

Claire Darmstadter

Hey everybody, I'm joined today by Kate Kopotic, senior at Sun Prairie High School with plans of attending the US Military Academy at West Point next year. Thanks for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

Kate Kopotic

Oh, sure. Glad to be here.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, so I know Kate pretty well, but not as much when we're younger. So could you just give us a little bit of a background on your experience with language growing up, and maybe some aspirations of how you might use it in your career or post high school?

Kate Kopotic

Definitely. I'm grateful for the opportunity that I had to study Spanish from kind of a young age from my mom. So my older brother Sam, and I took private Spanish lessons from a couple different tutors, the first one we did with a few other kids, and he would just come over to our apartment at the time. And we do things like flashcards, very basic grammar, just a very introductory type deal into the Spanish language. And then Sam and I went off to study with a Bolivian instructor. And we would meet in the Starbucks of the Barnes and Noble cafe at the mall every Friday, and we would do a Spanish lesson like that. But since it was only once a week, and it only went on for a couple years, I didn't retain much of the language. So by the time that I got to high school and actually started taking Spanish in that kind of format, it was as though I was starting fresh. But I think the exposure in itself, even though it was pretty limited, was really helpful, because as you probably already know, younger kids are — they can pick up languages a lot easier. As far as aspirations go, I'm not sure exactly what language I want to major or minor in at West Point. I know that I want to do one and I was — Spanish is definitely on the table. But I was also interested in Chinese or Russian. So I just think that the skills that you learn, while pursuing the study of a language, whether it's like cultural aspects, or learning a different language structure itself, has just helped my study habits and expanded my brain, if you will. So I definitely want to keep doing that.

Claire Darmstadter

And so following those initial years, when you're kind of doing some informal learning, you've done Spanish every year going through that, like standard typical high school experience where you do Spanish 1-5, AP, and a lot of high schools offer this although at the end of high school, most students don't walk away feeling very fluent or proficient or competent.

Kate Kopotic

Oh, not at all.

Claire Darmstadter

Yeah, knowing that Sun Prairie has some incredible committed language educators who are doing everything they can within the restraints of our curriculum and COVID and everything going on. Is there anything you would have liked to see different with their language courses or a way that you've been able to kind of adapt to what the structure and system is to better fit your needs, or perhaps have a higher level of proficiency once you graduate?

Kate Kopotic

You know, I think you put it perfectly when you said that we have great educators, and they're doing what they can like within the constraints of school. I know that I've learned a lot of the basic grammar and vocabulary, sentence structure, you know, the basic building blocks of the Spanish language, I feel like I have down. But even after five years of studying this, every year at school, I don't feel anywhere near fluent. Part of that probably has to do with summer vacation. Everyone takes a summer off, and then they don't practice the language enough. I know that outside of class, I don't really do much with the language at all. And a lot of repetition is required to actually gain proficiency. So maybe that's personal responsibility and integrity on the students. But I think it's also been difficult with Spanish because there are so many different dialects. And it seems that especially in AP Spanish, this year, we're pulling from a bunch of different ones. So different native speakers, from countries all around the world, a lot of different materials. So since it's AP, Spanish Language *and* Culture, in addition to the language itself, we are learning about various different cultures. And I find that it's a lot of information to take in and actually retain, because we don't, it's not applicable in any of our lives. So once the class Zoom ends this year, we're just done with it. Let's see, I think what I'd like to see differently, more exposure to the language, but I don't have any specific solutions in mind, we can all take a trip abroad, or do things that are actually intensive that would help us learn the language faster. But I think finding ways to make it more engaging and applicable for students in student life might be helpful. I think a lot of the material that we cover, especially in AP Spanish this year, has not been, I don't want to say entertaining because the class is not meant to be entertaining, but it's been difficult, especially because of virtual learning. So for example, I haven't had a conversation with anyone in Spanish all year. So that kind of thing and that kind of practice has not been present.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure. And in language learning, you don't need to know what this is, but there's a theory called Comprehensible Input where instead of focusing on like the grammar and drilling all these like verb tenses and vocabulary, it's more on just kind of speaking in the language and just immersing kids, you know, in the language and having someone speak it and they kind of just like naturally pick things up. Now for me, as someone going into language education, I see the value in that. That's also really scary because as a language learner, I kind of cling on to that grammar structure as a security blanket where if I don't know, something, I can go into my head. So do you feel like having that basis where it's very formulaic, and every time you speak, you have to kind of think through the formula is helpful? Or is that more of a detriment, and you'd wish you had to kind of just like acquired it more as just like listening to conversations and just kind of saying it, even if you don't know exactly what you're doing.

