# “A Human Perspective in the Forest”

Dialogue has been edited for clarity.

Stephanie Nawyn (SN): Hello this is Stephanie Nawyn, I’m co-director of the Center for Gender in Global Context and I am here with one of our students who is a WGS minor, Louren Escamilla. Louren, thanks for coming to talk with me today.

Louren Escamilla (LE): Oh pleasure!

SN: So, you have a really interesting story about how you came into the minor and what your major is, sort of an unusual story, could you tell me about that? What your major is and how you decided to add a minor in Women’s and Gender Studies.

LE: I’m a forestry major in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources here at Michigan State with minors in Environment and Sustainability Studies as well as Women’s and Gender Studies. I actually stumbled upon Women and Gender Studies as I was still coming out with myself about my trans gender identity as a person. I was googling that identity and resources on campus and this office was one of the resources that I got pointed to, so I decided to check it out and talk with, a now former, advisor Dori Hopkins and she got me into in the minor and after she left Sara Bijani took over and she suggested some really good classes for me to continue the minor. Now, two summers later, I’m all done with my minor in Women and Gender Studies and I find that it’s given me the power to explain who I am as a person in terms of my identity to those who are unaware, those who just lack the knowledge. It’s also given me a better perception on issues that women face that I’m still kind of learning about as I continue my transition. It’s served me well.

SN: I’m sure your experience in the minor is really different than what you experience in your classrooms in forestry. Can you talk about that a little bit?

LE: Yeah, so with the minor I found that it was largely women in most of my classes whereas with forestry it’s, our college has about 77 forestry students and about 70 of those students are male, so there’s a much smaller percentage of female students and an even smaller percentage of minority students. I think this is the first time we’re actually not negligible in our ratios of students. We have about a 24% minority amongst undergrads and a 41% on the graduate level in the Department of Forestry.

SN: Oh wow, so things have really changed since you’ve been here.

Yeah things are slowly improving, and diversity is becoming more mainstream in the Department of Forestry. We’ve made strides but we still have a long way to go.

SN: What kinds of pivotal experiences have you had in relation to being in the minor?

LE: Essentially, I believe the minor has given me better vocabulary and knowledge to explain who I am. My job during the summer I’m a forest silviculturist with the US Forest Service and I work in the Hiawatha National Forest doing silviculture and forest management and I’m finding the crew I work with is sometimes lacking in knowledge. I’ve had a lot of good conversations with people with different perceptions than I do about things and I’ve just found that it’s really eye-opening to explain things to people who have never given much thought to what this field actually is. One of the good experiences I had was just explaining who I was on my first few days in the field and why it’s critical to use the right pronouns. In my unit we work as a team so we need to have good communication, we need to make sure everyone is on the same level when we accomplish objectives in the forest so I just found that educating people about the pronouns is especially critical and something that the Forest Service is not—they’re still getting used to diversity I’d say—so I just think the best experience I’ve had was educating individuals on gender issues and what individuals like me face.

SN: So I would imagine people who are interested in studying forestry wouldn’t think about these social issues but of course even though what you’re focusing on is trees and biodiversity within forests and things like that there’s also these social elements because you’re always dealing with people, regardless of what kind of job you have.

LE: A lot of people don’t consider what we call the human dimensions of forestry, the human impact, why landowners might choose to do one thing over another, and how communication in that is important. And that’s one thing I know the Forest Service is struggling with right now: how do we get our foresters to be better communicators because a lot of people choose forestry because they don’t like people and want to be alone in the woods. That’s understandable but there’s always that people element at the end of the day that you can’t disregard.

SN: You are very close to graduating now is that correct? You’re going to be finishing in December?

LE: Yep

SN: Tell me how you plan to use the training and experiences you’ve had in the women and gender studies minor in your future endeavors after graduation.

LE: I’m currently a pathway student with the U.S. Forest Service. For those not familiar with that program, basically, if you work two summers with the USDA Forest Service and you receive good remarks, they hire you fulltime after graduation. My location is Munising, MI and this past summer I got involved with the Special Emphasis Program managing 12 months out of the year we have 12 separate programs about different issues and there’s different groups, there’s one for vets, there’s one for women. I’m actually part of the LGBTQ group and during Pride Month in June we actually educate other people at other people at other forests as well as our own forest about LGBTQ issues. This is a program that continues 12 months out of the year, two times a month, and it’s just a great way to get to learn more about different issues and what different people can teach you.

SN: That’s really exciting that you’re getting the chance to do something really new and innovative with the Forestry Service. I’m so glad that you came and spoke with me today. It was really nice to meet you and hear your story Louren, I appreciate it.

LE: Thank you for bringing me on! I don’t know too many Women and Gender Studies minors who are also doing Forestry, it’s just not typical of the field, but anytime I can educate I’m always happy to do so.

SN: What would you say to somebody who’s in another major, Forestry or some other major in the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources, to get them to think about the social dimensions and even a minor in Women and Gender Studies?

LE: A lot of people, especially men, don’t think that women and gender studies is for them, but actually it opens up new possibilities and its kind of taught me the difference between special rights and equal rights. I think it’s just very eye opening the conversations we’ve had in my classes and I was surprised actually how most of the individuals in my classes were women because I almost feel like it’s some of the men who need to be in those classes. I would just say if you’re thinking about this, I definitely would consider it because it opens your eyes to people who are different around you and it’s not just gender and sexuality issues but also race and class issues and different kinds of feminism you learn and it just makes you a more well-rounded person in terms of having a conversation and just being in the know about what’s going on lately.

SN: A college education should be nothing if not eye opening and expanding your horizons. Thank you so much Louren for coming.

LE: Thank you, Stephanie.

SN: You’re welcome. And if you would like more information about the Women and Gender Studies major or minor or the LBGTQ Studies minor we have, or any other programs we have at MSU, you can go to [www.gencen.msu.edu](http://www.gencen.msu.edu). Thanks so much!

LE: Thank you!