

Season 6, Episode 2: Reflections from a student leader

Host: ESF President Joanie Mahoney

Guest: Silas Cochran

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We were sitting around and hearing from students. This was going into finals week, and students had a lot of anxiety around not knowing where they were standing in their classes, whether or not that final would be the matter of them getting a B or an A, or if that final was a matter of them getting a D or an F.

But I think one of the most rewarding experiences for me personally was that kind of really gave me the reassurance that I was heading in the right direction with my career. Going into college, there's a lot of things that are presented to you. There's a lot of things that seem very overwhelming. But for that first semester, say yes to everything.

Joanie Mahoney: Hello, and welcome back to our regular listeners. If you're new here, welcome to Campus Conversations: The Podcast. I'm so glad you found us. I am Joanie Mahoney, and I have the honor and privilege of serving as president of SUNY Environmental Science and Forestry. This season, I'm speaking with the people working with and at ESF, who exemplify our mission to improve our world. Today's guest is ESF student and Mighty Oak Student Assembly President Silas Cochran. Thank you for joining me today, Silas. And I will just start out by saying until, what, 48 hours ago, you were the president of the student association?

Silas Cochran: It was about 48 hours ago. Yes. And now I've started my retirement. But thank you for having me. It's an honor to be on here, and it's definitely been an interesting transition from president back to being a normal student and figuring out life that comes after.

Joanie Mahoney: So do you ever really get to get away from it, or are they ringing your phone off the hook with questions about how MOSA works?

Silas Cochran: This new leadership team is definitely going to take off, and it's been amazing to see the transition and the just level of involvement that they're coming in with. So I think they're going to be off to the races really soon here. But I mean, I was just in the office, and I was cleaning up my belongings and packing them up. So it was just definitely saying goodbye to that. But I know always they'll welcome me back anytime I want, and they'll definitely be reaching out for questions, and they all have my phone number, so I'm sure.

- Joanie Mahoney:** It is bittersweet, I'm sure. I remember the end of college. It was a long time ago, but you just know that you're in for this enormous change, and it's exciting. And we'll get into your next plans, but let's just start a little bit earlier. So, you are a native New Yorker, grew up in Alfred, New York, right?
- Silas Cochran:** Yes. Yup. So I grew up in a small town, Alfred, New York, about three hours west of Syracuse. And I was actually homeschooled all throughout my middle school, high school, and then I came to ESF.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I have had the pleasure of being with you so many times, and I never heard that, that you were homeschooled. So you went to traditional elementary school?
- Silas Cochran:** I actually only went to traditional kindergarten. And then after that, I was homeschooled. So I have two older sisters at home, and they're four and six years older than me. So it was the three of us. And then as they went off to college, I started taking some college classes at the university, kind of double-dipping high school, college, and then I was able to come in here with some extra credits.
- Joanie Mahoney:** So you started your college experience already with credits in the bank?
- Silas Cochran:** Absolutely. And that knocked out a lot of my gen eds and kind of lightened my load.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And I think you have at least one parent that's involved in academia?
- Silas Cochran:** Yes. So my dad is a college professor at Alfred State teaching electrical engineering, and then my mom is a paramedic working for the county. So she's all over the place all the time.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And yet, they had this extraordinary amount of time to homeschool you and turn you into this wonderful human being. So that's impressive.
- Silas Cochran:** Thank you.
- Joanie Mahoney:** So what was it about your childhood that gave you an interest in the environment? Were you a kid that liked to play outside?
- Silas Cochran:** I was. I would definitely consider myself that kind of person. We grew up with about 80 acres of land around us, thankfully. So I spent a lot of time out in the woods, playing in the creeks, building forts as a kid. But I think what really pushed me to pursue the career that I'm heading down now is, we have some family that is from the West Coast. And since my dad's a college professor, we had the summers off. So we spent a lot of road trips back and forth the country

to Idaho and Colorado and California, and we would just take two months of the summer and drive the country.

Joanie Mahoney: Wow. What an experience. How lucky were you.

Silas Cochran: It was really awesome. And by doing that, we got to see a lot of national parks along the way and just saw the beauty of America, and I've been really wanting to continue to explore that and see what else there is to offer. But I kind of got exposed to the national parks and got bitten by that bug, and now I'm heading down that track again.

Joanie Mahoney: It is hard not to. I mean, if people don't experience it for themselves, you can't describe it, and you can't even appreciate it through photos. I remembered my husband and I taking our four sons to the Grand Canyon, and they were at an age where it was tough to impress them. Right? They were older teenagers.

And watching their faces as they walked up to the rim and just saw the Grand Canyon and just how massive it is and how beautiful it is, it was one of my favorite memories. We only were able to take our kids cross-country once, and I just have such fond memories. How lucky for you that you had the ability to spend your summers like that. So, how'd you find ESF?

Silas Cochran: So I was looking around for environmental schools. I didn't know where I really wanted to do yet. I was still trying to figure that out. But I had some friends on the swim team that were looking at Paul Smith's. And I visited Paul Smith's, and it's isolated. It's a beautiful campus up in the middle of the Adirondacks, but something didn't feel right.

And they had a decent outlook or course selection, but something about the campus, something about just the location of it, so far away from home, didn't really sit with me. And I was talking with one of my friends from Scouts, who is Peter Huber, who is a former Undergraduate Student Association president here, and he was like, "Hey, you should go check out ESF." And I was like, "What's ESF?"

