

Angel Rodriguez: Okay so I should go ahead and get started. Can you share a little bit about yourself?

Deonttye Nelson: Well, hi my name's Deonttye Nelson, I go by Diane, I'm originally from Charlotte North Carolina, I work two part-time jobs. I work at a hotel and I also work at Harris Teeter. In my spare time I like to hangout with my family and do family things, and I like to hangout with my friends, my trash friends, and do fun stuff with them, and most of the time I'm at school. So that's pretty much about me, I'm pretty much a really chilled person, there's not really much to me, I like to read and watch TV and just do adult things. That's pretty much it.

Angel Rodriguez: Did you attend any other schools before coming to UNC Charlotte?

Deonttye Nelson: As far as on a college level? Yes. I attended Central Piedmont Community College. I went there for almost a year. I went there for almost a year. I got my GED certificate from there, and then I started classes, college level classes. I only took one class and then I was like, I have to transfer to a university at this point. So I was there for about a year.

Angel Rodriguez: Okay. What did you do before coming to school?

Deonttye Nelson: I worked full time at an insurance company, a commercial insurance company, excuse me. I worked full time there before I came here and then it was just one day I had the epiphany when I was sitting there, like, I don't want to do this for the rest of my life and I want to go to school, I've always been passionate about an education. I always thought that it was important, and my grandmother was the really matriarch that always encouraged me like, "Hey, you need to go to school, you need to do this."

So after she passed I had to work a lot to pay bills or whatever until adult. But yeah, so from there I was just like, you know what, I have to make a change now, I'm only getting older so I need to go ahead and just do it. So I applied and I got in.

Angel Rodriguez: Okay, nice. How old are you now?

Deonttye Nelson: I'm actually 28.

Angel Rodriguez: 28 nice. So you came here when you were 24?

Deonttye Nelson: No, I'm actually graduating early. I'm graduating a semester early so I came when I was 25.

Angel Rodriguez: Okay, cool. That's awesome. Are you like a first generation college student or?

Deonttye Nelson: I am, I would say first generation, second generation, third generation, fourth generation. And it was so funny that you're saying that because me and my brother had this conversation on Sunday. We were just chilling and having some drinks or whatever. And he was like, "Yo, I can't believe you're literally about to graduate in December." He's like, "This is amazing," and he's like, "Nobody in our family was ever." Except for my cousin. He's a distant cousin though. He has a degree, but he's like, "Nobody in our family under our grandmother has a degree." Let alone some of them don't even have high school diplomas. I would say majority don't even have high school diplomas. So for me to actually get a degree it's surreal for a lot of them, like you really have it.

So yeah, especially coming from my demographic, I was coming from a fatherless home, my mom was struggling with drugs and things like that. So statistically I'm not supposed to be in college, I'm supposed to be either probably in prison or in jail or something like that. But I'm thankful for people that were in my life that were like, "Hey, you don't have to be where you come from, you definitely can make those changes in your life so that way that you can progress and be something." So I'm grateful for those people. It was only a couple but I'm grateful for those people that definitely encouraged me to do that.

Angel Rodriguez: That's awesome that you overcame all that. What did you enjoy the most about your time here?

Deonttye Nelson: I enjoyed. I don't know, I'd probably say I enjoyed, it was a couple of things. I enjoyed just meeting new people and the events that would happen on campus, the fraternity events and things like that, that was really cool. And just being interactive with people and the professors. I've always had great professors. I never had the professor like you may get one that's just like, "I can't stand him." I was fortunate enough to not have one, so I'm pretty sure that that's why I enjoyed interaction with professors, and that's pretty much it.

Angel Rodriguez: That's awesome.

Deonttye Nelson: Most I've enjoyed.

Angel Rodriguez: Are you in a fraternity now or?

Deonttye Nelson: No, I'm not in a fraternity. No I am not. I am graduating without being in a fraternity.

Angel Rodriguez: Yeah, you probably, I heard they go crazy over there?

Deonttye Nelson: I've heard too, most of my friends are in fraternities so they scare me.

Angel Rodriguez: What kept you motivated to your senior year?

Deonttye Nelson: What kept me motivated my senior year? I don't want to be repetitive, but I feel like my family. I have a, that's in my family, it was actually like my second mom, she's actually ill right now and it's progressing and so as we were conversing, I actually talked to her today and she's like, "Yeah, I'm going to have to have something serious right after thanksgiving." So I'm like, "Oh, okay, well, you think you could wait until December 15th?" And she's like, "No, I really can't." So I'm like, "Okay." So that's probably what kept me motivated because even this past summer, I actually took I think five or six classes over the summer. And then I have six classes now, so I definitely was just on the ball, "Hey, I want to do this, I want my mom to see me actually do something great with my life, something that she always wanted for me as well."