Kate Kopotic

You know, I could definitely see it both ways. That switch that you just talked about, I realized that's probably what's happening to me this year, because Spanish one to Spanish four is very much structured. And you can go through those formulas in your head, and you can form sentences and go through very logistical type things. But then this year, I think that's, that's what Señora has been trying to do is, you know, just here's a conversation, you'll get it, you'll pick it up, or here's an article like a genuine and authentic document in the Spanish language, and you can pick things up. So I find it has actually been detrimental this year for me, because while I'm listening to an audio, or while I'm reading something, I'll try to go through those structures. And I'll feel as though if I don't understand every word, I won't grasp the actual meaning of whatever I'm looking at or hearing. And then it slows me down. And I'm not able to keep up. So it's definitely a pace thing too. For me, going through and conjugating verbs can be kind of relaxing, but it's not, it's not applicable, when you're actually speaking to native speakers, it's, you have to pick up the pace a little bit. So I don't know if that answered your question. But I think a healthy mix of both would have been ideal, but time only allows so much in school.

Claire Darmstadter

And now looking at Sun Prairie as a community for those who don't know, where a suburb of Madison and so we're not quite as large and we don't have quite the programming that Madison might provide. What's kind of the vibe that you get from the community about how they view languages? Do you think in Sun Prairie we are supportive of people who speak languages other than English? Do you think it's looked down upon? What's kind of like the sense you get from being out and about?

Kate Kopotic

Well, you know what, in a perfect world, we'd all be studying languages at our elementary schools, and we would have started much earlier, Sun Prairie School District would have, well, American school districts in general, would have implemented those very early on in the curriculum. There are people who — I don't know how large each sub community is, but though English is the dominant language here, I'd say most reasonable people are, like accepting of people who speak other language, but our community, it does not, if you don't have English as at least like a first or second language, it's going to be difficult to navigate a lot of things. So it's, I would say, although it's inclusive, and we know we have AP French, AP Spanish, AP Chinese, we have language classes, there aren't enough people who take them to make it like a very prominent, prioritized subject matter. So it's iffy.

Claire Darmstadter

And finally, in celebration of multilingualism, we tell kids that speaking more than one language is a superpower. So can you give us one reason, you can answer in English you can answer in Spanish, whatever you're most comfortable with, why we should celebrate people who speak more than one language.

Kate Kopotic

Should I try to answer this in Spanish? Debemos celebrar las personas que hablan múltiples lingüistas. No yo sé, okay? [*We should celebrate people that speak multiple languages. I don't know, okay?*] Well, I like the way you put it that it's a superpower. We could definitely use more bilingual, trilingual people, especially young people who will be like taking the reins of the government someday, etc. But necesito un momento pensar. You get to know more people. You get to have a wider understanding of different cultures and get to know more people and humans are social creatures. So that's like our primary function here. Even people who say they're introverts, we all want to feel connected to a larger mass. So I think that by actually putting yourself out there, even if you're not comfortable with it, to learn a different language and learn about different cultures, you are taking that step towards a greater understanding of humans as a whole. And that's, I mean, I'm not going into teaching like you are. But that's why I definitely want to major a minor in another language and travel because it's important that we have a global perspective nowadays, like it's preached the most out of any other thing I find.

Claire Darmstadter

For sure, well, thank you so much for all your time and your vulnerability and you know, to speak a little bit of Spanish, right? You talked about how it's important to just kind of go into it, I really appreciate you taking the opportunity to kind of try to play around with Spanish, because I think it shows all of us that we should be okay with doing something that we are a little bit uncomfortable with. So I appreciate your time. I wish you the best next year and I hope the rest of the COVID year turns out well for you.

Kate Kopotic

Thank you. Thank you for having me. Glad I could help.