

S3E8: Sam Gilchrist Transcript

MOLLY: Hey everyone, welcome back to another episode of all careers considered the IU Walter Center podcast, where we connect with IU college of arts and sciences alumni, and hear about their careers. So today I'm here with Sam Gilchrist who currently serves as the Western campaigns director for the national resources, defense council or NRDC. He lives in Denver, Colorado, and of course, Sam is an alum as well. So I'm excited to have Sam here virtually today to talk about his career thus far. So thanks for being here, Sam.

SAM: Thanks so much Molly for having me.

M: Yeah. So I knew he graduated from IU Bloomington in 2006 and since then you've done all kinds of interesting things with your career, but why don't you just go ahead and get started by kind of giving a quick summary about you, maybe a little bit about kind of where you're from and what your time at IU was like, and what you've done since then.

S: Yeah. Um, so I guess we were to start, so I grew up in Indianapolis and went to North Central and then from there went on to IU and studied political science and anthropology, thought at one point I was going to be a doctor and some classes kept me from that route. So, I started to fall in love with politics early on, getting involved with college Democrats, some of, some other groups on campus, and like the Monroe County democratic party and some, some campaigns. And it really actually started with some Iraq war protests, which kind of funny, you know, we were the 02 to 06 years were kind of an odd year or an odd time for, you know, us as a country and pushed a lot of students, political activism, not unlike today. So you know, I got involved just in as much as I could. And learning about the history of politics, the, you know, the literal science behind politics and then anthropology kind of pushing me to understand the dynamics of how people interact with one another and perceive one another in the political world. So from there, I volunteered sort of as an intern for the Monroe County democratic party during the 06 cycle to help reelect Baron Hill, who was a Congressman at that, at that point in time and then from there had no idea what I was going to do to be a state Senate intern for a couple of States senators over the next, basically from January to June of 2007 during the legislative session. And so again, kind of curious what to do and the presidential cycle was coming up. And so I had an option between three candidates, John Edwards, Barack Obama, and Chris Dodd. And, for some reason, although I really enjoyed working for him, I went and worked for Chris Dodd in Iowa and Obama clearly swept the field that year. And you know, he and Hillary Clinton got into a pretty contentious primary after Dodd, uh, ended his campaign in January, I went on to work for the Obama campaign, and then worked on a congressional race in California after that. So, I've bounced around for much like campaign life. You know, you bounce around a little bit between campaigns for, for a cycle or two and eventually I found where I worked on a special election. And from there back to Indianapolis to work on basically the fight for passing the fight for the international union, which is a big 3 million plus member union that has members in Indianapolis, they've got members all around the country, really. I mean, literally like in multiple countries so that they represent the service sector. So, janitors, security officers, a lot of

healthcare workers, a lot of public employees, and they were launching a huge campaign across the country to help support Democrats and to push Republicans too to support the affordable care act. So I led our field team in Indiana for a little over a year. After the affordable care act passed, our project was dissolved and I became an organizer with our security officer campaign in Indianapolis. We did work mostly in Indiana and Ohio organizing security officers at a lot of the major buildings, commercial buildings around the state, or Indy Metro area primarily. And that was a good job. It was a really hard job. It's, you know, trying to form a union is one of the hardest things people can do because our culture doesn't really, our business culture doesn't really support what employees are pushing back for things, you know, like good working conditions or higher wages or better benefits or things like that. So, you know I did that for a while and, funny enough, my wife was, um, I got married during that time and my wife was planning to go to nursing school to get her master's. And so we ended up moving to Connecticut where I worked for another FCIU union, did some political work before starting with the union for the Connecticut Senate, Senate Democrats but got, sort of got back to the healthcare space, working for a 26,000 member health care union. I was a political organizer and then our acting political director there and we were really powerful, you know, good member driven union in the state of Connecticut. And like I said, we represented healthcare workers from you know, home care workers, all the way up to doctors at major state hospitals. And so it was a really eye opening experience. It was a really good experience. We really liked Connecticut a lot, but we moved to Colorado because my wife paid for her nursing school through the air force. So my career path has kind of jumped with all of those, um, with her moves. So we've had two major moves because of that. And so she, you know, again, find the healthcare theme, you know, she was engaged in, you know, working for the air force as a nurse practitioner and moving out here, I was planning to just go and work for another CIU union or the state counselor, or something like that. But, ended up running the AFL CIO, which is the state Federation of labor. So it's basically an affiliate body of all of the labor unions in the state. And there are local groups there, like local labor councils, state, and then the national AFL CIO. So I did that for a couple of years and we were thinking of moving again and ended up through my network of political friends and folks I had gotten to know in the environmental space, and found my way to NRDC. So it was sort of an interesting jump because labor and the environmental world have a lot in common in terms of who we want to see, you know, making policy, you know, there's a lot of potential for creation of good jobs in the clean energy economy. So I had done a lot of work with local and state environmental organizations when I was running the state Federation. But, you know, there's still a lot of tension there, a lot of the fossil fuels history isn't organized and they have a lot of membership within the union. So there's a lot of tension. So we're constantly trying to figure out ways to work past that as partners to make sure that we can move towards reducing carbon emissions and keeping our planet from, you know, like burning or extreme weather and hurricanes and things like that, as we're seeing constantly right now, I mean, ultimately it's about clean air, clean water, making sure that people are healthy. So yeah, the natural resources defense council is a huge international environmental nonprofit. I never thought I would work for NRDC. You know, our history is mostly of attorneys and PhDs and the experts of the experts within the environmental space. So, the organization was starting to take a different approach, and we're still going through this kind of shift, but the organization has