So that's what kind of kept me motivated, it's just a family thing and then my nieces and nephews, I want them to see something great from a family member other than bad things. So that's pretty much what kept me motivated. It's just that in my mindset it's like, "I'm doing this for my family, they have to see this." And that's the thing that's kind of what in my mind is like, "I'm doing it for me, but it's more so I'm not doing it for me, if that makes sense. So if was more I'm doing it for the generation that's behind me," so I feel like it's important for them to see something. I mean, yeah, I went to college because I wanted to be educated or whatnot. I wanted to get that paper, but I more so wanted the younger

generation to see what you can accomplish if you stick to the plan, and it's not about where you're coming from, it's actually where you're going.

And just the networking that I've had is motivation as well because I've met so many people from so many. Well I'm actually a history major so I've met so many people from different background, from business and from Bank of America, from everywhere. And they all are really receptive and especially in college, I would say the most important thing about it is the more hands you shake, the better off you will be. Pretty much, honestly, I've learned that the more hands you shake, the better off you'll be. So yeah, that's what keeps motivated as well it's that I want to get it those connections and network and get those great opportunities because you never know where they're going to come from. You never know who you're shaking hands with.

Angel Rodriguez: That's crazy. I'm sorry to hear about your aunt by the way.

Deonttye Nelson: No, no, no, no. It's okay. She'll be fine. It'll be okay.

Angel Rodriguez: Well, I'm sorry, did you want-

Deonttye Nelson: I'm going to ask you a few questions later. I'm the ne being questioned here. I'm the one being grilled. And I was going to ask you. So why do you think you need a degree?

Angel Rodriguez: Mostly because I want to succeed in life. My mom and my grandmother have always told me that if you don't have a degree in the United States, you're not really succeeding. I mean nowadays a degree is a high school diploma, but to them-

Deonttye Nelson: Honestly?

Angel Rodriguez: Yeah, like you, you're trying to show your past generation that you can do it. So I got the opportunity to actually do it thanks to the military.

Deonttye Nelson: Okay. Cool. What branch?

Angel Rodriguez: I was in the Marine Corps.

Deonttye Nelson: Okay. Cool.

Angel Rodriguez: I literally just got out September 15th and I came straight over-

Deonttye Nelson: That is so cool. Not to cut you off but my grandfather was in the marines and he used to always tell me whatever you do, do it with speed and intensity, and I do everything slow now just because of that. Just because of that-

Angel Rodriguez: You got too tired thinking about it?

Deonttye Nelson: Exactly, I'm not doing anything fast I'm going slow. Go on I'm sorry.

Angel Rodriguez: Oh no, you're good. But no that's why I think you need a degree nowadays. You just need to I guess just keep moving if you're not doing anything. I mean I guess you can get experience through it, but I feel like

getting, like you said connections and network and you're not gonna get that anywhere else. You need to come to school and actually make the connections.

Deonttye Nelson: So what do you plan to do with your degree?

Angel Rodriguez: I want to be a firefighter.

Deonttye Nelson: Really?

Angel Rodriguez: Yeah, actually. I got a friend who was in the marines with me and we've been gone since boot camp all the way up to school of infantry and we got out together at the same time. We went to boot camp and everything like I said. He was a firefighter in New York, a volunteer one, and he was telling me all the stories, just the good times, the [inaudible 00:09:11] you get with being a firefighter and I feel like I'm not done serving this country. I feel like I haven't given her enough and I want to be content. I'm not there yet. So I'm reaching for everything I can now that can be able to get a degree I want to become a firefighter and captain, make chief, just work my way up to the chain of command.

I have my girlfriend's father he's a chief, not a chief, a captain in the fire department, but his wife was not happy that, because he was trying to actually be a firefighter, he was just happy with the whole timing and everything. So he's always trying to help me up with it I guess, that makes sense?

Deonttye Nelson: Yeah. There you go. Okay. So what do you think will be something that would keep you from achieving your goal?

Angel Rodriguez: What would keep me?

Deonttye Nelson: What do you think would maybe be a stumbling block?

Angel Rodriguez: I think my mentality.

Deonttye Nelson: Okay.

Angel Rodriguez: Yeah. I think right now I'm in the mindset where I need to get straight As.

Deonttye Nelson: Right. Yeah.

