

RUTGERS, THE STATE UNIVERSITY OF NEW JERSEY

NEW BRUNSWICK

AN INTERVIEW WITH KRISTINA GRKOVIC

FOR THE

RUTGERS ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY

PAUL CLEMENS

NEW BRUNSWICK, NEW JERSEY  
SEPTEMBER 1, 2021

TRANSCRIPT BY

JESSIE CHEN

Paul Clemens: Let me see if I can do this transcript thing. Yes, okay, that's working. If you, for any reason, I can't imagine why this would be so, want to see what you're saying, it will show up now at the bottom of your screen, if you hit the--there's some sort of transcript icon there at the bottom of your screen. So, I can see it, it's printing out what I'm saying right now, and that's actually what's being recorded, and I don't look at it when I'm going on. It could record without actually showing it. But, every once in a while, I look at it when you say a word that I don't quite catch and I want to make sure that, looking at it, I've got the right word. So, when we get to editing this, we can do it.

Kristina Grkovic: It will be okay with my accent?

PC: Oh, yeah. We've been doing interviews with people literally who are working as graduate students all over the world, and some of whom, like you, were born elsewhere and English is their second language. Sometimes, the accent is really hard, and it's hilarious the way it gets transcribed by Zoom. But you have a small, small accent compared to some of them. We've been working with a graduate student who's been going back and forth between Japan and the Philippines for her research. She's Japanese, and Zoom just had a really difficult time trying to figure out what she was saying. We'll work with that and eventually get it fixed. I'm going to take notes, because in one disastrous moment, after now about sixty interviews, for some reason, it did not record, even though I had record on. So, I take notes, and that way, if anything disastrous happens, I can write it up, send it to you, and then we can do a little follow up and have something in order to fill in the blanks. But I don't think that's going to happen.

KG: Okay.

PC: So, let me tell you first a little bit about the project and then go through the consent process. The project, as I told you in email, is a long-term project, which will hopefully lead to a book. It will be dependent, in part, on how long the COVID situation continues and how bad it is in subsequent semesters or years--and let's hope it isn't. It's two of us collaborating. Johanna Schoen, who's a historian of medicine and historian of women and medical ethics, is working with me. I've written previously about the history of Rutgers, I've written about Rutgers sports, and I've actually attended volleyball games at Rutgers. [laughter]

KG: Really?

PC: I've never seen the team win. But that could be said about many people, and I will see you win this year at some point. I know you've already won a tournament, but I will see you win this year at some point in time.

KG: Can I ask, are you also working with all the other athletics?

PC: We have two undergraduate students who are working with us as interns. One of them actually plays, a woman, on the lacrosse team, and I've interviewed her. She's the one, unfortunately, in which things screwed up when we tried to record, of all people. I've interviewed your coach. I've sent things to the women's soccer team, one of the members of the coaching staff, a former player here who I saw play a decade ago, and to the wrestling team, and

I haven't gotten anything back from them at all. I'm going to try again, but I don't push people. I know everybody's going through a lot. It's not surprising when you don't hear back from people. Of the programs we're looking at--and we're looking at places where we think COVID may have had a major impact--I'm getting very similar stories from people in the dance program, who have incredibly rigorous training schedules and who had to go on training under unusual conditions, like in their bedroom, without proper flooring, and they get shin splints and worse things happen to them when they're training. So, it's not like we don't have some information about how these things are going. I've talked to the trainer from the dance program. There's stuff online. The trainer for the wrestling team has got a long clip up online about what he's gone through in terms of trying to keep the wrestlers, you know, a sport with an incredible amount of contact in it, how do you handle that?

KG: True. Do they wear masks then? Sorry, I'm just asking.

PC: Let me go on with the consent, just to make sure you understand how that works. The consent process is what is on that form, and by saying yes, you consent, that's what you're agreeing to. However, two important footnotes. One is--though it's in there--if, at any point at all, I ask you a question--and sometimes I even warn you, I'm going to ask you a question of this sort--that you don't want to answer, just skip over it, and people do that. It actually almost never happens, but people have done that occasionally. I've been doing oral histories for years in other projects, and that's fine. They're most likely to be things that are too personal or involve somebody else, that you can't explain it without talking about something else you don't want to talk about, that sort of thing. Secondly, if we go through this, and at some point you want to just pull out, you can do that, too. So, just keep that in mind.

KG: I know one of my other teammates ...

PC: Madyson.

KG: Yes, yes, she told me that.

PC: I don't mind mentioning her name because she basically said she knew you were doing this too, so I assume the two of you had talked about this.

KG: Yeah, we've talked about it.

PC: I had a very good interview with her the other day.

KG: Yeah? She's great.

PC: Let me start with--I'm going to go back to your background in the second step--let me just ask you: this is your first day in which school is going on. Tell me, what was the routine? What happened? What did you do today?

KG: So, I woke up really early and went to catch the bus, because I live on a different campus than our training campus, and it was empty, surprisingly, because right now it's completely full.

It's crazy how many people there are; I did not expect it. [laughter] Then, I had practice. No, first, we had treatment for an hour, and then we had practice. Then, right after practice, we watched film and we had to do film on our own, and then we get tested to see if we know what we're talking about. After that, I went straight to class. No, I had lunch, then I went to class, and now I'm back home.

PC: What campus did you start on?

KG: Livingston.

PC: And so you took the bus over to College Ave?

KG: Yeah, the LX bus, which I found out is the most crowded one.

PC: Yes. I've taught over in Tillett [Hall] many times and I tried to put myself through the same thing students do, which is to say to take the LX bus and it's a disaster. They're going to have that problem fixed, but by that time, I'll be retired and you'll be graduated. But they have figured out a way to improve it.

KG: That's good.

PC: They're going to tear down Campbell Dorm and put in a roundabout there. They're going to whip the buses back and forth from the roundabout, but it's going to take some time to get that done. You said you had treatment. What's that?

