

**Claire Darmstadter**

Hey, everybody, I am so lucky to be joined today by Tanya Skiljevic, a JD student here pursuing immigration law at UW Madison, who also attended undergrad here. Thank you so much for taking a couple minutes to chat with me.

**Tanja Skiljevic**

Of course!

**Claire Darmstadter**

So it'd be great if you could just give us a really general overview of your educational and linguistic background and why you decided to pursue law.

**Tanja Skiljevic**

Yes, so I studied psychology and Gender and Women's Studies in undergrad. And I honestly wasn't sure if I wanted to continue to go into psychology or if I wanted to do law, so I ended up taking a gap year. And being a refugee from Bosnia, I've always been very interested in immigration issues. So I just figured that law would be the best way to make a change in our currently political system with regards to immigration. So that's why I ended up going to law school kind of, with the exact plan of working in the field of immigration.

**Claire Darmstadter**

And can you give us a little bit of an overview of your linguistic background and what languages you grew up with?

**Tanja Skiljevic**

Yeah, so I grew up speaking Serbian, but I'm from the former Yugoslavia, which languages are kind of I guess it's considered Serbo-Croatian. So Croatian, Bosnian, Serbian, are all pretty much exactly the same, except for with small dialect differences. So that's pretty much all I speak, I learned Spanish in high school, but I grew up speaking, Serbian, which has been my native language and stuff. And yeah, I learned English when I was five.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah, and correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm gonna go out on a limb here and say you probably didn't have the chance to take Serbian and like a middle school language course. So did you ever have to develop like formal literacy or more sophisticated language skills? Or was it just kind of like, you know, practice at home, talking with your family members?

**Tanja Skiljevic**

Yeah, so well, one, we weren't allowed to speak English in the house because our parents were so worried about us losing our language skills. So pretty much the only time I would speak English would be at school. So I guess I was able to learn it more fluently that way. But I did actually take Serbian 2, second semester Serbian, when I was here in undergrad. So they do have I think, three or four semesters a Serbian here at UW. And it was really interesting because it was like, complete basics, but like, I'm not really skilled in the grammar aspect of the

language. So like, it was also really difficult because I've learned kind of how to speak with my family and what other people I'm close to, but then like, the formal aspects of it, like I would just, it was really hard to break out of certain patterns that I learned growing up.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yeah in some ways, like, that's better to not have to think about all these verbs and the grammar and all those things. But you know, you get into those classes. It's like, oh, shoot, I did not know that. And you feel sometimes a little bit, I'd imagine uncomfortable or like, wow, am I not as good at the language as I think but it's like, No, you speak it fluently. It's just this very formalized, rigid setting isn't necessarily how you grew up speaking it. So do you feel like nowadays is a language something where it's gonna be helpful for you in your legal practice? Is that something where you have to, like, make a really effortful, I guess, effort to maintain the language and make sure that you're up to shape on your skills? Or is it just kind of like, you can break into it whenever you want, or is it something you have to think about?

### **Tanja Skiljevic**

I wouldn't say it's necessarily something I think about sometimes, I don't really think in Serbian sometimes, but like, it is really like, it's really easy for me to switch between them. There's not much like an intention behind it, I guess, other than like, just flagging who I'm speaking with. But I have been looking into, I guess, kind of international law or looking at ways that I can use my law degree to kind of help the Balkans because they're still recovering post war. And that's definitely something I've even looked at jobs over there because most of my family is there. And I don't think I have the formal capabilities to ever take a job working there because I don't know the law language, for example, in Serbian. So I hope one day I can, you know, take, like a more advanced course with the intention of learning like a professional skill, like a professional language set if that makes sense.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yes. And so you also worked with a group of students from Milwaukee involved in the book Green Card Youth Voices. This is actually a group based out of Minnesota, who worked with other communities in writing books. And I'll leave a couple links in the transcript if people want to check it out because I would so encourage you to read all their books and all the material that they have. I read the book, I think, in one sitting, and it was just amazing. Can you just kind of walk us through how you were involved in that process of what you contributed what you got out of it, and kind of how I think a really important part of the book is that it protects the voices of the students, and it doesn't like you know, nitpick and pull apart all their grammar and everything. So how do you support and uplift the voices of all these students and all their stories?

### **Tanja Skiljevic**

Okay, so stop me if I start to get a little too passionate because this is a really cool project that I was able to be part of. But basically, during my gap year, I worked for an AmeriCorps program called College Possible. And the whole intention of that program was to help specifically first generation or low income or minority students have a clear access to college. And that included me giving biweekly, you know, kind of like informational sessions to my students and helping