And I looked into it, and you guys had the major and the courses that I was looking for, and it was in the middle of a city, which, obviously, I grew up in the country. So that was kind of a change I was looking for, but also had the escape to the Adirondacks with the Newcomb Campus and Cranberry Lake that I was like, "I can get best of both worlds here and still go to school in the city, but also have that smaller course sizes and not just be that mass of one student in a 400-person lecture hall."

- Joanie Mahoney:** And the way you describe it, I would repeat that for students who are interested, because that's true. But in addition to that, you get this small college vibe and all the benefits of this large university that's right across the street.
- Silas Cochran:** Yeah. And it's definitely kind of an interesting dynamic, because you want your own ESF identity, but then it's like, "Well, I do get all these benefits." I can walk into the Barnes Center and get access to all of that. And then, I mean, we've been fortunate. Through MOSA, we're building a relationship with the Syracuse student assembly over there. And it's been really awesome to see what we can do if you put the power of the two campuses together, what we can get accomplished.
- Joanie Mahoney:** So let's back up a little, because you said a couple things that are interesting. One is, you're on the swim team. So even though you were homeschooled, you had an affiliation with the local high school? Is that right?
- Silas Cochran:** Yeah. So, I swim on a club team. So it was with USA Swimming, and I was on the Genesee Valley Swim Team. And, I mean, anyone from Wellsville, Belmont area could join. So there was about, I think at max, 120-some kids on that swim team, and we would travel around different places across the state and go to swim meets.
- Joanie Mahoney:** So, again, with the best of both worlds, you were homeschooled, but at the same time, you had this social outlet as part of the swim team, and you mentioned Scouting.
- Silas Cochran:** Yes.
- Joanie Mahoney:** How old were you when you got involved in Scouting?
- Silas Cochran:** So I joined Scouts as a Cub Scout, so that would've been, I think, fourth or fifth grade joining in there. And I guess I am still involved in the Scouting organization, but I was really actively involved until I turned 21. And then I've kind of taken a step back, focused more on MOSA here, and kind of transitioning into wherever my life will take me next.
- Joanie Mahoney:** So did you earn the rank of Eagle Scout?
- Silas Cochran:** I did. So I'm an Eagle Scout, and I'm a Vigil Honor member as well within the Order of the Arrow, which is the highest honor level.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Wow, that's fantastic. And it's the one thing I used to tell people that you can do as a young person that, when you're 80, people are still going to be talking about, is that you earned that.

- Silas Cochran:** Exactly. That's one of those things that will always be on my résumé no matter how old I am.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And they've opened it up to women, so I'm happy to hear that.
- Silas Cochran:** Yes. Yes. No, that's been a really awesome change, from Boy Scouts of America to Scouts BSA now, and the way that the program has adapted to provide an opportunity for everyone.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Yeah. There was always a separate but equal.
- Silas Cochran:** Yeah.
- Joanie Mahoney:** But people were always talking about Eagle Scouts. You knew which presidents were Eagle Scouts and that kind of thing. So you were involved in Scouting. You were in swimming, and your family was part of the university world there and the county world there in Alfred. You made your way here. You were in the cohort that came to college during the pandemic pre-vaccine, right?
- Silas Cochran:** Yes. So that was started, I guess, in fall of 2020, and the pandemic started in March of that year. So we were definitely still figuring out what the world was and what it would look like. And I think that was before any vaccines rolled out to the masses.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Yes. They didn't come until the end of the year, beginning in January. I think I got my vaccine in February or something. So let me just back up. I guess, because you were homeschooled, it might not have been such an abrupt end for you. The students were told, in high schools across the state in middle of March, there's this virus, and we're all going to go home. And that was the end, abruptly, of their high school experience, but yours probably continued.
- Silas Cochran:** It definitely continued for a little bit. I was thankful. So on the swim team end, we had our championship swim meet actually the week before the world shut down. And we knew about it. It was on the West Coast. People were talking about it. And then I think about Thursday of that week, we got the email, and we're like, "All right. Everything's canceled. Nothing's happening anymore."
- But thankfully, I was able to finish off my senior year on the swim team. And then it really hit for me that the world was different when the summer camp I was planning on working for that summer completely shut down. And that was towards the end of April, I think, that they decided to make that call. And I was just trying to figure out what I was going to do for the summer, so I ended up working at a hardware store in town.

- Joanie Mahoney:** Everybody had their own experience, but my heart breaks for people that are your age, because you're at the very end of your childhood. To just have everything shut down on all of you and to start college so isolated, my heart really breaks for you. I'm curious what your experience was. Did you come here and live in Centen?
- Silas Cochran:** So I actually did not live in Centen. So my family owns a house not too far off campus. And so, I moved up here for my college time. But definitely, the isolation, and even knowing people in the dorms. The dorms shut down not too long into the semester, because there were some outbreaks on campus, and they had to restrict the access.
- So it was, coming to lab or coming to campus once or twice a week was my only time actually interacting with people in person. The rest of it was over Zoom. And, I mean, that definitely takes a toll on you and takes a toll on your mental health.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And the weekly testing. Weren't we making students test every week?
- Silas Cochran:** Yeah. Going to the Dome for those testings. I was in a game there a couple weeks ago when we were walking along that concourse, and we're just reminiscing of all the little black tents that were set up.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Yeah. We were there, too. Administration was there. Faculty was there. We were all being tested weekly. It seems like a blur now, doesn't it, looking back?
- Silas Cochran:** I know. Just blocking that part out. But it really made making friends and trying to figure out what campus life was and getting your routine down kind of challenging.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I would imagine.
- Silas Cochran:** And, I mean, I would say the actual college experience that people anticipated didn't really happen until the end of my sophomore year.
- Joanie Mahoney:** That's why my heart breaks for all of you, although I don't know anybody who's put together a college experience the way you did. So you certainly made lemonade out of that experience. Do you have roommates? How were you even able to meet people to live with?
- Silas Cochran:** Yeah. So I have one of my closest best friends, Alex, who has been living with me since sophomore year. We met in chemistry lab. We both have a Scouting background and quickly bonded over that, and then we both survived gen chem lab together. But he's been one of my roommates, and then I'm also living with another ESF student, also named Alex.