KG: With our athletic trainer, so if you're hurt or if you just want to do some recovery, like just normal recovery. If my shoulder hurts, I would talk to her, she would do some stretches, therapy, cupping therapy, any type of ...

PC: So, it's not for everybody on the team; it's for everybody who needs it on the team.

KG: Well, everyone has to go. They have to get cleared by the athletic trainer. Then, if you do need something, you stay for a bit extra, and then you can come to treatment after practice as well if you need it again.

PC: Do you expect, the end of the summer, which you already know, and the course of the first couple months, that you're going to be seeing that trainer almost every day?

KG: Yes. Every day since preseason started, even before, we were seeing her every day. It's just like a part of practice, let's say. It's like stretching. It's not mandatory, but it really helps. It's really important.

PC: Being on the bus when it gets crowded, other than the fact that it's a real pain when it's crowded, did you feel in any way afraid of that situation?

KG: Not really, no. I mean, the students are all students; they're nice. You don't really talk to

anybody. It's just kind of hot and maybe you have to stand.

PC: I know the standing and I know the hot. But now you've got a mask on and supposedly everybody on the bus is vaccinated, but you can't be absolutely sure of that. They could be asymptotically COVID. There're those sorts of muted alarms that some people experience and others do not. You shouldn't feel scared. I think things are probably about as good as they're going to get right now.

KG: Sometimes, if it's really crowded, you have a choice. You can choose to push through and maybe fight to get in or just wait for the next one. So, it's nice that it comes all the time.

PC: Okay, so, let's go back to basic background. Tell me when you were born, where you were born, and then we'll talk a little bit about your family, and how you grew up and things like that.

KG: I'm a little nervous. [laughter]

PC: Okay.

KG: So, I was born in Belgrade, Serbia, on March 29th of 2002. Until I was nine years old, I lived there, had a normal childhood. Then, my father got this job. He works for the UN [United Nations], for WFP, the World Food Program, and he got this position in Sudan, in Africa. So, my mom decided that we should go stay with him. We all moved to Sudan for the next four years, and that was actually really fun. After those four years, they moved him again. Through these four years, he also always was traveling, moving around Africa. Then, he got a job in Italy, the same one. They moved him to Italy, and so we followed him again to Italy.

PC: In terms of your schooling, you were in Serbia until you're nine. That means at least part of what in America we call the elementary school process takes place in Serbia.

KG: Yeah.

PC: Then, you go to Sudan. Where did you go to school in Sudan?

KG: Actually, I went to an American school.

PC: Are you already speaking some English at the time you go to Sudan?

KG: No. That's where I learned English for the first time. I'll never forget my first day when I didn't understand anything. It was the second grade, and I went in, I didn't know anything, and literally in three months, I learned English.

PC: Wow, good for you. Your English, by the way, is wonderful. So, I wouldn't worry about ...

KG: I'm stuttering so much right now, but I promise it's better than this. [laughter]

PC: You do not hear that when you speak. I swear to you, you do not.

KG: Oh, thank you.

PC: What was going on in Sudan at the time you were there? This has been, at various times, a troubled part of the world. Is there any time when your father is at risk in any way?

KG: Oh, yeah. He's at risk pretty much all the time. Right now, I think he's in Juba in South Sudan. But he's been moving through Afghanistan, Sudan, even Uganda, all these different places. But he knows how to--he's been doing it for a long time and he's with really trustworthy people. He has this team, and it's all really secure. But, of course, the risk is always there. That's why the job pays well. [laughter]

PC: What does your mother do? Is she in Italy now, or is she back in Serbia?

KG: She's in Italy. She actually recently got a job because of COVID kind of. So, my father's and mother's friends group is the same. They all work in the UN somewhere. During COVID, they had such a lack of staff, that they really needed more people to work. She works in aviation for the UN now, and she got this job during COVID, because they didn't have people and she applied and she had the requirements, not all of them, but most of them. [laughter] They did this program where since all the flights were not working during COVID, the UN made this airline of theirs that was for diplomats and people that needed to be moving, like mandatory workers, and she works here in this.

PC: She's in the U.S. now?

KG: No, she's in Italy.

PC: She's in Italy, okay.

KG: She works at the United Nations.

PC: Is there a chance that either of your parents will get over here to see you play at some point in time?

KG: They said the moment that the restrictions go down, they will.

PC: Good, good.

KG: They really want to. They're always watching the games.

PC: Yeah, that's neat. So, you're in Sudan, four years, you learn English there. You moved to Italy. What approximate grade level are you starting education in Italy at?

KG: I was in grade seven when I moved to Italy, yes, and then I finished high school there. But this is when I want to a British school, so it was a little different, a little harder.

PC: Yes, I'm sure it is. What was your favorite subject when you were in school?

KG: Art.

PC: Art. Yeah, I figured that out from your--I looked at those questions they have up on the webpage [of the Rutgers Women's Volleyball Team], it's not exactly a bio, but, "Here's my answer to all these things." I know you like dogs and frogs.

KG: Oh, that's a running joke in my family. As a kid I really liked cats, but my dad would joke, he would say, "You're not a cat. You're a frog." I remember for one of my birthdays, he got me a frog, and I wanted a cat. So, it's been a long running joke in my family.

PC: You like art. Did you have teachers there that inspired you in some way or another?

KG: Oh, yeah, my IB [International Baccalaureate] art teacher. He was the fourth biggest examiner in the IB program, I think. Basically, he really encouraged me to do art, and he's really the typical art teacher, stereotypical art teacher, like in movies. He would come to class dressed crazy and he would always have these videos playing in the background, loud music. He just made this environment that lets you escape from normal classes and encouraged us to do art. He really wanted me to go into design, like movie design, digital movie design, set design. So, I'm still thinking about this all the time, "Should I change majors?" but I think for sure in the future, I'm going to do something with art.