them with college applications, all that stuff. And then Green Card Voices ended up partnering with like one of the supervisors in College Possible. And then they decided that Pulaski, the high school that I worked at, was actually one of the main schools that had a really high population of non English speakers or people who are also bilingual or multilingual. So they're like, this is probably gonna be the best school to do this. Because like, I think 40% of the population spoke. I think there might have been like a high pop percent of the population that just didn't even speak English at all, they had like a whole subset of Spanish-speaking-only classes and stuff. So then they decided to do it at Pulaski. And I was the senior like, coach, I guess it's called there. They asked if I had any students I'd recommend. And I had a couple of students who were refugees. First of all, I knew kind of their own personal stories and other ones who had emigrated to the United States from different regions of the world. And the whole point of the book is to get like a wide variety and not just, you know, have everybody from like, I'm trying to think of like Spain or something, they want to have a wide variety of countries and regions and everything. And then basically what my job was, was to transcribe first of all the audio clips of the students talking with their interviews, and then meet with them a couple of times throughout the semester to make sure that everything they had meant to say was in there, and that we could edit the essays for clarity while still keeping their voice in there. Because that was — her name is Tea — she's like, I think the director of Green Card Voices. So she was very intentional and very like this is the whole point is to make sure that we keep their voices and we don't make this just like palpable to the, like English speakers and stuff. And this isn't something that we try to make it like, you know, just easy to read, but rather something that is authentic to each author. And, yeah, that was just making sure that like small little grammar things here and there were fixed, but that it wasn't anything like it wasn't just me rewriting it to make it better sounding like in English or something. So yes, I met with the students a couple of times. And then like, we went through like a whole final read-through and everything. And then a couple months after that, I think my first month of law school here, they had the whole book launch and everything. And I got to see some of my old students from Madison actually are also in the book. So I got to see them speak and everything. Yeah, super cool. I recommend everybody to read pretty much all the books in the series are great.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yes, it's incredible. So at a wonderful panel I attended, I think last week that you're a part of you spoke about identity and appearance and how sometimes you don't kind of quote unquote, look like a typical refugee or immigrant or someone born in a nation where English isn't the dominant language, and that as a result you kind of interact with are included or not in the immigration story a little bit different from some of your peers that have stories that people may be more familiar with, or like it's what they first think of when they think of immigration. So can you speak a little bit about what your point to this was because I think I'm rambling a little bit here, but I think you had a really clear and concise way that you presented kind of your point of view.

### **Tanja Skiljevic**

Yeah, so it's something that I've been struggling along with, like my cousin and my sister and others, you know, like younger, I guess, immigrants that I know, that are Serbian with this whole identity of like, we came here as refugees. But we're very clearly white. And oftentimes, it

depends on how we're received, depending on the community, you know, within my schools, it was you know, I went to MPS, so public school where there was a lot of diversity and stuff, and it was never really like a thing, I guess. But then I switched to like a suburban high school. And then it became more of a thing that I was very clearly other, even though I was white. And I don't know, I remember like, I think in senior year of high school, like some girl got into an argument with me because I didn't consider myself American. And she was like, well, you're a citizen here and you live here, so like, you have to call yourself American and I was like, well, that's just kind of erasing my identity and I don't think that's fair for you to do that. But it was also interesting in that I think I was like, kind of an easier immigrant on the eyes because I'm white or like, it's more easy for people to look at my identity and see something, I think I used the word exotic or like kind of entertaining of like people are like oh my god your food is interesting. Your culture is interesting, because it's slightly different, but not enough that it would offend white supremacy in America kind of. So yeah, I would say definitely, compared to a lot of the other, I guess, immigrants, like two of my closest friends, one was Chinese, and one was Indian in high school, I think I was better received than either of them because I was white. And because I, if you didn't know my name, or if you didn't know my parents, you know, or heard their accent or something, it was easy to not see me as different. But I don't know, I think it's weird, because this is gonna sound kind of silly. I saw a Tik Tok recently with this guy. And he was saying how a lot of people saw him as white. So they would say really crappy stuff around him. So like, he was like, it was really weird how people let their guard down. And that would kind of happen around me, because people would see me as not different enough that they would be willing to say these kinds of things. Like, for example, I did really well in high school. And a joke on my soccer team was, how funny is it that so many immigrants are top in our class? Like, what does that say about our education system that they're taking over? And doing better than any of the Americans here? I was like, well, we work hard. And like, that's what it is. This isn't like, you know, like, why is it so surprising that a bunch of immigrants are top of your class? Like, why is that something that you have to call out? Or make a comment on? You know, and? Yeah, I don't know if that makes sense. But basically, I think it's interesting to just look at the intersection of identity of being a white immigrant, when a lot of the anti-immigrant rhetoric has been towards people of color. But also the second that, I make it known that I don't support that or that I don't consider myself primarily white first, or like, you know, American, then it's very easy for some people to turn on that idea and look down on identity and culture.

### **Claire Darmstadter**

Yes, well, thank you for sharing that. It's a really personal story and identity. And I really appreciate you sharing that because I think people don't often talk about or think about that. So to end on perhaps maybe a little bit of a happier note. So we tell little kids all the time that it's a superpower to speak more than one language. So can you give me one reason, you can answer in any language or mix of languages you want, why it's a superpower to be multilingual?

### **Tanja Skiljevic**

I think that's a superpower because I think there's something very eye opening about being able to connect with people in a language they feel comfortable in and being able to switch between communities and feel at ease. And know that those connections are more capable when I'm

more — being respectful of other people's cultures and others identities. And I think being able to speak different languages would make or does make people more empathetic and more compassionate towards differences and diversity. And, in general, as cheesy as it sounds, it makes the world a better place. Because I think it really is kind of the gateway to understanding others and other cultures and stuff.

**Claire Darmstadter**

Yes, well thank you so much. I know you're super busy. I don't know what it's like to be in law school, but I would imagine it's very time consuming. So I appreciate you making a couple minutes in the evening for me tonight and I hope you have a great rest of your day.

**Tanja Skiljevic**

Thank you so much.