Angel Rodriguez: I'm not trying to lose that. I'm trying to keep going with that, coming from high school and then, that's the only education I had before here. I wasn't doing so good back then. I had some low grades and I ended up staying two years out of high school working construction and mow a lawn. Just odd jobs here and there to maintain and then once I joined the marines I thought I was going to make a career out of it. It wasn't. So I'm here now and I'm hoping to just become better than that person I was before.

Deonttye Nelson: There you go.

Angel Rodriguez: And not get out the same person I was.

Deonttye Nelson: Definitely. One thing I can say about college when you don't afford a university is definitely what you get out is what you put in.

Angel Rodriguez: Right.

Deonttye Nelson: If you put in your all, you're going to get the best results out, it just, it is what it is. So how old are you?

Angel Rodriguez: I'm 24 years.

Deonttye Nelson: You're 24. Okay. I was thinking 24 but I didn't want to guess and you'd be like, "No, I'm 23." And I'm just like, "Oh sorry."

Angel Rodriguez: Actually I just turned 24. I turned 24 during the school year but they still let me do the oasis-

Deonttye Nelson: Oh, happy birthday.

Angel Rodriguez: Thank you.

Deonttye Nelson: You're welcome. So this is your first semester, right?

Angel Rodriguez: Yes.

Deonttye Nelson: Okay. So just taking like [inaudible 00:11:25].

Angel Rodriguez: Yeah. Exactly right now. I was able to talk to the career advisor for my major, the [inaudible 00:11:32] from technology engineering.

Deonttye Nelson: Okay.

Angel Rodriguez: And she was able to wave all that stuff for me. So I'm actually-

Deonttye Nelson: That's awesome.

Angel Rodriguez: Next semester I'm actually taking the core classes, which I'm pretty excited about.

Deonttye Nelson: That's really cool. Yeah, that's going to be a lot smaller at that point, because I know you're probably in the classes with 100 plus people in it.

Angel Rodriguez: Right, 20 people I saw 20, 40 people. So it's going to be-

Deonttye Nelson: Really that's it?

Angel Rodriguez: Yeah, some of them are only 20, I think technical drawing I can't draw, so hopefully it's not too.

Deonttye Nelson: But that's something you could cork on. That's really cool. So what would you say, I know that you were talking about your grandmother and your mom kind of motivated you to actually start college. Would you say that there were any. Were there any obstacles that you say were actually have maybe stopped you from coming to school? Other than you being a marine? Was there anything in your mindset saying, "Hey, maybe I don't want to do this because maybe a financial burden or."

- Angel Rodriguez: Yeah, well actually legally, I couldn't, I was born outside the United States, I was born in the Dominican Republic-
- Deonttye Nelson: You're Dominican? Okay.
- Angel Rodriguez: Yes, exactly. So I came here when I was nine, and I came here illegally surprised. I mean, I wouldn't say I came here illegally. I came here with a visa. I was privileged enough that my grandfather worked for the American embassy.
- Deonttye Nelson: There you go.
- Angel Rodriguez: And he was able to get his visa. I came here but I over extended my stay basically. And I went to school here. I went from fifth grade all the way up to my senior year and everything. But other than legally, eventually I was able to get my green card and I decided to go into the marines instead. Really just, I was at a point in my life where I was really depressed. I just went through a breakup, but I mean now it's like nothing but at the time it was so big.
- Deonttye Nelson: Yeah. I'm sure we've all been there.
- Angel Rodriguez: Yeah. Exactly. I went through a break up and I ended up having my green card at the same time. I had a buddy who just came back from boot camp and he talked me into, well he didn't really talk to me into it. I saw him in his uniform and I was like, "I need that."
- Deonttye Nelson: There you Go.
- Angel Rodriguez: So I decided to go with that, but it really just, I didn't have the mentality back then. I'm glad I didn't do it honestly back then because I would have failed out. But I think I'm ready now to take on that challenge.
- Deonttye Nelson: And I think that's important for a lot of young kids to keep in mind, after graduating high school, a lot of kids think that, "Oh, immediately I need to go into college and do these things," but sometimes you may not be ready for it. You may have to experience the real world first and then after you do that, you might need to come into college. I know that I was in the same boat. I know if I came to college right after high school, it would have been bad. It would have been really bad, but now that I'm older and mature and I know what I want, I think it's more helpful for me. Let me ask you another question. So why did you pick the Great University of North Carolina at Charlotte?
- Angel Rodriguez: I was actually deployed it in Italy and I was there for eight months. I left August 2017 and I was signing up for schools, I'm originally from Florida. I was raised in Melbourne, Florida, kind of below Cocoa Beach area, so I'm a beach guy-
- Deonttye Nelson: There you go.
- Angel Rodriguez: I was applying for schools back home and a lot of them didn't work with me at all. You have to come here and do a letter and sign this interview or something because I was an adult student. So I was actually, it was a lot more challenging and like I was saying I wanted to get my career going and my degree going. I wasn't trying to wait any longer, because I was in a mindset I knew if I stopped or had a break or something, I could change, get lazy or whatever you want to call it. So I was in Italy and applying for everything. And my girlfriend who I met when I was into-

Deonttye Nelson: I'm sure she's gorgeous.