PC: I don't know if they have the graduate program there or not--my kids went to the art school at NYU, which does all sorts of really interesting things, many of them connected with computers, and they both work in IT now for Sony, but there's some really good programs in New York you could at least think about. Some of them lead to really solid jobs. If you have a certain combination of skills, right now you can get very good jobs.

KG: I think right now, I'm going to focus on getting my major in supply chain here. Then, I kind of want to keep art as a hobby, not as a job, if that makes sense. I'm probably going to take some courses in the summer just for the sake of it.

PC: That'd be good. The Mason Gross program here is so much better than when I first came to Rutgers. Mason Gross didn't actually exist when I came to Rutgers.

KG: What is [this]?

PC: Mason Gross, the art school, and it's dance and art and theater and music, so it's all those rolled into one. How did volleyball get into your life?

KG: It's actually a funny story. I was always into sports, obviously, because of my height, and both my parents played some sport growing up. My father played in Serbia volleyball, a professional league. My mom played some basketball here and there. But it was never a plan. I never went to clubs like elementary and all that because I was always moving from Sudan to

Serbia and all. Then, when we went to Italy, we got a house that was literally in the middle of nowhere. I was staying home all the time, so my parents thought--there was this little club in our village, like the local club, where the parents would just bring their kids. My parents said, "Oh, why don't you go try for that just to do something with your free time instead of being in your room on the phone." So, this is how it started.

Then, as we started playing, it was nothing serious, I think I was twelve at the time, and this one guy, who was the president of a really good club in Italy, in Rome, he saw me play in this tournament. He offered me to go in his club, which I didn't know at the time was the best club under eighteen, under sixteen in Italy. So, I transferred to this club. For a year, I stayed there and basically just kind of took off. Eventually, we moved from the house in the middle of nowhere to Rome just to be closer to the club. This is where I've been for four years. In this club, we always went to play the national tournament, and I was competing with some really good players that always got the best under sixteen male of the country. So, I got to compete against some really good players. This is basically how it went.

Then, eventually I had to decide, "Do I want to stay in Italy and play pro when I got older, or do I want to go to school?" So, I started thinking about, "Can I do both?" and here you can. So, I looked. My coach's wife, she makes this summer camp where you can go for a couple days, where a bunch of coaches from America come to recruit players. So, I went to this camp, and this is where the coach from here saw me. That's how we got in contact.

PC: When you say the coach, do you mean the former coach or the one you've got now?

KG: The former coach.

PC: What was his pitch to you about coming and playing in the U.S.? What'd he say to you?

KG: He didn't actually tell me anything at the time when I first--I couldn't meet them because there were some precautions or rules that they're not allowed to speak to players.

PC: That's true, yeah.

KG: So, all the other coaches had tried to get in contact with me and they were talking to me, but Rutgers, they just left a note, only to me, none of the other players got it, and they just said, "This is our email. Send us a message if you're interested. We want you," and I was like "Whoa." [laughter]

PC: That's neat. Just so I get the framework right, what are we talking about, you said summer camp, summer of what year, 2019 or 2020?

KG: No, 2018.

PC: So, summer of 2018, you're in contact with somebody who is eventually going to get you to come to Rutgers. But you still have, at that point, I guess your senior year in high school ahead of you?

KG: Yeah, I still had a year.

PC: Yeah, so you've committed ...

KG: I didn't commit, but I had this option available.

PC: I know in talking to other people in various programs over the last few years, you can commit now at an unbelievably young age.

KG: Yes, it's crazy.

PC: It's really something.

KG: I think I committed really late too actually because all the other schools were emailing me, like, "We need an answer, please," except for Rutgers. They were like, "Take your time." This is also one of the reasons why I committed.

PC: At the time you were talking to Rutgers, we were obviously already in the Big Ten. Did you know you were going to be going into the best, essentially, league in the United States?

KG: I didn't actually. [laughter] They just told me it was the first league [Division I]. I had no idea there was different conferences and all this. I learned it recently, last year.

PC: Did you know that Rutgers had such a bad record at that time?

KG: No, I didn't. [laughter]

PC: I told somebody the other day--maybe I told Madyson or I told somebody else who was asking me about volleyball--I said I've been to, I'm guessing, somewhere in the area of fifteen matches over the last five years or something. When they played in the gym, I know you're moving to the RAC [Rutgers Athletic Center or Jersey Mike's Arena], you could just literally walk out of your class, walk down, and if it were an afternoon game, you could go in and watch the game for nothing, for free. I never saw them win a game, not one match.

KG: When did you go to the matches, recently?

PC: As far as I know, I don't know if you've had--last year, I don't know if you had any.

KG: No, not last year.

PC: The last year you were playing, I may very well not have gone to any--I mean, playing a regular schedule. After you got here, I may not actually have gone to any matches. Now, last year, you won some matches.

KG: Yes.

PC: But they would have been without people there.

KG: Yeah, no one was allowed to watch.

PC: Between the age of twelve and about the age of seventeen, your whole volleyball career, that's it, unlike some people, who start playing a sport when they're five years old, and they're focused and their parents are focused, hardwired into the sport. You sort of--I won't say drifted into it, but it came late.

KG: I had to catch up a lot. I started really late compared to all the other players I was playing with, so my technique and my feel for the ball was much worse than the other players. I had to put in extra hours and everything, just basically catch up because I didn't start as early.

PC: What did Rutgers tell you about the difficulty or non-difficulty or the nature of the academic program here, since you've been educated overseas? Did they give you any sense of how easy it would be to fit in in an American academic environment?

KG: Well, they were saying that, of course, the culture shock and the difference would be difficult to adapt to, but I've already moved to different countries and lived in different places, so it's nothing that new to me. I've done it before, in a sense, so I knew what to expect. Of course, it's a completely different continent, so it was a little difficult at first. But, also here, there's a lot of international students and even on my team, so this really helped, honestly. This is another reason why I really liked it. I got offers from some schools where the team was only Americans, and I knew that I would have a much harder time adapting there, because here, I have other people that relate to my situation. So, that was good.

