

Kate Granruth - Dr. Shikha Gupta, UVA 2010

Kate Granruth: Okay, so maybe just for like logistics, we could start out with your major, and when you graduated, your current job and that type of stuff.

Shikha Gupta: Sure, so I graduated in 2010, from the College. got a double major in political theory and Spanish and I had a biology minor. So very much was not sure what I wanted to do with my life, I was considering law school and also considering medical school...I'm currently the executive director of Get Us PPE, which is a nonprofit, started in March of last year by myself and other physicians who are working to get personal protective equipment for people who need it across the country.

KG: Definitely awesome. And then what is your UVA story? How did you decide to come to UVA? What type of things did you do outside of academics here?

SG: So I grew up in Virginia Beach. And UVA was not my first choice, I didn't really want to stay in state, I was kind of, you know, had that itch to sort of leave. And I don't know why my parents let me do this, but they let me just apply to as many schools as I wanted, which was bizarre in hindsight. And so I remember going on college visits all over the country. And ultimately, my parents were like, "Well, great, that was a cool exercise. So now choose an in state school." And so UVA was far and away the best choice in Virginia, and, you know, a great choice, of course, overall.

And also, and my brother was a fourth year when I was a first year. So that was a nice touch point, too. And I'm from Virginia Beach, there are so many of us that go to UVA. So it was a really nice kind of crew that we had, and heading up there together. And in terms of activities that I did, outside of academics, I did quite a few things. I was a member of the guide service. I was in a sorority, Alpha Chi Omega. I was heavily involved with the mock trial team at UVA. And I competed for my first three years.

I had done a lot of public speaking type of things in high school and really had no interest in mock trial. But there was a guy that was a fourth year and he was president of the program and had gone to the same high school as me, and we had done well being in debate together. So he recruited me and I didn't know at the time that it would take over my entire life. And it was great. I use so many of the skills I learned not only about public speaking and clearly not so much the legal side of things but more of the critical thinking and the real family that it created for me at UVA. I was also an RA, found another community there.

KG: That's very cool. Did you find mock trial was welcoming for female students as well? Was it like a very male space, sort of how the legal political area is?

SG: That is such a good question. Um, I do think they were very welcoming of women. I didn't actually feel that my gender was taken into account much overall. I think it was a pretty impartial process and I think it was very much talent based and it was a pretty rigorous selection, and but

I don't ever remember feeling that being a woman directed or changed the thought process of the organization's leadership, and I held quite a few leadership positions within the organization and my closest friend on the team, also a woman, also held many leadership positions. So that's cool. I would say that there were probably more men on the team than women. So I'm sure there was some level of unconscious bias potentially, or also, potentially some sort of selection bias and that the recruiting may not have been as targeted towards women.

KG: And I guess that leads into if you had any experiences like that with your majors? Did you notice a gender disparity within the students or the faculty of the majors you were in?

SG: Definitely in my political theory major, more than in my bio minor, and Spanish was maybe more weighted towards women in terms of numbers. I can't say that for sure. Maybe it was more evenly split than it appeared. But I don't have a lot of memories of female professors, specifically for a political theory, and really, for politics in general. But that said, I didn't have that many female professors generally at UVA. So that definitely was gendered. And I think, especially with political theory, where so much of it is speaking up in class, and so many seminars, and it's so discourse-based and a lot of it is philosophical. It was clear who felt most confident, gender wise, speaking up. I would say that the conversations were largely male-dominated. I don't know if that's your experience currently.

KG: Yeah, it had it's definitely my experience. I'm in those types of classes. I'm a gender studies major, so I there's a lot of women, mostly female teachers. But yeah, in politics classes I've taken it's definitely been in that vein.

SG: Yeah. Which is so interesting. And I hope that that changes. I do think a large part of the change happening will require a change in the makeup of the faculty as well. So I think until it feels welcoming for women to advance in a field, I think there's a sense that perhaps, "If I'm not going to be able to become a professor, if academia is what I want to do. And I'm seeing only male role models in the field." I do think that there is a potential to really discourage women from pursuing that type of career, especially in an academically rigorous environment.