- Joanie Mahoney:** So did you spend your first year living alone?
- Silas Cochran:** I did.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Oh my goodness.
- Silas Cochran:** Yeah.
- Joanie Mahoney:** So coming to this new place, everything's closed down. You're in this house by yourself. It is really amazing, the resilience that you showed to flip all of that into being president of the student association and being as involved and impactful at ESF as you have been.
- Silas Cochran:** I'd definitely say, the outcome of that has made me a stronger person. But that year and a half, it's not the best time of my life for sure. And, I mean, I know the world, we had no idea what was going on, so it was kind of, "Well, I wanted to go to college." And I understand where my parents didn't want me to get sick or get COVID, because we still had no idea what this disease would do, and people were dying like crazy.
- So it was kind of that scare, but I was like, "I don't want to push college off for another year. I'd rather deal with it during the pandemic." And I'm like, "Okay. If I push it off another year, I would've had a normal college experience." But I think I'm glad that I'm here now and that we made it through to this point, and we're ready to move on.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And you're ready to launch. If you had another year of college in front of you, it might feel different.
- Silas Cochran:** It would just be prolonging everything.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I have a son who's the same class as you. He graduated high school in 2020, started college in the fall of 2020. And I have many times thought, "Should he have taken a gap year?" Because he moved into a dorm. His roommate never showed up. The lounges were all locked down. Classes were-
- Silas Cochran:** You couldn't do anything. Yeah.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Yeah. And I thought, "Oh, you kind of missed all that." But on the other hand, he too looks back, I think, and says the things he did that were different as a result of that were good. He became a student who traveled abroad, because he never found his people, because he never had that experience that first year where everybody bonds.

So that kind of freed him up, and he spent a couple semesters away from his home college, and I think that he looks back on really fondly and says, "I probably wouldn't have done that if it had been a traditional college experience." So I hope you have some of that same... It wasn't great living through it, but you guys really made the best of it.

Silas Cochran: And I think everyone was eager to come back that next year. And really, once we had the vaccine, once we kind of had that protocol figured out, it took some time to shape and figure out what the campus life was going to be again. But people were quick to make friends and jump off and kind of forget about the COVID years.

Joanie Mahoney: Forget the foretime. Yeah.

Silas Cochran: Yes.

Joanie Mahoney: So then what was your path into student government? How does somebody who came in the way you did get involved?

Silas Cochran: USA, at the time when I joined, was still meeting somewhat. There was about seven or eight people that would meet over Zoom, or honestly, looking back, I don't even know what we were really talking about those days, but we were just trying to figure out what the heck was going on and try to make-

Joanie Mahoney: How did you even join?

Silas Cochran: So Peter, who I mentioned, kind of pointed me in the right direction. I needed him for a committee in Scouts. I was the section chief at the time, and I was like, "Hey, Peter, can you join this committee for me? I need some support over here." And he was like, "Yeah, I'll do that, but I'm also president of USA, and I heard that you just got that offer letter. So when you come to ESF, you're going to be one of my senators." And I was like, "Fine." And I started attending those meetings.

Joanie Mahoney: That was a gift, really, from him to get you involved like that.

Silas Cochran: Yeah. No, and to get me jump-started into that. I don't know if I would've found that on my own. I don't think I probably would've, because I was looking to kind of... I had spent a lot of time with Scouts as section chief, running meetings, kind of being involved in that kind of way. So I was thinking about taking my college experience in a slightly different direction, but I am definitely glad that he encouraged me to join and kind of forced me into it. But looking back, I don't know what else I would've done.

- Joanie Mahoney:** I remember coming here as a new employee and people telling me, "Oh, she's president of USA." And I was like, "I don't think so. We have a president." But the Undergraduate Student Association was referred to as USA.
- Silas Cochran:** USA. Yes.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Yeah. And then you were part of that whole branding change.
- Silas Cochran:** Yes. So, I mean, just as you said, that confusion of USA and-
- Joanie Mahoney:** The United States of America.
- Silas Cochran:** ... the United States of America. There is just a lot of confusion around that. But also, it didn't really feel like our identity anymore. It was just like, "Oh, it's really cool to put on the résumé that, 'Oh, I'm the president of the United States of America.'" So we were looking at that, and we're like, "All right. We need to restructure." USA has some baggage that's kind of weighing it down and just some internal strife that we wanted to kind of get away from and break free of, and we're like, "What can we do to kind of make this look like a new thing so we can launch it?"
- And we decided on the Mighty Oak Student Assembly with the help of the communication office. And we launched that with a major restructuring of our executive board and a lot of our positions, and we're like, "All right. We got new branding. We have a new structure. We're going to launch this, but then how do we make a name for ourselves? What's our first big move to let everyone know that, 'Hey, we're back?'"
- And I guess at the very beginning of my presidency, there is a major concern of mental health going around on campus. And this was as we were emerging from the pandemic, but also, at that time, no one had midterm grades. And we had a mental health panel, and I believe you were there with a lot of-
- Joanie Mahoney:** It was in May.
- Silas Cochran:** ... our other counseling staff and a lot of other support staff. And we were sitting around and just hearing from students. This was going into finals week, and students had a lot of anxiety around not knowing where they were standing in their classes, whether or not that final would be the matter of them getting a B or an A, or if that final was a matter of them getting a D or an F.
- Joanie Mahoney:** That was very important to me to be there, the number of students that talked about the anxiety from having no idea where they stood academically in a given class at any moment in time. There were no grades that some students had received. So you jumped in on that?