Angel Rodriguez: Yeah, thanks.

Deonttye Nelson: You're welcome.

Angel Rodriguez: She moved here. She's an insurance person as well. She works with Travelers.

Deonttye Nelson: OKay, those are our competitors. We don't want to talk [inaudible 00:15:52]

Angel Rodriguez: Let's be real.

Deonttye Nelson: It's all the same.

Angel Rodriguez: But yeah. So she worked here. I came back from deployment and I had already turned in all of these admissions so she's the one pushing me. She has her masters now. She was pushing me. She was telling me, "You can't do as soon as you get back because you get out four months later. That's not enough time for you to." I don't understand because like I said, I was fresh out of high school basically. And my family, I'm the first generation as well. No one knew really how the process went of out of here and. Yeah. So UNC who was actually able to work with me I'd send them emails in Italy, even with the time changes they were giving me replies at all times and-

Deonttye Nelson: That's good.

Angel Rodriguez: Yeah. And I came back and they were able to wave me through a lot of stuff. I came back from deployment to the states and they presented me a, what's it called? The letter of admission or whatever-

Deonttye Nelson: Letter of admission yep.

Angel Rodriguez: Yeah. And I was pretty nervous when I got it actually it was two months after getting back I remember.

Deonttye Nelson: So where were you when you actually opened that letter? Because that was a monumental moment for me as well, I was like, "Wow, I actually just got admitted into a university, what is going on?" How did that feel?

Angel Rodriguez: It was crazy at first, I was in my girlfriend's house, our apartment now, I was sitting in the living room and she comes in with the letters and she's like, "Oh my God, look what you got." I'm like, "Oh man, no, no." And she's like, "It's a big envelope, that's a good thing." And I was like, "Really?"

Deonttye Nelson: This is true.

Angel Rodriguez: So I'm sitting on the couch and I'm calling my mom and I'm like, "Yo, mum I don't know." And she's like, "Just open it, let me know what it says," and I'm reading it out loud and it says congratulations. And I was like, "Yes," I was super happy.

Deonttye Nelson: Right.

Angel Rodriguez: We went out to celebrate that night and I called my whole family and let them know, all my friends back home, all my friends in the military right now. And I man it was crazy.

Deonttye Nelson: That was a good moment for me as well. I remember opening mine and it came in the mail and I was thinking the same thing. Like, "Well if it's big like this, it got to be something good," I'm sure they wouldn't just have like this big bag. And it's like, "Well we regret to inform you," but yeah, I'm opening it. And it says graduations, you're welcome to the [inaudible 00:18:06] family and it had all these welcome and stuff. And I'm just like, "Oh my God." I honestly, it was crying. I'm yelling in the room telling my mom and she's like crying. I'm just like, "Oh my God, this is so cool." But yeah that was a defining moment for me right there where I knew this is what I want to do, I'm not going to mess up my opportunity.

Angel Rodriguez: I didn't think they were going to accept me just because, It was full on the university. I was thinking I'm going to have to go to Central Piedmont and do a couple of years there and then come over and my girlfriend actually motivated me into trying for the full on university and I'm glad I did it.

Deonttye Nelson: Me too.

Angel Rodriguez: So if there's anyone out there who doesn't want to just go ahead and go for it seriously.

Deonttye Nelson: Just do it. It's nothing like that university experience. Central Piedmont is definitely a great university in Charlotte, but it's nothing like that university experience. It's totally, totally different. Totally different. It's totally different. And I feel like, I don't know just as far as statistics, but I feel like their graduation rate will be better at a university for an individual as opposed to Central Piedmont because you're migrating to the school as opposed to living on campus or close to campus, so studying habits might not be as good because you're figuring, "Well I could do that later. I want to do this or I have to work," just different things like that.

So I suggest to anybody that even at my job at Harris Teeter, I tell all the kids there, I'm going to a community college or whatever. I'm like, "No, you need to apply to a four year university. I will help you wherever paperwork you need help with, I will help you." You need to be there because it's nothing like that experience. You need to get away from home to experience what life can be and that's how you really find out who yourself is too, when you go to a university. You find out a lot about yourself because you're on your own. You're responsible for thyself. So I think that's important.