KG: Yeah, I totally agree. I see a lot of mostly male professors when the politics department will put things out. And I think that that definitely has an impact on who wants to pursue those types of things.

SG: Yeah, for sure. I think one of the biggest difficulties that I encountered or that I guess I've carried with me since graduating from UVA is there was a sense of it being kind of an old boys club. But you know, I think back to Larry Sabato and his Center for Politics, and he would select like a couple of interns every year and they were always white males. And it was always people who had a family connection or something. And it was like, the odds are so stacked against you, especially, you know, I'm a first generation Indian American, so I certainly did not have family clout. My parents were like, "What are you doing? Why? Why are you going to school and like going to football games just go to class." So, in that way, I think it really did feel like an uphill climb. I was more aware of, I think the race disparity, than the gender disparity when it came to

things like selection. So anything that was competitive at UVA, like guide service, or even my sorority, or being an RA, I was the only minority RA. In my building, it was like four white males, one white female, and me. And so I think that that kind of modeling makes it feel that things are closed off. I think guides service is a great example of that. I did not see a lot of people who looked like me in the guide service when I was applying for it. And so I think I am pretty stubborn, so I went for it anyway. But I imagine for a lot of people who aren't as stubborn as I am, they were probably like, well, screw it. That's not worth it.

KG: I think that's definitely a conversation that's being had on grounds now especially with the context of trying to recontextualize Jefferson's role in the university and being really honest about the sort of history of slavery at UVA, and then being like, "Wow, a lot of the things that make up UVA are really white." Would you say that was the most challenging thing about UVA while you were here?

SG: Maybe, yeah, I think it was the feeling that there were just pieces of the University that were not accessible to me, for whatever reason, whether it was that I didn't come from the right family, or I didn't have, you know, I didn't look like the people who held the keys to that section of university. I felt a lot of frustration about that, I think, especially coming from Virginia Beach, which is very diverse, because it's a military town. And I wasn't ever made so clearly aware of my gender, or my race growing up. And so that was really a rude awakening for me, I think. I think the place that I probably saw that the most clearly was looking around my sorority, and I just don't think that I had realized that, you know, I would be in a room full of white women. to other minorities, and that was the extent of it out of 30 of us. And it's not that minority women didn't want to be a part of those organizations. It's just that it wasn't done. I wasn't who they recruited. I think there are so many other sort of ways to get around the rules at UVA. There's so many situations like, "Oh, I know this guy who knows that guy who knows this girl, and we can get you in here." And I found it to be really frustrating. I have a lot of affection for UVA and have done a lot of work with Alumni Hall. And that's been a huge part of my volunteerism since I left the University. But I think I was never blindly affectionate towards UVA. I felt that there were a lot of issues even while I was there. And it has been really gratifying as an alumna to watch you all the current generation of students really take up the mantle and hold the administration to task and to really require more of them than we did. And that makes me so proud. And I wish that we had done more of that when I was there. So kudos to y'all. It's not easy.

KG: Thank you. I mean, all of the student groups that are doing so much organizing are so cool. It's just really quite fearless. And especially with some of the alumni who graduated in like 1940 who are like emailing students mean things, showing up to lawn rooms with Exacto knives to cut their signs down. It's clearly making a stir, you know? And I think that some of the response has been, "Oh, if you hate it so much, why do you go here?" It's like, no, the reason we're upset is because we don't hate it. we know it can be better.

SG: I love that. I feel that way. I consider myself to be a huge UVA fan. I'm so grateful for the education I received. But it doesn't define me and I think part of being proud of your heritage is being able to criticize it and look at it critically and think about where you can improve it.

Because my goal as an alumna is to support young women who are at the university like you, and if there's anything I can do to make your experience there better than mine was, then, you know, why wouldn't I? I think it takes all of us, for the University to continue to do well and to flourish. I served on the Alumni Council for eight years, and served as president of the Alumni Council and then stayed on for a year as the immediate past president. And I was not a person who had a lot of affection for Alumni Hall. Frankly, I think a lot of people do. But it wasn't really a part of my experience. And one of the places I very much did feel shut out of was student government. And that very much felt clique-y. And diversity and equity was not really top of mind for the leadership, both at the staff level and at the student level.