- Silas Cochran:** Yeah. And we saw that, and, I mean, we were shocked there as well. We were like, "This is..." I mean, just having that standing, knowing if you're getting that A or B is a big difference to a lot of people. And we decided, "All right. This is going to be that first big push that we make." I hadn't passed resolution during my time here, so we were like, "All right. This is going to be at least my first resolution." And then to really make that into effect, we had to go through Academic Governance and actually create a policy that's now embedded in ESF as a policy, and now we have midterm grades-
- Joanie Mahoney:** And I remember your presentation-
- Silas Cochran:** ... forever.
- Joanie Mahoney:** ... to Academic Governance and that some faculty stood up and pushed back a little bit on you.
- Silas Cochran:** It's definitely a little bit more work for them. Our goal was not to make more work for anyone, but at the same time, we want to know where our class standing is.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And I think that is important in the best of times, but when you put it in the context of what students were dealing with coming out of this pandemic and all the mental health issues that were already bubbling up, when you added the uncertainty of how you're doing and the pressure that these finals were placing on people, it's even more important.
- And I don't want to go past that, because I'm really interested in your perspective on the mental health crisis that we've had. Was there a difference for you pre- and post-pandemic? Was it social media exacerbating it? Was it all of the above? What were you feeling about what was happening with this explosion of mental health issues?
- Silas Cochran:** Yeah. I think it's a combination of a lot of things, and the pandemic brought a lot of that to the head. So first of all, I think the isolation of just people kind of being locked up, not really having that social interaction, it really changed the entire dynamic of being a human being. I mean, you go out to the park or you go out to the Quad, and there's people sitting around there. You walk into class, and it's filled with people, and your class was these little digital people on a Zoom screen.
- So I think for a lot of my generation, it made that formative development years of those end-of-high-school, early college years where we had a shift from talking to your friends in class to that shift to social media. And, I mean, we already know the downsides of social media, but people were trying to adapt and figure out new things.

So TikTok came alive. A lot of other social media apps really kind of blew up in that time. But for me personally, it was that isolation. And also just, we're trying to figure out at this age who we are and really what direction we're going to be taking the rest of our lives, and not having that solid structure and still having that uncertainty from even your advisors of, "Oh, you just don't have an advisor's office that you would walk into." You would have to go set up an email appointment and hop on Zoom with them. And some of those just little changes made it more difficult to have those conversations and figure out your identity as a person.

Joanie Mahoney: And for a lot of people, that age that you were-

Silas Cochran: So formative.

Joanie Mahoney: ... so formative. But also, friends are such an important part of that time in your life, and it's when you start to move away from your family a little bit and find your own people. And you guys, even if you were mitigating it with Zoom, we did some of those Zoom conversations with our friend groups. It was so strange. And it's not just that it's isolating, but there's also this clock ticking. These are supposed to be the years that I'm doing these things-

Silas Cochran: Absolutely.

Joanie Mahoney: ... and that time is going by, and I'm not doing them.

Silas Cochran: And the number of things that got canceled that you spend-

Joanie Mahoney: Aw, it was heartbreaking.

Silas Cochran: ... years looking forward to it, and you're like, "Oh, yeah. I'm going to go on this trip," or "I'm going to go to this national conference." And then one thing's canceled, and then the next week, something else is canceled. And then just, you start to feel that kind of build on you of like, "Oh, well, what do I have to look forward to anymore?" It's just, "Okay. Wake up, go to Zoom, go back to bed. Wake up, class, go back to bed."

Joanie Mahoney: And you're Zooming with people you've never really met.

Silas Cochran: I had no idea who these people were. I mean, yeah, some of them you met during our orientation that was-

Joanie Mahoney: Abbreviated.