PC: How does that work: you go to this summer camp, and was it out of that experience that you got--you say offers--that several different schools got in touch with you, or was it because you took the initiative and inquired about schools other than Rutgers?

KG: No, the first thing you said. So, I went there and the coaches would watch the practice for four days. Then, they would reach out to you if they were interested--well, they wouldn't reach out to you; they'd tell the coaches and then the coaches will tell you, because you have to go through this process.

PC: Yeah, the NCAA process. So, if you were being considered or actually had an offer from more than one school, why did you choose Rutgers?

KG: Well, first of all, because it was in the first division, Division I, and because it's international. There's a lot of other internationals and also because it's closer to Europe. I didn't want to go too far from home.

PC: Certainly, if you wanted to get back, getting on an airplane around here, up until COVID, was the easiest thing in the world to do, to go back to Europe. People go back and forth all the time.

KG: I have to say the obvious one, New York is nearby, and the idea of New York, as a teen in Europe, I was like, "Wow."

PC: Now, let's go back to Italy. You would have been in Rome at the time that Italy became the epicenter of COVID in Europe. What was that like?

KG: It was shocking. We were having our best season, actually, in this year. We were about to go into the first league and win the whole tournament. So, in Italy, it's the same as here, you have the first division, second. We were in the second one, about to go into the first one, and this is when COVID hit. We couldn't finish up the matches, and I didn't get to have my last under-eighteen season.

But, apart from volleyball, generally going into lockdown, shutting down school, everything was a big shock, especially because Italy was one of the worst ones in Europe [and] had the worst cases in Europe, too. But some parts of the Italian culture really shone through to help the people cope. Basically, every night, during the quarantine period of--how much was it, like eight months, five? [Editor's Note: Italy's nationwide COVID lockdown lasted from March 9, 2020 until May 4, 2020, when restrictions were eased.]

PC: I know it was multiple months. I don't know how long.

KG: It was really long. But during this period, every night at eight p.m., the whole of Rome and the whole of Italy would play music really loudly for an hour. This was one of the good things about this, because every day was the same. It was get out of bed, open your class, and go back to bed. My club, they tried to keep us in shape by having video calls every day, where we would work out together. So, I set up my laptop on my chair and put my mat down and would do the workouts as my coach is showing me. But it was really repetitive, so it was hard.

PC: Did some of the players that you knew from your under-eighteen club get COVID?

KG: Yeah, they did. We tried to get back into practice when the restrictions were getting looser, but we just kept going back into quarantine. People started testing positive, and this is probably one of the reasons why it lasted so long. I mean, the restrictions were there, but of course not everyone was following them. Sometimes, you were just unlucky.

PC: That leads to the next question I was going to ask you. What did it mean to be in quarantine? I asked you at the very beginning what a typical day today was like. What was a typical day like for somebody your age in Rome during this period of time in, I guess, late 2019, early 2020, something like that?

KG: I would just be in my household, I would wake up--my sleep schedule and everything was really bad, because I didn't have any responsibilities to wake up early, go to school, and even my exams were canceled. But, generally, you couldn't go outside at all. You could if you had a dog, you could walk him for a couple [blocks], but you had to stay in a certain circumference of your house. This was tracked by your phone, and then if you would go out, or if you would go past a

certain time, the police would tell you to go back in, and I think there was also a fine.

PC: You were living with your mother at this period of time?

KG: I was with my whole family, my mother, my older brother, younger brother, and younger sister. My dad, at the time, he was in Africa. It was also really scary because he wasn't there when COVID hit, he was in Africa, and he couldn't come back. So, he was also scared for us.

PC: This is a question you can skip, but did anybody in your family get COVID?

KG: During the quarantine, no. We pretty much just stayed at home all day, luckily.

PC: I have friends over in Italy, and some of them got COVID. It was just horrible listening to the stories.

KG: Yeah, it was just terrible. A lot of my teammates' relatives passed away because of this, and it was really tragic actually.

PC: When do you actually get on an airplane and come to the United States?

KG: Okay, this was last year in August, yes. But this whole process also took a really long time to get approved, my visa and everything, because everything was closed.

PC: Tell me about that. How did you get a visa? How did that happen?

KG: I had to send twenty emails to figure out how to actually get the visa and talk to the American administration in Italy because no one knew--there was no solid process to go through because everything was changing really quickly. Every day, I had to open the site and see if there was any updates. Eventually, they loosened the restrictions, and they got an update about student-athletes. I got my I-20 finally, after like three months of checking the website every day. Then, I just flew by myself.

PC: Did Rutgers help you in any way, the International Students Office at Rutgers, or did somebody help you in terms of getting a visa?

KG: Yeah, they were also checking the website every day. They sent me a letter that I could show to the administration, which, when they saw it, they were like, "Oh, we know Rutgers, don't worry, you'll be fine." I didn't know Rutgers was so famous, actually. Then, any person that's been to America that I talked to, they're like, "Oh, yeah, I know Rutgers."

PC: That's interesting. Well, not that Rutgers wouldn't be known there, they're a very good university, but I do know we've had a very strong study-abroad presence in Italy.

KG: Really? I had no idea.

PC: In fact, the first sign that we were in a big crisis over COVID for most people at the

university was when Rutgers made the decision to pull all our study-abroad students out of Italy and get them home, and they did it almost at the last moment they could do that. I mean, after that, things closed down as they did quickly, in Italy more quickly than the U.S. But that was the first wake-up call for many people at Rutgers, that this is not just something that's happening way off in China and maybe a little bit over in Europe, but rather this is something that's going to affect us in the United States, which is so naive and innocent, looking back on it, but that's the way it was for most people back then.

