that is why it's important to speak out. So I had some mental health challenges during Foothill. But it I was graciously supported and encouraged and I thought people recognized maybe a little bit before me my talent and writing starting to grow over time.

JANET WEBER: Having bipolar disorder makes it tough to stay in school as you were saying.

SOPHIA FALCO: It can be extra challenges potentially -- not set in stone but you know. I could have dropped out my thought you know when I was at UC Santa Cruz struggling. And wasn't sure and I even put a little checkered flag on my dorm wall and a graduation cap. Like you can do it to finish you know because that was a little bit up in the air. I mean I did very well but at the same time a lot of challenges.

JANET WEBER: I think the challenging parts are when you're feeling depressed it's hard to get

yourself up and to go to class and do the work. Is that true?

SOPHIA FALCO: Yeah and fatigue and different things so yeah.

JANET WEBER: So you eluded to this already but it took how many years at Foothill College before you transferred?

SOPHIA FALCO: About three years.

JANET WEBER: And then you transferred to UC Santa Cruz.

SOPHIA FALCO: Yeah.

JANET WEBER: And tell us about that transition?

SOPHIA FALCO: Yeah, I felt like Foothill really prepared me. I would say at Foothill Doctor Scott Langford's English Honors classes so two of them really pushed me, believed in me. And so that helped me out. And then I had a much better direction of where I wanted to head after in terms of a major after being at Foothill because I was undecided and not sure. And so I ended up graduating with the highest honors in the Literature Department. And magna cum laude honors for intensive literature with

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a creative writing concentration in poetry. Foothill I've studied English and Spanish so it took some upper division courses in Spanish at UC Santa Cruz and yeah.

JANET WEBER: And you've had how many poems of yours published now?

SOPHIA FALCO: [Laughter] Quite a bit.
[Laughter].

JANET WEBER: A lot.

SOPHIA FALCO: But over 30.

JANET WEBER: Poems -- published in journals and you publish a chat book.

SOPHIA FALCO: Yeah, the chat book, The Immortal Sunflower was a winner of a contest so that was exciting. Published with Uncollected Press and then they published my full length Farewell Clay Dove and to be a third book moving right along. And that's tough with the press because it's very competitive nowadays with people wanting to you know be with a press versus self-publishing. And my publisher amazing I want to give them a shout out. My artistic vision he supports 110 percent.

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JANET WEBER: Your professor at UC Santa Cruz?

SOPHIA FALCO: My publisher who published the books.

JANET WEBER: Oh your publisher.

SOPHIA FALCO: And UC Santa Cruz, Rob Wilson -- Professor Rob Wilson, huge supporter, huge help and he's helping me out with some cover design ideas. So fortunate to prospect with similarly kind and knowledgeable professors and academic counselors like Janet along the way, so yeah.

JANET WEBER: And tell us what your goal is?

SOPHIA FALCO: My goal is to be a creative writing professor of poetry and um -- I was recently accepted to Saint Mary's of California Masters of Fine Arts Program for poetry and selected for their teaching fellowship with a scholarship. It's a competitive highly ranked school and I'm really excited to start the end of August on my journey hopefully you know to become a professor. It's really tough to do but I understand that and at the same time I'm pursuing that.

JANET WEBER: Well on your way.

SOPHIA FALCO: Yes.

JANET WEBER: Tell us in looking back on your journey, what would you have done differently?

SOPHIA FALCO: I mean it's interesting you know experiences. This point in time difficult, easier, this that. And so I don't think anything really concrete. But at the same time, to be nicer to myself mentally that you're worth it or kinder to the self you know not as hard on the self you know. But all of the other stuff you know it lead to this moment and I'm just grateful to be here in general. So I don't think I would have changed.

JANET WEBER: So you would be kinder and more forgiving to your younger self?

SOPHIA FALCO: To my younger self; yes.

JANET WEBER: Yeah.

SOPHIA FALCO: And to this day too, yes.

JANET WEBER: And today too. Good I like it. What advice would you have for students that are going through college now with mental health issues?

SOPHIA FALCO: I would say definitely make use of the accommodations if they receive or reach out to

try to get them. That really helped me extra time on tests and sometimes assignments a little more time consideration. And repeated the junior year in high school a little longer so everyone has their own path and for me it wasn't a race. It couldn't have been anyways it takes more time and it can.

JANET WEBER: I like that advice because I find that too many students are frustrated that they're not doing it fast enough. And I always wonder what the rush is. And so and we talk a little bit more about that how if you had felt that way you would have just felt worse about yourself rather than giving yourself that time and space to get through it.

SOPHIA FALCO: Definitely, yeah being reminded you know the finish line or in a certain amount of time. Because it is like who decides that anyways? You know it is arbitrary you know. My best friend I give her a shout out who is older than me is graduating with her masters of fine arts. And age I think we put too much emphasis on it and at the same time I'm extremely proud of her for returning to school and

just going for it. And not letting you know age stop her. So --

JANET WEBER: Great. And I know that you really enjoyed being at UC Santa Cruz; what was that like?