And so it was an interesting choice. I'm not sure why I decided to apply for an Alumni Council. But that is a place where I think I walked in and didn't see a lot of people who look like me. And then over the years that I was on the council, it was really important to me to change that and to see more women in leadership and to see more diversity at the table and to see more students who weren't trustees and sort of your typical, "I do everything at UVA." And I realize that this is contradictory, because some stuff on my resume is also probably part of that crew. But yeah, I wanted it to be diverse. Like we're not going to be able to serve this massive alumni population if we just have the same 20 people who already ran things at UVA. You know, white males.

KG: That's really cool. So did you guys set up like, Young Alumni Reunion and stuff?

SG: So YAR was an idea that came out of the Young Alumni Council. So YAC is more of a think tank than anything else. And then we turned it over to the university. And so after the craziness, and the rallies and the KKK and all the things. I was vice president of YAC, as that was happening. And one of the things that we did was work with Black alumni groups to find ways for them to come down for move-in weekend and to provide support.

KG: Sort of similarly, do you have a favorite UVA memory even if that's part of YAC or not part of undergrad? Or a transformative moment for you while you were at UVA?

SG: That's such a good question. I feel like I have so many. And now that you're asking, I'm like, nope, none. I don't know if this was transformative, but one thing that I really loved about my time at UVA was like, Facebook was just becoming a thing. You could only get Facebook when you had a college email address. So it was like a big thing to get Facebook and there was no Instagram or anything at the time. So Facebook was like, the coolest social media that you could be a part of. And it was exclusive, because not everyone was on it. But I remember when my sister went to college, she went to Tech. Just like three years behind me, everybody was like, "Oh, yeah, like there's Facebook groups. Like we can find a roommate and all that." And for us, we were like, "Yeah, I guess we'll do a random roommate. Like, I don't know what else."

And so I lived in New dorms, which I know is controversial. And I lived in Fitzhugh, and the suite of women that I lived with are still some of my closest friends. And it was a very diverse group of women. We had an international student, we had a black woman and the suite, I mean, it was awesome. It was mostly white women, because that is, yeah, you know--

KG: It is still UVA.

SG: Yeah. I mean, it was pretty cool. That's really cool. Yeah, and it's one of my favorite groups of people still. And I think for the past, like, I guess, like 12 or so years, we do a friendsgiving every year, this giant group. And we've all brought our partners in at this point. And so I think that that's one of the things that I will be forever grateful to the University for, for introducing me to these brilliant women who I respect and admire so much. And it was totally random. And I probably keep up with more of them than I do with people from my sorority, who, you know, I selected. And so that's, I think, sort of the magic of it. And if you let yourself be open to it, I think there can be so many transformative opportunities at a school like UVA. And, yeah, that was just such a nice one. Because it was not something I had to think about. And it was just, you know, it just happened for me.

KG: So I do have a couple other questions about sort of life on Grounds. I'm interested to hear if you felt like there was conversation about consent? And if there was, was it helpful?

SG: I don't feel like there were conversations about it. Yeah, at all. The only organization that I remember was [Alpha Chi Omega's] philanthropy. We worked with a Shelter for Help in Emergency, so I think we were maybe more or better versed than others. And I think there was a lot of targeted messaging towards sororities, which is really, you know, pretty unfortunate. It's pretty unfortunate to begin with-- when sororities interact with fraternities, the targeted messaging is towards sororities. So I think in some ways, maybe we got more of that messaging. But frankly, I don't really recall much of it. I only really remember One in Four and being really shocked by that statistic when I first arrived on campus. And I think, to the best of my knowledge, the number has actually significantly increased since then, which is really just horrifying in so many ways. And the one thing that my friends who were at UVA at the same time as me and I talk about, is that the conversations that you all have and that are happening with the current generation of students are so foreign to us. We talked about race, a little bit, but it was like very much in the context of self segregation, which is, you know, the worst possible phrasing.