KG: There was just a lot of uncertainty everywhere. It was scary at first, but it kind of made you appreciate the little moments of certainty. When I finally got that email, "Oh, you're going to get your I-20 on this date," it just made me feel really lucky to be accepted into this university.

PC: At no point did your mother, it would probably have been because your father's off, say to you, "Given COVID, maybe you ought to reconsider and wait a year to go" or something like that?

KG: Not my mom. Actually, the current coach told me this; she said, "We understand your situation and if you want to reconsider staying another year in Italy, you can." So, I had this option, but I chose to hope, I guess. [laughter] It worked out well.

PC: You get here in August of 2020.

KG: Yes.

PC: We've also already got a COVID situation over here. They put you in a dorm. You're in a residence hall?

KG: I was in a hotel for two weeks first.

PC: Oh, you were quarantining.

KG: Yes.

PC: Yes, right, of course. So, you started a two-week quarantine.

KG: Yes.

PC: Where'd you fly into?

KG: I flew into JFK, and then they organized for a taxi driver to drive me to the hotel.

PC: When you were in the hotel, how did you survive? Did Rutgers bring food over to you or something? How did that work?

KG: Yeah. For student-athletes, they have this per-diem card for the scholarship program that they put money on that's not during the season. Also, the air flights here [are] always providing

snacks for athletes, so I got to have some of these snacks for the first time, too. American food was a whole new experience, too.

PC: Good or bad experience?

KG: Mostly good, but a bit of both. It was just different.

PC: So, you're two weeks quarantined. Presumably, you've got a laptop with you and there are things that go on with the team that you can be a part of, but you obviously can't practice any more than you can just do exercises perhaps in your hotel room.

KG: Yeah, it was hard doing it in my hotel room. [laughter]

PC: I'm assuming you're by yourself. You're not with a teammate?

KG: Yes, completely alone.

PC: Completely alone. Total quarantine. Then, after that two weeks, you come to campus and then they put you in a residence hall, right?

KG: Yeah. First, I was in a dorm, a residence dorm, for another couple days until I got completely cleared, and then I got to go into the living dorms with my roommate.

PC: You have a roommate who is a member of the team?

KG: Yeah, she's from Greece, Stella Antypa. She's also international, so that was nice.

PC: The team is quite international. The soccer team at Rutgers, the women's soccer team, used to be very international, too. It isn't much anymore, but it used to have lots of Canadian players on it and a couple European players on it. It was quite an international team. Now, American soccer, women's soccer, girls' soccer, in the high schools has gotten so good, even in New Jersey, which means you can recruit locally.

KG: Women's soccer is not really big in Europe. I don't know about Canada; probably it is. I can understand why. Here, it's way better.

PC: It certainly is in Canada. As you may have seen in the Olympics, the Canadian team defeated the American team. The difference in Canada is that Canada does not allow athletic scholarships. Now, that may have changed, but three years ago, they did not allow athletic scholarships for sports.

KG: Three years ago only?

PC: Yeah, they had to come to the United States to get a scholarship, and so there was lot of cross-border stuff. That may have changed, I don't know. The last time I talked to somebody on the soccer team, that was the explanation they gave me.

KG: That's interesting. I had no idea.

PC: It's a different financial situation for them. So, you come over as a scholarship student, which is to say they're paying your tuition while you're here, and you get a per diem. They pay your room and board as well?

KG: Yeah, yeah.

PC: That's pretty standard, although there have been, in the past, sports where you have to partial up the scholarships and you get a quarter scholarship one year and blah blah blah, but I don't think that's the way it works anymore.

KG: I don't know.

PC: No, if that were true, you would know that by now. I presume, also, they have told you that you have probably an extra year of eligibility now?

KG: Yes, because the last season didn't count.

PC: Yeah, right. We're here; it's the fall semester 2020. It's last year. Tell me about how it started. What were you able to do? What was going on?

KG: We couldn't really do much. Just like in Italy, there was quarantine, not quarantine, but there were restrictions, and everything was closed, no restaurants, of course, the mask regulations. We had practice, but we began practicing with masks because that was the rules. It was kind of hard, actually, in the beginning, because for five months, we didn't know if we were going to have a season. We were just practicing hoping that we're doing it for something. But I think it was good for our team to have these five months together, because even with the new coaches, everyone got to adapt together and form this bond, because we had to see each other every day. [laughter] It really helped us, I think, in this season. It was really hard. We couldn't do--well, there was nothing to do, basically. We just stayed in our dorms, and we only had each other. [Editor's Note: Due to the pandemic, the fall 2020 season in Big Ten Women's Volleyball was played in the spring of 2021.]

PC: We'll get the classes in just a second, but of course that semester, there are almost no other students on campus. Even if you could go outside and go around places, you're not going to meet other students and form other sorts of ...

KG: It was empty.

PC: I know this became a problem actually, on the football team, were there parties or anything like that that you got invited to or anything like that?

KG: Oh, no, there was nothing. Actually, I think there might have been some, but we didn't go to any.

PC: I'm not surprised by that. I know at least one of the women's teams had some trouble because there were players who either didn't follow the rules or something, and there were people who got sick. What I remember both Madyson and I think the coach telling me was that nobody got COVID on the volleyball team.

KG: Yeah, I think we did pretty well following the restrictions, because a lot of other teams, even volleyball, in our Big Ten, had to not have matches or go into quarantine because of positive results. But, also, we were lucky, and I think we did a good job following the restrictions.

PC: At the very beginning of that fall, could you go into a fitness area or a gym area and actually do your daily exercises as opposed just practicing?

KG: No. Everything was closed, all the buildings.

PC: So, in other words, if you had to do some sort of conditioning, you had to go back to your dorm room and do that?

KG: You mean like team conditioning?