- Silas Cochran:** ... abbreviated. And it's like, okay, you follow them on Instagram. You see their face on Zoom. But there was a lot of days where it was, wake up, hop on Zoom for an hour, go back to bed, and rinse and repeat.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Ugh, and I can't imagine what the effect on mental health that that life must have been.
- Silas Cochran:** Mm-hmm. And it's like, yeah, you kind of lose that. You have no events to go to. You have nothing to be like, "Oh, I'm going to this dinner at the end of the week," or "I'm going to this concert." They all got canceled. There is nothing to do.
- Joanie Mahoney:** So how do you think the college did? And now that you're on your way out, you can be brutally honest, right? But how do you think the college did in meeting students where they were?
- Silas Cochran:** I think it was, on everyone's perspective, a lot of those unknowns. So obviously, the safety of making sure that we didn't have another major outbreak was pivotal. And, I mean, this was a challenging time for sure. But I mean, our counseling office has gone through a number of changes throughout the years, and I think it's taken a while to catch up to where we need to be.
- But from what I've been hearing and what I've been seeing nowadays, is I think we are in the right direction of having the resources available with the new structure in the counseling office, as well as we have now TimelyCare, which has launched to kind of alleviate some of the pressure from those staff. So I think with the combination of that, we're seeing those resources being available. But there was just an overwhelming burden on our counseling staff for a year or so, and it was really hard for them to be able to kind of catch up and-
- Joanie Mahoney:** People were desperate for someone to talk to.
- Silas Cochran:** Exactly. And just that too of, "Okay. You didn't have that chance to form that close friend where you're like, 'Oh, I have this issue. Let me go talk to my friend.'" Your friends that you know are 200 miles away, 400 miles away across the country. And yeah, you could pick up the phone, but it's different than having that face-to-face. So they were grasping for that support from the counseling office and just getting overburdened.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I don't want to diminish either what you were doing by setting Engage up and making it easier for people to be involved, and to know what was happening on campus. And you really revamped MOSA, but you also brought a lot of that socializing back to the student body.

Silas Cochran: Yes. And the really big push with the rebrand as well was, "Let's get that student life, that student engagement back." Clubs kind of dissipated. Some of them were still meeting on Zoom, but there was also a lot of lost transitional knowledge from officers that were graduating and moving on. And normally, you have a year or so of overlap to be like, "Hey, this is how we run events and whatnot." And we kind of had that generational gap because of the isolation.

So it was really giving those clubs the support that they needed to come back to life and to get their events up and running again. But then, yes, then Engage platform, as you mentioned, was really the all-encompassing campus internal website that clubs could put their events on. And it was a one centralized calendar that I could just go to and be like, "Oh, these are the 10 events that are happening today."

And then you can just pick and choose. You can join organizations right on there. And we're now to a point where it's actually affecting clubs' budgets whether or not they're inputting information on Engage. We're tracking pretty much every aspect of the controlled, I guess, as we can say, student experience on there.

Joanie Mahoney: It's really amazing what you have done in your time here. And I don't know how you had time to do all that, because-

Silas Cochran: I don't know that I had time either.

Joanie Mahoney: ... all of this is a side thing to what is a pretty rigorous academic program too. So we haven't even talked about that. What was your major here while you were at ESF?

Silas Cochran: Yes. So I'm currently, I haven't graduated yet, studying environmental education and interpretation. So I came into ESF. I started as a policy and law kind of concentration within the studies department after my first semester, as I mentioned, the number of events and stuff that have gotten canceled.

To kind of add to that, I also lost a major national election over that winter break in my freshman year. And I came back from that, and I was like, "All right. Maybe that whole political career that I was planning isn't quite for me." I was planning on using that election to gain a lot of connections to senators and local politicians that I would've been regularly meeting with. And I kind of lost that direction, that momentum.

Joanie Mahoney: That was the Order of the Arrow that you talked about?

Silas Cochran: That was the Order of the Arrow. Yes. And I-

Joanie Mahoney: Silas, I want to tell you something while you take a breath. I ran for mayor of the city of Syracuse and lost, and I know that feeling of the next day like, "Oh, wait. That was my plan." Right? You already have parlayed that into a new direction that seems like a perfect fit for you. But I would also say, you kind of have to get back at it.

And I hope you have the impression I do that never have I had an experience in my life that has taught me more about myself and that I've learned more from than putting myself in a situation and then not getting the prize at the end. I consider that now, looking back, a real gift, because I learned so much going through that, and it affected the direction I took, a lot of it, better.

Silas Cochran: 100%.

Joanie Mahoney: Okay, good.

Silas Cochran: Yeah. I mean, I'm best friends with the person I lost to, Garrett. And it was kind of that, you go into the election room. You're friends before. You're either friends or enemies afterwards, and I'm glad that we're still friends at the other end.

Joanie Mahoney: I love that. I love that.

Silas Cochran: But at the same time, yeah, I mean, it definitely sucked. I mean, I went back up to my hotel room after that and bawled my eyes out, and then I was like, "All right. You got to pick up and keep going." But it took me a few weeks to kind of figure out what direction I was going to take it, but it was also that really humbling experience of not getting something you thought you had a shot at getting.

Joanie Mahoney: And I will say, knowing you the way I do, my guess is, you didn't have a lot of those experiences growing up, because you're so good that you probably got and earned everything that you wanted along the way. You were already an Eagle Scout by then, right?

Silas Cochran: That was my first election that I lost. Yeah.

Joanie Mahoney: Yeah. Exactly. I know that feeling, and I will also say I'm friends with the person that beat me. So we have a lot in common.

Silas Cochran: Yes. And honestly, looking back, I am glad that I didn't get that position, because-

Joanie Mahoney: Me, too.

