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Episode 13: Irina Pidberejna

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Transcript

Christina Torres:

Hi everyone, and welcome to Futures in Languages, a podcast showcasing stories from UCF's Modern Languages and Literatures Department alumni. I'm Christina Torres and I'll be hosting this episode today. We'll be talking with Irina Pidberejna, who graduated from the Russian program in 2015. Thank you so much for joining us.

Irina Pidberejna:

Thank you so much for having me. It's a pleasure to be speaking with you, and I'm so glad that this has come up and this is a great idea to showcase alumni.

Christina Torres:

Woo, we're very excited to have you. She's a rockstar, as you'll find out in our conversation. Let's go ahead and just jump right in there. Irina, can you tell us a little bit about yourself, maybe where you're from, some background?

Irina Pidberejna:

Okay, so I'm originally from Ukraine and I moved to the United States when I was four years old. I grew up in South Florida in the Miami area, did all of my schooling K through 12 in the United States. And then I decided to attend the University of Central Florida for my bachelor's. And I graduated with my Bachelor's in Visual Arts and Emerging Media Management. And I also got a lot of things tagged onto it because I really wasn't sure what I had wanted to do. I knew I wanted to do art, but I wanted to be business minded or logical. So I did a BA instead of a BFA. And then I also graduated with a TEFL certificate, a Russian minor and substitute teaching certificate.

Christina Torres:

You were very busy during your time in undergrad at UCF?

Irina Pidberejna:

Well, it kind of all started to fit in pretty well, so it's not as if I took longer than I needed. I still finished in four years and some of my credits they were encounters for with AP classes and dual enrollment, so it worked out pretty well.

Christina Torres:

That's exciting. You really made most of the time that you had there for sure. Great. Can you tell us what you've been up to since graduation?

Irina Pidberejna:

So right now I am currently pursuing my PhD in early childhood education. After I graduated, I participated, I was fortunate enough to receive a Fulbright English teaching assistantship. In Russia. My host institution was in the city of Ufa, which is the capital of the Republic of Bashkortostan. And I taught English there at a university and also volunteer taught at other places like schools and libraries and did different community events. So once my Fulbright experience ended, I ended up moving to Alabama

because my husband now, before boyfriend, he moved here after I graduated. He's also a UCF alumni. So I left for Russia in September and he left for Alabama in October. And I actually applied to the University of Alabama and received a Master's in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages because of my experience with the Russian program and the TEFL program. And I had wanted to continue pursuing that. I taught some university classes including composition, writing English for specific purposes, and even Russian at different universities in Birmingham and now I'm actually working as a Montessori teacher, and I teach children three to six years old and working on pursuing my PhD in early childhood education.

Christina Torres:

You got a full plate there and it sounds like you've done a lot of really cool things since undergrad. So you said that you were with the Fulbright, would that be with the English Teaching Assistantship, the ETA's program? Yes. So great. And you were talking about doing your TEFL certificate and I know that we recruited you here to talk about the Russian program, but you also had your TEFL certificate, so that's really exciting. So you went abroad with your TEFL certificate and it seems like you combined your Russian and your TEFL all in the same kind of experience. Is there anything else you'd want to add on that?

Irina Pidberejna:

I think it really helped overall just getting both sides. So continuing to improve my Russian, but also learning about the science of language and all of those hidden things where most native speakers of English or Russian will just say, oh, well, it's just how we do it. But through TEFL and the Russian program, I was able to understand why. And so during my Fulbright, I actually got the opportunity to, I wanted to continue improving my Russian, but the only class that was available was actually learning how to teach Russian as a foreign language. I already had the experience of teaching English as a foreign language, and now I got the opposite during my Fulbright by learning all the ins and outs of the Russian language as well. So

Christina Torres:

Yeah, you're touching that. That's touching on one of the big things that I always tell my pre-service teachers is, listen, speaking a language fluently is one part of the equation, but you also need to be able to deconstruct it and put it back together. Like being a native speaker on its own is not the full toolkit that you need when you're inside of a classroom setting. So it's fun to hear that coming back from your side. And congratulations on working on your doctorate as we speak. I'm a doctoral candidate at UCF too, so I understand that. That's a lot. So congratulations and yeah, sounds like you're doing all a lot of cool things there. So you've told me a little bit about what you've been up to since graduation. How did the Russian program, and you've touched a little bit on this, but how did the Russian program and the TEFL certificate prepare you for your life now?

Irina Pidberejna:

Well, I think that overall first off pretty much changed my life going into UCF and doing my bachelor's, I didn't know that I had wanted to teach or I wanted to teach, but I'd always steer away from it. I'd always avoid it or just push it aside. I remember in high school, one of my art teachers was watching me give a presentation on watercolor lesson, and she said, have you ever thought about being a teacher? And I'm like, yes, but no.

Christina Torres:

Yeah.

Irina Pidberejna:

So it really helped me learn kind of the ins and outs of being an effective teacher and an effective communicator. It also helped me really find ways to do what I love, which is I love languages and I love teaching others languages. I kind of thought that with language learning, I want to start with young children because there are so many families and parents that they want to have their children speak their home language or another language, and then something happens or they don't follow through or they're not the resources. So that's kind of why I shifted to early childhood because I'm interested in emergent bilinguals and how pretty much, if it wasn't for the way that my family raised me, I wouldn't have that opportunity to know Russian, Ukrainian, English and Spanish without the home environment and getting that input at home in different languages.