PC: No, I assume if there were no COVID in the world, you would be doing something every day, working out on a machine work, those sorts of things.

KG: No, if you wanted to do extra, maybe you can go for a run or in your room. Me and my roommate used to work out together, yoga in our rooms, on the weekends.

PC: So, there is a little bit of ability to do that sort of thing. You're taking how many classes that fall?

KG: I was taking five.

PC: Five classes, that's a lot.

KG: Yeah, I didn't know at the time. [laughter] But I think it's good.

PC: I mean, five classes is the norm, but it actually is not the norm for a first-semester student at Rutgers. A lot of students only take four classes, and a lot of School of Arts and Science advisors, who you may or may not have talked to you, you may have talked to the Business School, but in any case, School of Arts and Science advisors will tell first-year students that they should go easy in the first semester and make it up later. They sort of nudge them towards four rather than five courses.

KG: Yeah, but two of the classes were kind of introductory classes, so there was no final exam for them. They were just kind of teaching you what being a student-athlete means, basically. So, it wasn't too hard.

PC: Has anybody from the administration to the team talked to you about your major and about what makes sense for a student-athlete to get into while they're here?

KG: What do you mean?

PC: In some programs, you'll be told that if you are choosing between these two majors, it's an academic tutor or something, that this one makes a lot more sense, if you want to be a volleyball player, than this one does, that sort of thing.

KG: Not really. They really just ask us, "What do you want to do?" and then they give us the plan, "This is your best option," and they kind of just go with you through this plan.

PC: I'll give you a concrete example. I do a lot of advising for people that want go into student-teaching, and there's no way in the world that a student-athlete can do that program. They can become a teacher and they can go out after they're in college and get an education degree in the Graduate School of Education. But, while they're in school and while they're performing, they can't do it, because there's a whole bunch of stuff in the internships that they have to do in the public school system that is incompatible with a schedule that you are on, going around to the Midwest and all that sort of stuff. They can't do it. So, any program that has that internship built into it, which a lot of the professional programs do, it doesn't fit. Another, obviously, would be nursing. You can't go into nursing. Why? Because you've got to have this long internship in the nursing program, so it's virtually impossible.

KG: I think the only time that we can take [an internship] and not have it collide with any other responsibilities is during the summer.

PC: Yeah, there's probably a possibility and there might be ways to fit that in some academic programs. There are others that you can't. There are state requirements you have to meet, which have to be done in the fall and spring. But that doesn't mean you can't come back later and do them in one way or another. What did you take in the way of things that are prerequisite for a business major when you were ...

KG: My first semester?

PC: Well, both semesters. All last year, you took, presumably, some courses that were tailored towards going into the Business School.

KG: Yeah, yeah. So, I have a list of requirements that I need to do, like I have to take two of these classes or two of those. So far, I've taken "Intro to Micro," "Intro to Macro," of course "Calculus," "Intro to Computer Science." They're all intro. Yeah, I think that's it. Oh, I also took "Statistics" in the summer. So, these are all like pre-business courses that you need to have if you're not already in the Business School.

PC: How did you respond to--you obviously had this already in your schooling before you got here--but how did you respond to this at a university level? How effective was online teaching

in these courses that you had to take? I'm not asking how well you did, I'm asking you really, did you feel ...

KG: Did you learn anything?

PC: Were you learning enough doing it this way?

KG: I had some previous knowledge already because I took IB business, but it mostly depended a lot on the student in general to learn with online school, compared to normal school. But, then again, I don't know what normal college is like, so I can't really say. [laughter] Let's say if you have an asynchronous class, it puts much more responsibility on you to do your responsibilities, to do your classes, to learn your material. So, I think it just made us all grow up a little faster. It was difficult. At the beginning, I struggled a bit with managing my time mostly. I would leave things to the last minute and then didn't realize that I couldn't do that because it would all pile up, but it kind of helped me manage it better now through trial and error.

PC: The other factor that is of some interest in understanding what this has been like for you: how frequently were you in touch with your mother and perhaps your father as well, your siblings? Were you able to keep an open a channel to talk overseas to your family?

KG: Yeah. When I first got here, obviously, it was hard. We would video call every day, but this was in quarantine; I had nothing else to do. Then, during the practice and before the season started, yeah, because they also didn't have things to do. They were also in quarantine. So, we had a lot of free time, so we would always keep in touch. Now, a bit less, because school is back up. I just call them every now and then.

PC: So, back in August of 2020, when you get here, they are still in quarantine or back in quarantine over in Italy?

KG: Yes. They were kind of jealous of me, actually, because I got to go to practice, I got to travel during the season, whereas they had to just stay there.

PC: When did you find out that there was going to be a season basically, that you were going to play in the spring rather than the fall, but you were going to actually have a season? When did that ...

KG: I think it was really close to the actual season, basically the last minute, because the NCAA, I think they updated it--oh, my God, I'm trying to remember. The coaches, they kept telling us we may or may not have a season, and then one day, I think it was maybe a month or a couple months before the actual season started, they said, "It's official." But, even then, what if we got COVID? It was really always uncertain, to some extent.

PC: Right. When the season starts, you're playing matches. Obviously, they made an effort to group you, so there'd be a minimum of travel, but you're still getting on airplanes and going places to play, right?

KG: Yeah, we had one commercial flight, and the rest were all chartered just to minimize the contact with other people. We all had to test every morning, because this was the rules at the time.

PC: Do you remember the transition from taking the Rutgers saliva test to taking the nose test that the NCAA required?

KG: I remember. Oh, my God, the saliva test, we had to do this twice a week. I remember we would not eat breakfast or drink anything and we would keep it in our cheeks for like thirty minutes before we could spit it out.

PC: That's different than--I mean, I was on campus a lot during the summer and actually during the whole spring semester, and so anybody who was on campus more than one day a week, you had to take the test. What I did was really simple. You just walked over to Sojourner Truth [Apartments], you got a little vial, you spit into it a few times. It was very easy to do.