- Silas Cochran:** ... I mean, I don't know... It probably would've ended up in the same direction that I am going now eventually, but I think it would've taken me a lot longer to figure out that, "Wait a minute. I'm not just doing this thing because I know I'm good at it. I'm actually doing something that I know I care about. And actually, I'm going in that path now of something that I care about versus something I'm just good at."
- Joanie Mahoney:** So you did learn a lot about yourself-
- Silas Cochran:** Yes.
- Joanie Mahoney:** ... going through that process. And, I mean, what you have done to put yourself in the position going forward. So you will be graduating in a couple weeks.
- Silas Cochran:** I will be graduating May.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And you already have a job.
- Silas Cochran:** Yup.
- Joanie Mahoney:** So let's tell people about your internship first. How'd you get the internship that you got that's led you to this career?
- Silas Cochran:** I was talking with my advisor, and I was like, "I think I want to go into the direction of Park Service." And I didn't really have a foothold into that organization yet. I had an internship at Green Lakes. I had a background working with summer camps, but I didn't have anything really with the National Park Service. So she pointed me in the direction of friends programs, which are basically nonprofit partnerships to the national parks.
- Joanie Mahoney:** To support the parks?
- Silas Cochran:** Yeah. And a lot of the larger parks have some sort of organization that's kind of the bank behind them that you can donate to. And then all of a sudden, they make money appear in really powerful groups that are supporting these places that we love. So she pointed me in the direction of friends programs, and then I started looking around, and I found the Summit Steward program in Acadia National Park.
- And I applied there. I threw my hat in the ring. And a couple weeks later, I got a phone call. And a few interviews later, I was a summit steward. And basically, as a summit steward, our job was to go out there on the trails and interact with visitors. We would tell them about the natural history and cultural history of the park. But also, our biggest job was teaching about the principles of Leave No

Trace, ensuring that people are still enjoying themselves, but also understand importance of staying on the trail and making sure that you're not...

I mean, the basic things like littering, but I mean, the ways that you can avoid widening the trail when there's this puddle, and the reasons that you don't want to just pick up that pretty rock off the ground because it looks cool, and that has a purpose and is holding something in place. So the education about that, but I think one of the most rewarding experiences for me personally was that kind of really gave me the reassurance that I was heading in the right direction with my career.

Joanie Mahoney: Because you loved it?

Silas Cochran: It was a really awesome experience.

Joanie Mahoney: That's great. So I think an interesting part of your story that you've heard me repeat a few times is this van that you bought that was your home while you were in Acadia. Is that right?

Silas Cochran: Yes. So that van has a sad story. So I did live out of a van over that summer, and it was definitely an interesting experience.

Joanie Mahoney: Where'd you park this van?

Silas Cochran: Yeah. So it was parked, just some guy's random lot in the middle of Maine. Looking back, it was kind of a sketchy situation, where I paid him cash every month, and I just hung out there. Yeah. I don't even know if his name was his real name. There was, one day, the state trooper showed up and knocked on my van, and he was like, "Hey, do you know David someone?" And I'm like, "No." And he had a stack of arrest warrants for him, and I'm like, "Uh..." And I texted the guy I was living at. He was like, "Oh, don't worry. That guy hasn't lived here in a very long time."

Joanie Mahoney: And you think it was probably him, right?

Silas Cochran: I have no idea.

Joanie Mahoney: Who knows?

Silas Cochran: And I was just like, "All right. Well..." But I'd never seen the state troopers up there, because there's obviously the park rangers. There's a local town police, but it's a rare occurrence when state troopers come that far up.

Joanie Mahoney: Were you paid for this internship with the Summit Stewards?

- Silas Cochran:** Yes, thankfully. Otherwise, I wouldn't have been able to afford it.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Yeah. Good. I'm glad to hear that.
- Silas Cochran:** Yup. It was a paid internship with them. And so, Friends of Acadia has multiple different areas. They have summit stewards, which there was six of us, and then there was recreation technicians, and they focus on a lot of research gathering and data gathering that then they share with partners like the Schoodic Institute.
- And then there's also the stewardship crew, and they are kind of responsible for managing a lot of the volunteers that come into the park. And they have volunteer days. They go out and do trail work. So Friends of Acadia is a big organization that brings in a lot of money for the parks, but also has these three great opportunities for college-age students or even late high school students that are looking to get involved.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And then how did you parlay that internship into a job offer?
- Silas Cochran:** Being a summit steward, one of the other things that we were kind of responsible for was helping out with search and rescue. If we happen to be in the vicinity, we got to tag along and go up for that. So I had a few opportunities to actually... I mean, I saw my first bone sticking out of a body this past summer. Someone came up to me with a broken finger.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Oh, I'm sorry.
- Silas Cochran:** It was really cool.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Oh. I'm not sure that that would've been my reaction, but I'm glad you did okay with it.
- Silas Cochran:** Definitely not in the moment. But looking back, it was really fun. And so, we worked with the park rangers and worked with the search-and-rescue teams there. And in doing so, I, I guess, made a good enough impression with some of them. And when I applied to be a general ranger for this coming up season, I got the phone call, and Tim was like, "Hey, you want to come work for me?" And I'm like, "Yes, sir."
- Joanie Mahoney:** So this person was part of those search and rescue, but worked for the national park-
- Silas Cochran:** Yes. He worked for the National Park Service.
- Joanie Mahoney:** ... not the friends group?