SOPHIA FALCO: Well my favorite classes I was selected for their poetry concentration on the first try which was cool. And those were my favorite classes. I learned so much in my craft of poetry really grew tremendously under guidance of great professors and some workshopping. And learning different techniques and skills and implementing them and just working, working, working at the craft. Because I feel like it is the craft and it's grown over time and it's not a given there is a lot that goes behind the scenes to create a poem. And so I learned so much under great professors.

JANET WEBER: And you are quite prolific you have written a lot of poems. And I've seen you at several poetry readings.

SOPHIA FALCO: Yes, yes.

JANET WEBER: And one thing that I'm always struck with I think I was saying this in the beginning, is

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that you were so shy when I first met you. And it's always a joy for me to see you in front of an audience reading your poetry.

SOPHIA FALCO: Yeah, I was much more shy in my personality, a bit more open. With poetry that's where in life my confidence lies 110 percent. It wasn't always 110 percent but it got there. So I feel comfortable and um -- even lead a poetry workshop. I was a mentor for Right Girl helping them out in their big virtual workshop this season. And so I definitely feel like I have gained some more confidence in the academic ground with tutoring and stuff like that. But it took time because I would barely say anything at all. [Laughter]

JANET WEBER: And you are publishing a book now.

SOPHIA FALCO: My third book; yes.

JANET WEBER: Yes. Will you tell us a little bit about that?

SOPHIA FALCO: So I can't say the title right now because it's you know -- but it's about 25 poems over the span of two years. And I was telling Janet prior that this was out of at least made 400 free writes or

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more. So hundreds of pages and I feel like with the craft its quality not quantity. So out of all of those pages the best of the best have made it into this book. And each poem I'm extremely proud of.

Yeah the title that's okay. *Chronicles of Cosmic Chaos in the Fourth Dimension*. That title came to me when I was at a residential treatment center and that book core idea kind of manifested from there in that moment in time, January of this year. So the book is pretty intense but it ends a bit hopeful. And the title *Chronicles* is like factual but the fourth dimension is kind of at odds with each other a bit.

JANET WEBER: And we cannot end this podcast without hearing some of your poetry. So I think you have two poems that you are going to read for us?

SOPHIA FALCO: Yes I have 2 poems. The first one is after my favorite poet, Kaveh Akbar. He is very talented. I've read his work. And he pushes me, I don't know him personally, but he pushes me to be a better poet. I'm just in awe of him all of the time in the way he carries himself. And now I'll go into the poem:

It's for Maya, this very kind woman in my life.

Little hands and big hand for Maya after Kaveh Akbar.

The little hand, the big hand both in reverse wish for more time. He claimed the clock is ticking. Ticking now backwards. His claim this buys more time. I didn't check that clock. Thrown off equilibrium. Less time equates to heartache her hand is the little hand. My hand is the bigger hand. This mother figure real. Almost all knowing to sit across from me in silence. Her presence fills up the room echoes of love when despair comes. She loves me for me. Love never said out loud. This fear to leave soon tries to avoid writing about hands. Mine are missing something. I cannot grasp on to emptiness instead I hold on to back handles, miniature candles. My paper airplanes made from memory not holding space for the existence of heaven. My purple pen holding, holding, holding, holding. Cannot catch time that flies during day time. Yet night's too long, too lonely wake up with jolts

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glancing at the digital clock seeing red not wanting to. Hope its morning, it's not its hauntings. I cannot face the past. Head on the face of the grandfather clock too old. The glass cracked. No longer can protect its own hands.

JANET WEBER: Beautiful.

SOPHIA FALCO: Thank you. These are both -- will be in my new book. This one is titled, *Wishing*.

In the shadow floating aimlessly across the blank wall. Drawing a blank on my first memory this puppet my choice a butterfly confines. Not etched in missing bright colors and eyes. I believed I was living in the shadows of who I once was. Still after all that time wanting to fly and to not die. My empty heart at night still beating still pumping blood woke up with a jolt. Butterflies born in my stomach ready to burst they started rising to my chest, knots. Now caught in my throat not a net. Migration upwards the suffering trying to hold it down. When this needs to reach the outside to see the light I threw up these butterflies in the middle of the night. Illuminating

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*this room with me alone in bed by shooting stars.
These effervescent butterflies. Buttering about I
open my palms one perched on my finger tip and I made
a wish.*

JANET WEBER: Beautiful.

SOPHIA FALCO: Thank you.

JANET WEBER: One thing I love about your poetry and I see people respond to this often is the imagery that you create with your poetry. It's so beautiful. And when I read your poetry I'm often struck by how vivid of an imagery you create just in general. And then specifically, the visceral feeling I get of what it's like to live with bipolar disorder. The ups and the downs and the different places that you go. And, I also want to say that I love watching you read your poetry because I see a different heart of you come out when you read it.

SOPHIA FALCO: Yeah. It was quite profound in this therapeutic writing group. When I read I tend to subconsciously kind of move or rock like back and forth subconsciously and he said oh it's your form of

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prayer, poetry. And I just thought that was so profound and I agree with him. You know I'm spiritual not religious but poetry just takes me places.

JANET WEBER: I love that. I think that's a good place to end. Thank you Sophia.

SOPHIA FALCO: Thank you.