KG: It was hard at first. At first, I couldn't produce enough spit. [laughter]

PC: Yeah, okay, that makes sense.

KG: Kind of gross.

PC: Compared to sticking something in your nose--I've had both, too--one is more pleasant than the other, it seems to me.

KG: They're both fairly bad, but I would say the majority prefer the nose one.

PC: Once you start playing, once you're into a routine where you're going to play actual matches with other Big Ten teams, you're still only getting tested twice a week?

KG: No. When the season started and a bit before the season started, we had to test every day, the quick test, twenty minutes, every morning before practice. So, we had to get cleared before we could go into the gym.

PC: Did any matches get canceled because the other team had an unexpected outbreak of COVID?

KG: Yeah. I think it was postponed, one of our matches, because the team had an outbreak.

PC: Had you already flown somewhere and then found out when you got there?

KG: Oh, no, no. But there was an instance where one of our players caught a cold, and she was just a little sick, because the flight was cold. This day we were unsure, "Are we allowed to play? Do we have to wear masks?" So, we had to really be able to adapt to any situation possible, because there have been instances where the coaches would say, "We're testing now, and if anyone gets a positive, we have to stay here for another week." But, luckily, it didn't happen to

us. If it did, I think we would have been fine. We were adapting pretty well at the time.

PC: It sounds like it. You've been down to Florida. How did that experience go?

KG: [laughter] Oh, Florida is super hot. It was good, it was good. I think the coaches did a really good job of preparing us for the match. Instead of just letting us jump into a Big Ten match or just a match in general, we stayed there for a couple days just to adapt a bit.

PC: Was that a charter flight, or did you go down on a commercial airline?

KG: It was a commercial airline.

PC: Did you feel unsafe in any way at all?

KG: No, no, it was fine.

PC: You flew out of Newark?

KG: Yes.

PC: Where'd you fly into?

KG: Oh, God, I don't remember the name. I'm sorry, I don't remember the name.

PC: It depends on what part of Florida you were at. I should remember, actually, myself.

KG: Yeah, it was somewhere, and then we practiced for a couple days and went down to play. But I don't remember the name.

PC: So, the airplane flight didn't intimidate you in any way?

KG: No, no.

PC: I've been on exactly one airplane since the pandemic started and it didn't bother me either, although I was bothered in Dulles Airport when ...

KG: How long was it, the flight?

PC: Oh, I went to Knoxville to do some hiking in the Smoky Mountains. [There are] no direct flights anymore, so probably four hours all together but only about an hour, sort of two hours in the air, but broken into two parts, with Dulles Airport in D.C. in between. Dulles Airport was a madhouse and that bothered me, but on the airplane itself, no, I agree, I felt the same. I had to wear a mask, and I felt very safe. If I ask you this, this again is something you're completely free just to say, "I don't want to tell you." Have you been vaccinated?

KG: Yes, I have.

PC: I would think you came out of family that probably pushed that; your father, at least, must be vaccinated.

KG: Yes, he also had to be vaccinated to travel.

PC: I could not imagine what he's doing without being vaccinated.

KG: Yes. I actually went with him from Italy to Serbia. We drove together and stayed there for a couple days.

PC: You got vaccinated here or ...

KG: In Europe, in Serbia.

PC: In Serbia, okay. Which vaccine did you get?

KG: Pfizer. Both of us got it.

PC: Oh, you got the Pfizer one, I see.

KG: It's really funny. In Serbia, they give you a gift card if you get vaccinated, a twenty-dollar gift card.

PC: The things they've given away in the United States in various states to try to up the vaccination rate is really something. It almost makes you wish you'd waited, but of course that's stupid. We could have gotten these bonuses for going out and getting vaccinated. This semester, how many courses are you taking?

KG: Also five.

PC: Are you in the Business School, or are you applying to the Business School out of the School of Arts and Sciences?

KG: I'm going to apply to it. Next semester, I have to have a major, and this is actually something I spoke to my advisor about. I have all the requirements right now, so I just have to apply and hope for the best.

PC: Your season has already started and you play matches through semester break, is that it?

KG: Yeah, we're playing a couple tournaments, just to get into the groove.

PC: The conference championship round, whatever it is, assuming you get into it, that still takes place during the first semester? Your season ends at the end of the first semester, you go on practicing in the spring, is that right? I'm not sure.

KG: Yeah, it ends in fall.

PC: Will the time you have to commit to volleyball go down in the spring then?

KG: No, no, I think we're still going to practice every day. We haven't talked about this yet, actually, so I don't even know.

PC: Yeah, because this year is going to be significantly different than last year. I mean, last year, it all hit you just like that.

KG: Completely new experience. Even the last three days, when all the new students came, it's been like a new [experience], like I'm not in New Jersey anymore, it's somewhere else.

PC: This year, you're going to be in the same residence hall you were in last year?

KG: No, last year I was at Busch Campus.

PC: And this year you're ...

KG: Livingston.

PC: Livingston Campus. Okay, same side of the river. Are you in one of those towers or are you in the ...

KG: No, I'm in the apartments. Towers, what towers?

PC: There's a tower there that is--I don't remember what the name of it is, it's called the Towers--and then there's a set of Quads that are over there as well, that are at the other end, sort of catty-corner across the other end of Livingston Campus. The Towers may have come down, they may not be using that anymore. It's been a while since I've looked for it. The Quads are very much still there, and they just call it the Quads. They date all the way back to the 1960s when Livingston first opened. If you're driving around the Livingston Campus, which is a huge rectangle essentially, the RAC is at one end, the Quads are at the other end. [Editor's Note: The Towers being referred to are the Lynton Towers (North and South), located on Livingston Campus.]

KG: Oh, yeah, no, we're at the RAC.

PC: You're close to the RAC.

KG: Walking distance, pretty much.