- Silas Cochran:** But he did some of our training, and we worked with them on a few different occasions. And so, I was able to leverage that summit steward position, make an impression, and then had the opportunity to now apply for a National Park Service position in Acadia, and I'll be there until November.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Which is probably the dream job of so many students here at ESF. And you're headed to Acadia when?
- Silas Cochran:** So I start May 19th.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Oh my goodness. You're not taking much time between-
- Silas Cochran:** No.
- Joanie Mahoney:** ... graduation and starting. Have you set up a place to live up there and everything?
- Silas Cochran:** So I'll be in park housing, so not the van. So that van, unfortunately, is sitting in a junkyard. I had a car accident.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Oh, I'm glad you weren't hurt.
- Silas Cochran:** No one was hurt in it, but it was kind of unfortunate. So those vans are unibodied. And once they get some damage, the frame's bent, the whole thing's gone. But it served its purpose for its time. I don't know what the future holds for me in that. But again, that's one of those experiences where it's like, I learned a lot from it. And if the opportunity presents itself again, I might go down that road again. But just past week, I bought myself my first car.
- Joanie Mahoney:** What an exciting time in your life. That's what I mean it's bittersweet, because you have just this huge life here at ESF. This is an extension of your family. You have such good friends here. You're so well-regarded here and so involved in everything. And to be knowing that that time is ending is one part, and then knowing, "I'm buying my first car. I've got housing. I'm headed to Acadia. I mean, I'm done with school. I'm off to the next phase of my life." That's so exciting.
- And I think the way you sort of dull the double-edged part of it is to just make sure that you're a big part of ESF going forward. I hope that you will be one of the most active alumni and that you'll come back for events, and I hope you'll encourage your friends to do that.
- Silas Cochran:** Yeah. So I'm definitely planning on joining the Alumni Association. And yeah, I have no idea what the future holds for me, but I definitely plan on coming back and seeing ESF continuing to pursue its mission. And I'm really excited to see,

especially where MOSA is going to be in the next 10 years, and be able to have a walk back on campus. And hopefully, it's still a thriving organization, and people really talk to you about it.

Joanie Mahoney:

You have left it so much better than you found it, and that is just an amazing feat given what was happening, as you said, in the world. But I have enjoyed working with you, because you're a strong advocate for students. You noticed that the lack of a midterm grade was affecting the mental health of your fellow students, and you jumped in and got involved, but you had a way about you that led to success.

You're not a real flamethrower. You're a logical, "This makes sense. I will talk to all the people." You put the time in. You put the structure in place, followed the procedures, and then were successful. And I've seen that time and time again. And with this past year on campus, with some of the conflict that's happening all over the world, you had some really serious issues that you were dealing with, but you never lost your cool. You showed a lot of leadership in whatever the situation was that was thrown your way.

And I am grateful for that, because it can go very differently if you don't have a good working relationship with the person that's representing the students, which is the reason I'm here, is for the students. So I appreciate the working relationship we've had. I don't know if it was Scout training. I don't know what you would chalk up your leadership capabilities to.

Silas Cochran:

I spent some time in the Order of the Arrow with the National Leadership Seminar, and I staffed in a number of those. So having that background and that tooling definitely has helped. But I mean, as you just said, at the end of the day, everyone is here for the students.

And kind of understanding that and realizing that, that everyone's here for the same common mission, and then trying to figure out how to work with them and how to compromise to be able to achieve those goals was something that I quickly discovered would be very beneficial. And forming those personal relationships and coming at them with solutions in mind rather than, "Hey, this is a problem..."

Joanie Mahoney:

"Go fix it."

Silas Cochran:

"... and you need to fix it," versus like, "Hey, this is a problem. Let's see how we can work together to make this happen." And also just building those personal relationships at first and being open and honest with the people, and being like, "Hey, this is the position that I'm in, and this is how it's going to be affecting you, so let's figure out how to solve it."

- Joanie Mahoney:** Right. And when you're doing the right thing, you listen to the students, you heard what they needed, and then you were pursuing a solution. And since you were on the right side, it just makes those conversations that much easier. So when I go to Acadia, will I be seeing you in the booth there in the beginning? Will you be out on the trails?
- Silas Cochran:** So I'll be out on the trails or driving around making sure people are not parking in illegal parking spots. So hopefully, you don't get a parking ticket from me.
- Joanie Mahoney:** I will be on the lookout. But I will say, last time I was in Acadia, I embarrassingly drove to the top of Cadillac Mountain. I need to walk, right? I need to walk up?
- Silas Cochran:** So depending on the time of the year, you can get a permit and drive to the top of it. So it is one of the-
- Joanie Mahoney:** I did do that, but why didn't I walk?
- Silas Cochran:** So there are a few trails, but I mean, it's about a mile and a half up on the North Face Trail. And especially if you're going up for sunset, then you're walking down in the dark, and that's not as safe. So yeah, we encourage people to get the reservation. And then depending on when you get that reservation, system's new as of two years ago, I think.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And when we were up there, we were looking at the sunset, and there were a lot of people doing that. So yeah, it would've been-
- Silas Cochran:** Yeah. That probably was pre-reservation system, and it was just a free-for-all at that point.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Yeah. I love how better used the national parks are, but it's so noticeable. We try to hit parks whenever we can. And it used to be that you could be in part of the park and not see anyone, but that is not the case anymore. I mean, you really can't even walk at your own pace. You're almost walking in line if you're there in June or July.
- Silas Cochran:** Yeah. And, I mean, that visitor use management is a huge thing that the park services are really looking at, especially even post-pandemic. I mean, we've-
- Joanie Mahoney:** Everybody wanted to be outdoors.
- Silas Cochran:** Exactly. We've noticed huge increases in visitation across the board in a lot of outdoor recreation spaces. I mean, Green Lakes doubled its... And it's continued to double it since the pandemic. And people are kind of... They had the opportunity to discover that outdoor space. And once they were like, "Wait. We have these beautiful spots in our backyard?" they're continuing to come back.