So it's kind of helped me it, it's helped see the importance of language learning and wanting to bring that eventually to a younger audience as well as with my time teaching at the university, having enough preparation from the Russian program and my experience at UCF to be able to teach students and feel confident in my teaching abilities because I've sort of been through that. And I also like to tell my students that I can relate to you always a challenge learning a language, but I'm a good example in terms of especially younger students, if you see me in the things that I did, you can do that as well.

Christina Torres:

I love that you're talking about encouraging language and emergent bilinguals, simultaneous bilinguals in maintaining the heritage language, the heritage culture. I think that really speaks to me too. I had a very strong home effort from my parents to maintain the Spanish, which looking back on it, I know we resisted a bit at home, and I'm really grateful for those efforts that were made to develop that and to maintain it and to work on literacy. That is an important component of language learning and bilingualism. So kudos to that. And it seems like you've really spanned young children all the way to adults in your teaching experience. So that's really cool. Do you say that there was a turning point for you when you realized, yeah I want to be a teacher?

Irina Pidberejna:

Probably through the Russian program, I realized that this is what I want to do and this is kind of the pathway that can happen. So being able to get my Russian minor, being able to study abroad and Russia for the first time in 2013, being able to participate in different scholarship opportunities and essay writing and Russian, and really just the program, the Russian studies program itself, it has just given me so many different avenues and connections to flourish in the Russian language. I participated in a project called Connecting Classrooms where we partnered with, we partnered with live team number seven in number Russia, and it's high school students learning English and we're learning Russian. So we would have step conferences every so often, either every two months or so, at least once a semester. It depended on the year and everything, but just having those authentic connections through the Russian program.

My pen pal, I was able to host her when she came to visit us. And she was able to host me, and when I was in Fulbright, she was able to come and meet me at the train station, and we still keep in contact. And now I see some of the students that were in our group, now they're getting married. So it's pretty incredible how language and language learning can give such a wonderful human connection and the

ability to connect with another culture and realize that we're all people and we all have hopes and dreams, and we all want to learn more about each other and about the world.

Christina Torres:

Yeah, that's a really lovely thought. And I think that there's a lot of us that go into language specifically for that reason, because we're building connections, we're building connections with people, we are understanding each other, and it's great to have those one-on-ones and those moments to really get to know people across different languages and different cultures. So what I'm hearing from you is the choices that you made in undergrad opened up opportunities for you, options for you, and then you navigated through that. And here we are today with all of the really great things that you've been working on. So what advice would you offer someone who's interested in studying Russian or TEFL?

Irina Pidberejna:

I think with Russian, especially at the University of Central Florida, is just a wonderful and amazing, well developed program. So Dr. Kourova has pretty much put her heart and soul,

Christina Torres:

And she's fabulous, fabulous.

Irina Pidberejna:

And with Russian, you truly do get to experience all aspects with Russian. I think that you need to be patient with yourself. Don't let the cases overwhelm you. Really just put in the work. Practice. Don't be afraid to speak. Everybody makes mistakes and it's normal. I remember when I first started I had kind of like the inputs. I could understand almost everything, but I didn't have as much practice speaking, so I was very nervous. But it comes with time, and if you follow through with it, and if you stick the course, then it will get easier. And I've met people in my life that have learned Russian fluently, and it's amazing when you keep going and you meet those people and you notice, oh, well, there are people that put in that effort and their passionate about it, and the results happen. It's just continuous practice. I think the alphabet makes a lot more sense. Everything, almost everything is fine.

Christina Torres:

That would be nice in English too. A completely phonetic sounds spelling correspondence would be great. Yes,

Irina Pidberejna:

Definitely dig out those opportunities and you have to practice because if you don't, then you're not prepared. But it, it's an amazing language. It's a unique language. It's not a language that everybody knows. It opens up a lot of doors, a lot of opportunities. Just once you have what, the more languages you have that the easier it gets

Christina Torres:

For sure. Great. You talked about your Russian program. Is there anything that you would say to someone who's interested in studying in the TEFL certificate?

Irina Pidberejna:

With TEFL? I think it goes hand in hand it's helpful. If you want to learn about the world travel, learn about different cultures, and teach English. And if you do want to teach, not just, Hey, I'm a native speaker and I'm friendly and I really want to go to Asia somewhere, or Europe, that that's not the reason to do it. The reason to do it is because you enjoy helping people and you enjoy working with people, and you can see that you would enjoy being a teacher. It's not just a fun, let's travel, but it goes hand in hand. It's not a lot of credits. So you can definitely include it if you're taking a Russian minor if you've done study abroad last time I checked, something overlaps so that you already have one course out of the way. Last time I checked, it was only four courses, and it's really worth it. I learned some really amazing things in the TEFL program, which I didn't know about, but they kind of opened my eyes and really helped set the foundation for the master's program in TESOL that I did. So if you love languages and if you love dissecting languages and figuring out the puzzle of them, it's definitely a great choice.

Christina Torres:

Great, thank you. So what I'm hearing is hard work, persistence and learning more languages opens more doors.

Irina Pidberejna:

Oh yeah. Yeah.

Christina Torres:

Great. So thank you everyone for listening to this episode of Futures in Languages. I'd like to give a shout out to Divi Guy for our intro and outro music downloaded from freesound.org. I'm Christina Torres, and our featured guest today was Irina Pidberejna. Tune in next time to hear more alumni stories from modern languages. For more information about the Russian and TEFL certificate and other language programs in the Modern Languages department, please visit our website at mll.cah.ucf.edu.