grown pretty considerably over probably the last 10 years. And we were starting to look at sort of more holistic campaign management or campaign project management. And that's where folks with more of the political acumen you know, came in. That's where I came in. So yeah, that's kinda how I found my way over here. I know it's sort of a long way of explaining it, but yeah.

M: Yeah, no, that was great. I think you did a great job. Sometimes it's hard to kind of summarize your whole career in a few minutes. So that was perfect. I'd like to go back a little bit to your time at IU. And I hadn't really thought about that, about what it would be like to be a college student kind of right after like 9/11 and all of those tensions were really high. And I can imagine that current college students are kind of experiencing similar types of, you know, craziness just with everything that's been going on. So what was that like being a college student at that time? And I know you mentioned that those tensions were kind of big, they kind of pushed you to pursue careers in politics and really, you know, completely changed from you thought you were going to be a doctor and now you're switching careers. So do you think it really was just everything that was going on in the world that inspired you to change? Or was there anything else?

S: That's a good question. So. I think the circumstances of that time were really motivating for me to get involved but you know, my family has a history of being involved in politics and in philanthropy and volunteering for organizations. My grandmother worked for Dick Lugar and Bill Hudnut, former mayor of Indianapolis. So, you know, she taught sex ed for years. You know, it was a different time. So comprehensive sex ed is not really a tenant of the Republican party right now. So she is a real inspiration for me in terms of being involved in public life. And, you know, doing something beyond yourself is really important. I think feeling connected to something bigger than yourself is a thing we all crave. I thought for a second that I was going to go into the military after 9/11 or to the Naval Academy was my dream and realized quickly that they didn't take people with asthma. So, you know, I found out and then went to IU and became this huge liberal, but, so I'm joking, but it was interesting. It opened my eyes to a much broader world of ideas, backgrounds people had. I was involved in a lot of different things but you know, just the friends I met at the school, you know, sometimes a big school is intimidating for people, but not for me. I mean, I came from North central, which was almost 4,000 students, so it's, you know, it's a huge, you know, a huge school to a huge school, but at IU you can really find your niche and, you know, Bloomington is such a great town. It's, you know, there's just, there's a lot to do. So, you know, yes, the circumstances of the time are motivating, but also just my family history and people I had met really pushed me to get involved and, and doing more.

M: Gotcha. Yeah, that makes sense. And I'm sure a lot of students can relate to that as well. So I'd be curious to hear, you mentioned that you really didn't picture yourself being in this kind of environmental space and that a lot of the people that you work with are attorneys and people that really have a lot of knowledge in this area. So how have you been able to kind of quickly learn about, you know, the things that everybody else he has degrees in and everything like that? Like how have you been able to just kind of learn on the job and kind of grow in that way.

S: Yeah. That's, that's a really good question. It's a work in progress, so. I know for a fact that I am not environmental policy experts. So in that it's not my job to be one, and I work alongside our experts to help craft campaigns, um, and do a lot of, I do a lot of government affairs work as well and political electoral work for the organization. So it's really my expertise. in politics and government affairs and what, what makes people tick? And I think, you know, the political science and the anthropology background are really important in informing that, they both help you think very critically and analyze what is, you know, the best way to, you know, pass a policy or legislation or, you know, something through an administrative process. So I've had to learn a lot about a lot of different things over time. So when I worked to help pass the affordable care act, I was the sadist who read the damn thing. And, you know, a 2000 page bill is not something fun to read. So it took me a long time. I think I actually finished it after the bill had passed. So, you know, it was like reading a lot, trying to soak in as much information as I can, knowing that I wasn't going to be the expert on something, was really helpful. I think a lot of us, um, you know, when we're younger, want to be seen as having authority on, on issues. And it's important to recognize when it's appropriate for us to, you know, to be the expert, if we have the background or if we need to lift up other voices. So, yeah, I think I've learned a lot from my colleagues and they're very gracious and patient with me, in terms of understanding, you know, the science behind greenhouse gas reduction. So, you know, like policies that reduce greenhouse gases and things like that. So it's, yeah, it's a work in progress.