Angel Rodriguez: You think it helped you overall going from community college too or just-

Deonttye Nelson: I think it did. I would say it did for me honestly. That's why I was speaking about it. I mean me being at social media, like I said, I took one class there. I think it was like a writing class, English writing class or something like that. Just something I needed in order to start my college career. And yeah, for me, I mean I did well in the class but it was just, I didn't feel like this is where I want to be. I knew I wanted to be at a university. I'm just like, I'm in college, but I want that university feel. So I think that definitely would've succeeded a lot more if had I not stayed there. So being that I did transfer, I think that definitely helped me.

Angel Rodriguez: That's awesome. Okay. Yeah. Because I was wondering, I was like, I don't know if going to succeed that well-

Deonttye Nelson: No, no, no.

Angel Rodriguez: So far I'm doing well but it's good to know-

Deonttye Nelson: And you will. Yeah, yeah, yeah, you will. Because it's more homey as well too everybody is not so distant like everybody likes to study with each other, because this is our house, so a lot of people live on campus or live around campus, so it's like, "Hey, you want to study, I live around here or we can meet at the library at certain times." It doesn't take me long, it takes me five minutes to get over there as opposed to being in a community college where somebody might live in Waxhaw or what have you and they have to travel to university and then you can't go to the library because it's closed at a certain time as opposed to our great Atkins is open 24 hours. So just different things like that can, just the small things like that can help aid in your success I feel like. So yeah, I think that's important.

Angel Rodriguez: So what do you, I know you said you're getting a degree in history?

Deonttye Nelson: Yes.

Angel Rodriguez: What are you hoping to do after?

Deonttye Nelson: Well, initially I wanted to actually, I wanted to come to school. I knew I wanted to be a teacher. I wanted to teach in title one schools because I wanted to go into urban communities to let them know how important education is, because I've seen that there is a lag because I volunteered a lot of those schools. Now that's actually changed. I want to actually apply for the graduate program here at UNC Charlotte. I went to actually teach at a college level. So I don't necessarily want to teach our kids anymore. I want to teach at a more adult experience. So that's what I'm hoping to do.

Angel Rodriguez: That's awesome.

Deonttye Nelson: Sometimes it changed, when you have your mindset, you're going to do one thing and then as time progressed you're like, "Aaah, maybe I wanna try something different," not saying that you want firefight, we thank you for your continued service. [crosstalk 00:22:18]

Angel Rodriguez: I still have that option open.

Deonttye Nelson: You never know. Things could change in four years. Four years is a long time. I've been here a long time, four years is a long time, I'm telling me things change every day, every day. So.

Angel Rodriguez: Yeah, I'll be able to finally find out next semester hopefully. But-

Deonttye Nelson: Yeah, yeah.

Angel Rodriguez: So what do you think is like the biggest difference from you now to the man you were before?

Deonttye Nelson: That is an excellent question. Me then as far as after graduating high school or before coming here?

Angel Rodriguez: No, before coming here?

Deonttye Nelson: Before coming here?

Angel Rodriguez: Yeah.

Deonttye Nelson: I would say maturity. I definitely feel like I've grown over the years. My younger days before I came here, yes I was working full time. I've always been motivated to work. I've had a full time job since I was 18 years old, like I literally since my 18th birthday came I was going to get a job. So I've always worked but it was just, you're young and you have those immaturity times. But I feel like me coming here, especially being an adult student, you see a lot of stuff that the other kids do, and it's just like, "Oh, I remember those days. I remember I used to do those things."

So you see that you progress when you see other people making the mistakes that you did. So you're just like, "Oh, I wouldn't do that, I do that before and I wouldn't do that again because I know I've learned from that." So I would say maturity and growth just mentally, spiritually even physically, is probably the main things I would say for me then and now. Yeah.

Angel Rodriguez: All right. That's awesome man.

Deonttye Nelson: I actually don't have any more questions for you. Do you have any more for me?

Angel Rodriguez: And you pretty much answered all of them.

Deonttye Nelson: Honestly.

Angel Rodriguez: I feel like I should've come with a list, but I think I'm good.

Deonttye Nelson: You're good?

Angel Rodriguez: Yeah.

Deonttye Nelson: All right. Well it was so nice to meet you.

Angel Rodriguez: It was good to meet you too.

Deonttye Nelson: Good luck on your college career.

Angel Rodriguez: Thank you. And good luck with your prior education that you [inaudible 00:24:34]

Deonttye Nelson: I appreciate it. Thank you so much.