PC: How many days a week this semester are you taking the bus? How often do you have to come across to College Ave?

KG: Twice a day.

PC: Every day?

KG: [Yes].

PC: Wow.

KG: On the weekends, it's a choice, only if I want to go to the Yard or something.

PC: Have you done anything adventuresome now that some of the rules have relaxed a little bit? Have you gotten on a train and gone to New York?

KG: Yeah, actually, we went up a couple times just to see what it's like, like tourists.

PC: You actually went to New York City?

KG: Yeah, yeah.

PC: Good for you. What'd you see in New York?

KG: Well, we went to see Times Square, of course. [laughter] We went to a restaurant. We saw Central Park once. It was beautiful, wow, out of this world.

PC: Did you get to go indoors anywhere in New York?

KG: Not really, no. We just went to a restaurant once, and that's pretty much it. Not many times, just a couple.

PC: You took the bus in or the train in or something like that?

KG: The train. That's a whole other experience, figuring out the trains, oh, my God. It took some time.

PC: Anybody who's used to European trains will be sadly disappointed when they come to the United States. That said, getting into New York on New Jersey Transit is probably about the easiest important trip you can make in the United States.

KG: Yes, I agree.

PC: It's a good system. It works most of the time, which is better than most trains in the United States.

KG: One issue most of us internationals have, because back home, or back in Italy, public transport like trains and buses is pretty much everywhere, whereas here you mostly need a car to get around. So, that's another trouble.

PC: A huge adjustment that people have to make.

KG: Adjustment, right.

PC: The bus system over here is--I mean, if you can't afford the train and you don't have a car, the bus system sort of works, but it is terrible.

KG: I haven't even tried it.

PC: I mean, just getting around Middlesex County on buses and I have friends who do that, it's almost impossible, and not cheap, actually.

KG: Really?

PC: It's cheaper than the train but not by much. How would you define, just in general, the experience you had after you got here of your first year at Rutgers, looking back on it right now?

KG: It was uncertain, so much uncertainty.

PC: That's a good word.

KG: But, at the same time, I felt so lucky, because compared to the rest of the world, I'm so fortunate to be able to still practice and do something instead of being locked [down].

PC: That sounds a little bit like your father and mother's lives coming through to you.

KG: Really?

PC: In the sense that you know more than typical American or possibly even European teenagers about what in the rest of the world is happening.

KG: Oh, thank you.

PC: You have a context that many people do not for thinking about the world and worrying about it periodically.

KG: I'm really grateful to my family for this, being able to move around and travel.

PC: What I'll tell you about the way this process works now is that we may or may not get back to you. It'll certainly not be until the spring and maybe not even until the end of the spring.

KG: Sorry, what did you say? May not get back to ...

PC: We may not come back and talk to you again. We may not do it. If we do do it, it won't be until probably the end of the spring semester. I really don't like messing things up for people with committing too much time to this, but we may come back and try to talk to you, probably

more briefly, about how this year went. It's going to depend in part on how this year goes for all of us. I mean, if this year poses new challenges that are unanticipated, then it would be worth our time to talk again. I think that's probably going to happen, but it won't be until the spring that we'll do that, and I'd love it if you're willing to sit down for maybe half an hour that time, about half of this, and bring me up to date a little bit. The other thing I wanted to mention to you--I sent out messages to four members of the team. I haven't heard from the other two. I'm not asking you to get in touch with them, but if they happen to talk to you ...

KG: Which two are they?

PC: I can tell you. Beka, I think, was one of them, and I'm going to mispronounce this, Shealyn.

KG: Shealyn.

PC: So, if they happen to get in touch with you ...

KG: Oh, yeah, we're close.

PC: You don't have to try to convince them to do this, but if they're interested in what we did over the course of an hour, please feel free to tell them that. One of the things I very much don't want to do is put pressure on people to talk on the record about themselves.

KG: Oh, no problem. I'm going to remind them.

PC: It's partly why, for example, I didn't ask your coach to go out and ask anybody, because your coach, even if she doesn't want to, in some way as an authority figure can put a little bit of pressure that was unintended.

KG: Yeah, of course. She didn't say anything about it.

PC: No, I'm sure she wouldn't. She understood exactly what I was saying, and that was fine. I will tell you I had a wonderful interview with her.

KG: I'm sure she's really experienced with interviews and talks way better than me for sure.

PC: No, you did fine. Okay, well that's about it, unless you have any questions for me. What you will get out of this eventually will be an audio transcript--I probably should have said this at the beginning--and you will get a written transcript. The written transcript, you can actually edit. There may be some things in there we just got wrong, but there may also be things that you remember and say, "You know, I said that, but what really happened was the following," and you want to just fix something in it, you can do that as well. So, you'll get that, and you'll have a chance to give us some feedback. We keep all the video transcripts, which are the big, huge, what we call MP4 files, but only for the purpose of editing the audio and the written transcripts. As soon as that's done, we get rid of them, so this will not be something, the visual part of this, that goes into the library, nor will you get a copy of it. That's mostly a question of personal security.

KG: I understand.

PC: They're a little more iffy than the other types of records, and we don't really need them for what we're doing. What we really need is the transcripts, and that's what we'll get eventually out of this. Okay, then.

KG: Well, I hope you got something. [laughter]

PC: I got a lot. It was fascinating, absolutely fascinating. Thank you very much for agreeing to do this.

KG: No, well, thank you. I'm so lucky that I got to do this.

PC: I will be at the RAC sometime in the next month or so, and I'll see at least you and Madyson, who I now know, that are playing out on the court. So, great, take care.

KG: Thank you, really, thank you.

PC: Bye.

-----END OF INTERVIEW-----

Transcribed by Jessie Chen  
Edited by Paul Clemens  
Reviewed by Kathryn Tracy Rizzi  
Reviewed by Kristina Grkovic 11/7/2022