- Joanie Mahoney:** And that, I hope, bodes well for the whole world, because that's what we do here, is to-
- Silas Cochran:** Exactly.
- Joanie Mahoney:** ... make sure people appreciate the environment, understand how fragile it is, how it's all connected, and we just need to appreciate it and care for it. And if everybody's now discovering the great outdoors, I think that bodes well for the planet.
- Silas Cochran:** It really does. And, I mean, for me personally, it's kind of sparking that interest in someone and sparking that curiosity for them to continue to want to learn more about the natural world or continue to explore it. And if they care about it and want to learn more, then they're going to be more receptive to actually realizing that we need to make a change.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Leave no trace?
- Silas Cochran:** Leave no trace. Just following those principles and incorporating them into your daily lives. And it's the little things that sometimes you don't even realize the actions that you're taking. But I mean, it's also like, the global level of changing your habits of consumerism are really the directions that we need to start shifting as a society.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And I think young people are leading the way on that. For the last few years, I've been expecting zipper repair shops and shoe repair shops, things that I remember from my childhood that went away when we all got fast fashion and this throwaway culture. Right? But I think young people are a lot more careful, and they're not wasting things, and they're fixing things, and they're not consuming as much. And that's good too, but we need more people doing more of it.
- Silas Cochran:** It's going to be an interesting shift, but I think this new generation, and it's going to be really cool to see how they get involved with politics. And I know some of the younger senators that are starting to pop up as they begin to get a voice, how that generation's going to shift.
- Joanie Mahoney:** It's going to be better.
- Silas Cochran:** I hope so.
- Joanie Mahoney:** It's going to be better. And I hope that I have the opportunity at some point to pull the lever for Silas Cochran. But before I let you go, I want to just ask you for one minute, if you can imagine going back, and imagine right now you were just finishing up your high school experience, your swim team, your Scouting, and

you're on the verge of starting as an ESF student. What advice would you give to the Silas that's headed into ESF right now?

Silas Cochran: I think it would be to explore every opportunity. Going into college, there's a lot of things that are presented to you. There's a lot of things that seem very overwhelming. But for that first semester, say yes to everything. Check out what opportunities are. Check out what clubs are. See what researchers to get involved with. Go to those speakers that you might not think you care about. Go to that event you might not think you care about.

Then after that first semester, start picking and choosing. But open your door to all those possibilities, and open your door to all those connections, because it is much easier to open a door once it's propped than it is to go pounding on a locked door once you turned your back on it.

Joanie Mahoney: That is such good advice, and I hope that maybe some of the accepted students that are picking ESF will find their way. We will push this podcast out to some of those new students, and I think that's really good advice, is just say yes to everything. That first semester, just do everything you can do.

Silas Cochran: Yup. And see what opportunities there are for you. And, I mean, after that first semester, after that first year, then you can start saying no. And then learning how to say no is a valuable skill, but-

Joanie Mahoney: But you've made the connections.

Silas Cochran: ... once you've made the connections-

Joanie Mahoney: You've met people you've experienced on some level.

Silas Cochran: It's so much easier to kind of go back to that professor when you went to their talk, and they're like, "Oh, yeah. We have research opportunities that you want to check out." And if you go make that connection with them right then and there, then next year, when you're looking for an internship, it's much easier to go back to that professor and be like, "Hey, I heard you talk about this research. I want to get involved."

Joanie Mahoney: That's really good advice. And I love how you found your internship. Right? You worked with your advisor. They told you about these friends groups that support the national parks, and kind of made your way into your dream job. How many people start right out of college, the week after you graduate, being an employee of the national parks? Not very many.

- Silas Cochran:** Definitely very excited and grateful for the opportunity. And it still allows me to travel and explore. I'll be a seasonal employee for a few summers. So come November, I have no idea what I'm doing.
- Joanie Mahoney:** Save your money, Silas.
- Silas Cochran:** Yeah. So save that money and go travel. Do something like that. But I mean, the world's an open book now, and I can just start coloring in it and exploring the country.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And I am so happy for you. And I heard you say that you're grateful for this opportunity, but you have earned it. You really put yourself in this position with a lot of work and dedication and goodwill. I mean, people interact with you, and it's better for them, because you're a solution finder, and you're willing to roll up your sleeves and do the work. And so, that's the kind of person that people want to hire. So you've put yourself in this position.
- Silas Cochran:** Thank you. Yeah. It's definitely that principle of servant leadership that I really value and put at the center of everything that I do. And some days, it's putting the needs of the common good before yourself and seeing that you're part of a bigger picture. And if you can work your way into that and make a change at the larger level, then it's going to ultimately affect you and be a positive change for you as well.
- Joanie Mahoney:** And if somebody with that attitude would run for office, we would all be better off. So I wish you all the best. I will see you over the course of the next couple weeks as we celebrate your graduation, and then we'll all look for you up in Acadia.
- Silas Cochran:** Awesome. Well, thank you very much for having me on. It's been a pleasure, and it's been a pleasure working with you for the past few years as well. And definitely grateful to have you on our side as we've worked on a lot of these projects, but-
- Joanie Mahoney:** Thank you, Silas. I feel the same way about you. You have made me a better president, so thank you very much.
- Silas Cochran:** Absolutely. All right. Well, enjoy the rest of your day.
- Joanie Mahoney:** You too.