M: Yeah, that makes sense. I'm sure it's a lot of just asking questions and kind of learning as you go. A couple more questions. I don't want to take up too much of your time, but I am curious about, you mentioned that you've made a couple moves you know, you're from Indianapolis, went to school at IU and then kind of lived on the East coast and now you're out West. So as you made those moves, what was it like applying for jobs and new cities? Did that take a lot of networking? You know, what strategies were you using to kind of get a new job and pivot into a new area of the country.

S: Yeah. I have never gotten a job without networking. So politics is a really interesting world because it's really about relationships as anything. But I think politics is literally just relationship building. So I was able to connect with people that I knew through either campaign work or through the union I worked for or through just, you know, friends. So I used some, you know, career resources to try and look for jobs, but, you know, a lot of those, my career path is odd. And so you don't really find a job like mine on, you know, a college career website or an indeed or something like that. So, you know, it's really about networking and, you know, I, I can't stress enough the importance of getting involved, whether it's, you know, it doesn't have to be in politics, but getting involved in clubs or other organizations or something outside of the school in the Bloomington community is really great way to just build your network and get to know people cause you never know where, I mean, if you were, have asked me at IU when, where I was going to live in, you know, 15 years, I would have said like DC, San Francisco or LA. So, it wouldn't have ever occurred to me that I was gonna live in Colorado.

M: Yeah, I think that's great advice. So I guess to kind of wrap up, you know, this podcast is mostly for students and young professionals as they kind of navigate their careers. So what would you say to a student that is really interested in working in kind of campaign management, governmental affairs and maybe they're just not feeling super confident about where they are, maybe how their resume looks or networking is kind of uncomfortable for them, or they're just trying to kind of figure out that next step. What kind of advice would you give to that student?

S: Well, if folks want to get involved in campaigns, then they should volunteer on campaigns, that's really the best way to get to the ins and outs of a campaign. You can always go if you're not really interested in the more, I guess, the social route of politics, the networking route, then being involved, you can volunteer for elected officials, you can go and work for them, apply for jobs with them. You can get a degree or master's in public policy, you can work in the policy sphere. I think the policy side of things is, is more of a after someone's elected or working for an organization that advocates for a certain issue or a set of issues.

But I don't know. I think that getting to know people that work in the field you want to go into is really important and doing internships, hopefully paid internships, \ are really critical, you know, just testing the waters. I think unfortunately our education system doesn't give students really enough opportunity to test the waters, without, you know, like having a big safety net to prop them up while they do it. So, it can be daunting to branch out and try different things that you may be interested in. But I think doing that while you're in school, talking to folks that have your ideal career and asking them about their pathways. I've talked with a ton of students through the Walter success network. And I think that people always, really, know who they work for. They're like, Oh, I want to be an environmental attorney some day. And I'm like, I'm not an environmental attorney. So, but I'm happy to talk to them about like the career pathways my colleagues have had the career pathway I've had. Get to know people. Don't be afraid to do informational interviews. Don't be afraid to reach out to people. Some people might blow you off, but for the most part, you know, they're just busy. So don't feel like you're getting rejected. If you don't get an email back from someone right away. Oftentimes, students will reach out to me and I forget to check the Walter success network, or it comes through my email and I have a thousand emails. And so, we, you know, we just miss it and so follow up with people, network. Something that I think is really overlooked a lot is getting to know your professors. That was something I didn't do well at IU. And so when I was applying to grad school, you know, thinking about different career paths at times, it was hard to find sort of that academic reference, but get to know your professors there actually pretty interesting people, they're not as stodgy or cruel all of them as, as sometimes we think they are. So yeah, network, get to know people,, both at school and in the outside world in turn, you know, try to find jobs you know, don't be so set on your career path, being this ideal of what you think it'll be about. Having a goal is really important, but thinking you're going to be the CEO of a company or the president of a major nonprofit by the time you're 30 is not realistic. So, you know, take time, work hard, get to know folks.

M: Thanks, Sam. I think that's great advice. And I'm glad you mentioned the Walter Center Success Network. I was going to ask if students have questions, if it would be okay if they reach out to you through that.

S: Yeah. Just don't be offended if I don't respond immediately. It's election season.

M: Completely understandable. Well, thank you so much, Sam it was great getting to know you and hearing more about your story and I'm sure the students will really appreciate it.

S: Thanks so much, Molly. I appreciate it. Have a good rest of your day.

M: Thanks everyone for listening to another episode of All Careers Considered and we'll see you next time.