But yeah, I remember experiencing a lot of discrimination. And at frat parties, I think I already mentioned that there weren't that many minority women in the Greek system anyway. So I think the fact that I was a woman and a minority gave these white male fraternity members all the power and agency that they needed to say whatever they wanted. There was one other Indian American woman in my sorority and she was a couple years ahead of me, and both of us, I remember, were blocked from entering a fraternity house. I remember seeing Confederate flags everywhere, so there were definitely these moments of realization that something is definitely not right. And the conversations that should be had aren't. And I think, coming from Virginia Beach, where it was a lot more liberal and accepting in a lot of ways. That was a big culture shock for me. I had never seen somebody just, you know, casually have a confederate flag, a giant confederate flag hanging on the wall. And it was the house right next to my sorority house, which I ended up living in for my third year. So there is this very strong kind of push and pull, I

think. You want to enjoy your experience and live your best life. But you also know that there are these racist, misogynistic men living next door.

KG: That's crazy. That's a threat of violence at all times. Even if it's not physical.

SG: And I think I didn't feel that I had the agency to tell anyone about it. It wasn't clear to me what that reporting pathway would have even looked like. It was such a foreign thing to me. And I didn't feel that I had access to the administration. And it's not to say that they wouldn't have been totally receptive, maybe they would have been wonderful. But I think the fact that the resources weren't advertised to us or made really clear was dangerous, and I think there was so much violence and so much discrimination and so much inappropriate behavior that just got swept under the rug. And part of it was because I think we didn't have the vocabulary to talk about it. I wasn't clear on how to describe those instances to the people around me or to anyone who could have maybe made an impact. And, and I think it became very much about making yourself smaller to sort of fit into the schema that was set up for you. And it was like, "Well, then don't go to those parties!" or, you know, "Take this route instead of that route!" And like, shouldn't we not have to do that?

KG: Exactly. I think that maybe we didn't have the vocabulary for it, but they didn't provide it. The administration didn't provide it. So how would we know?

SG: Yeah, and it's such a developmental time. I mean, you come out of this what for me, at least, was a super sheltered childhood, essentially. And then you're just thrust into this adult world where you have no concept of what could be lurking around any corner and to not be given some sort of framework to understand it, I think that really did us a disservice. And I mean, Yeardeley Love was killed, like two weeks before graduation. She was my year and was also a politics major and lived in the house next to mine, actually. And that was such an impactful moment, I think, because it was the first time for a lot of us that we had talked about intimate partner violence and how this beautiful, successful, strong young woman just was gone. Because a white man who felt that he had all the power in the world took literally everything from her.

And, I mean, that's such a tragedy in so many ways. But it was the first time that I remember being super angry about that, like power disparity. Which now in hindsight kind of shocks me, because I'm sure I saw it a million times. But I don't remember having that real emotional reaction. And maybe part of it, too, is because we were so close to graduation, and it felt like he just took this like, giant piece of...he took everything from her. But the fact that she was just like a happy, successful young woman, on the cusp of doing something great with her life is just, it's still infuriates me. And so I think that, for me, was a real catalyst as I went to medical school, and really focused on women's health, really learning how to make that vocabulary accessible to my patients and the communities I work in. And also really being thoughtful about how I could help my sister who's three years younger than me, and was at Tech, which has its own host of problems--some of which are similar and some are different--making sure that she had more of a sense about what was ahead of her than I did.

KG: Thank you for sharing that with me. I think Yeardeley Love is somebody whose name comes up pretty often still. And I think a lot of people here still know her story. And that the work that her family has done after her death has changed the experience of UVA for me, even in just like 10, 11 years. It's not perfect, but feeling like we can say something about treatment and whatnot.

SG: But I think that is such an amazing legacy. And I agree, I think the One Love foundation is incredible. And the fact that her family took this tragedy and like this incredible loss, and they turned it into something that's so positive. And they did it so quickly. I feel like the foundation was started up so quickly, and I appreciate and admire that about them. And I think, you know, I didn't know Yeardeley well, but we had classes together and she was a bright, exuberant woman. I'm sure that if she knew about the impact that it had, she'd be proud. Yeah. And so that to me is like such an amazing thing to hear because we all felt so powerless. So I love that you feel even infinitesimally better. Yeah, that's incredible.