# Health and Human Science Matters Season 1, Episode 9: Sami Brown

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Avery Martin: Welcome to Health and Human Science Matters, a podcast by Colorado State University's College of Health and Human Sciences. I'm your co-host and digital media strategist, Avery Martin.

Matt Hickey: And I'm Matt Hickey, Associate Dean for Research and Graduate Studies. In our college, we make it our mission to optimize human health and wellbeing through discovery and innovation. But don't just take our word for it. Each episode we sit down with people who fulfill that mission, our college faculty and staff. And today we're delighted to have Sami Brown from the School of Social Work to join us. Hi Sami.

Avery Martin: Welcome.

Sami Brown: Thank you. I'm excited to be here.

Matt Hickey: Thanks for joining us. We're looking forward to a chat. And as we were talking about before we got on air today, we just want to have some fun. We want to get to know you a little bit better. It's going to be a mix of Sami, the person, and Sami, the scholar. So we'll start with Sami, the person. Tell us a little bit about you and sort of family, maybe special memories or moments that you're willing to share.

Sami Brown: Well, I guess I'll just start with where I'm from. So I'm from the Pacific Northwest in an area called the Tri-Cities in Washington State. And my parents and brother and sister-in-law and nieces and nephews are in Washington. And so I grew up playing sports and playing soccer led me to undergraduate in upstate New York. And so I-

Matt Hickey: Where in upstate New York? I must interrupt because it's home for me, so yes. Yeah.

Sami Brown: Oh, it is? Okay. So Albany, the College of St. Rose. Yeah. So it was a small D2 school where I played soccer and really began studying psychology and criminal justice. And that's kind of what paved the pathway for me to be here today.

Matt Hickey: That's a long journey for college, the other side of the map as they say. That's great. So again, tell us about family influences, maybe special memories you have as a young lady.

Sami Brown: Yeah. I'm a first generation college student and so following the academic trajectory was a little out of norm for my family. But my parents always instilled kind of the hard work ethic and so I think that helped to encourage some of my pathways. But I grew up in a slightly rural town. It's not so much anymore. It's grown significantly, primarily because we're on the Columbia River and so a lot of wineries and things like that have-

Matt Hickey: That's a beautiful part of the world, isn't it?

Sami Brown: It really is. Yeah. When I say Washington state, often people think rainy Seattle, but it's very much a tempered climate similar to Colorado. So yeah. I mean, most of my childhood memories were spent either playing sports, floating the Columbia River or Yakima River, boating with friends and being in that little bubble of a valley. I also grew up with a horse and a dog, and so had that experience as well of raising animals growing up.

Matt Hickey: Oh, that's great. One of my fondest memories is from that neck of the woods, Mount Adams. Chris Milby and I spent some fun time in snow on Mount Adams a few years back. That's great.

Sami Brown: Yeah, I actually didn't learn how to snowboard or anything really until I moved to Colorado, so more in my adult life, even though I had attempted it several times, just given the proximity of all the mountains down there. But yeah.

Matt Hickey: I have to ask you, knowing somewhat the answer to this question, having grown up in upstate New York, you moved from paradise to Albany where the winters can be eyeopening. So tell us a little bit about how you survived.

Avery Martin: It's a nice [inaudible 00:03:59]

Sami Brown: Well, because I was on the academic schedule, I avoided some of the more severe weather patterns, so just being home for the holidays. But the fall in upstate New York is beautiful. And so we got to travel. Being at the D2 school that I was, most of our competition was in that Northeastern region, and so we would take the bus to New Hampshire and Rhode Island and places like that. And so I was able to see kind of upstate in that regard, which was really amazing and really beautiful. When I graduated, I had a December graduation and so flew my parents out and my brother. And that was the most severe snowstorm that we experienced. They were unable to drive and pick me up at my college residence, and so I had to taxi to their hotel in order for us to catch our flight and leave. So that was an eventful weekend. So I think it was just kind of ironic that never really had experienced that severe of weather until my family came to visit.

Matt Hickey: Well, you got lucky for the most part. That's great. So tell us about what you do for fun. When you're not on campus, what are the things that interest you?

Sami Brown: Well, when I'm not on campus, I spend a lot of time hiking with my dog and my husband. And yeah. I mean, so work in the Denver metro area and so we also go out to eat a lot and restaurants. And yeah. So that's kind of what I like to do for fun. I feel like I'm working a lot and so sometimes it's hard for me to think about what do I do for fun?

Matt Hickey: That's fair. Do you have a favorite hike that you're willing to share?

Sami Brown: Yeah, hiking Mount Albert, one of the 14ers, was probably the best hike that I've experienced. We woke up with the intention to not summit, but we did and it was just one of our first big hikes together. And so it's pretty memorable for us.

Matt Hickey: And the views are spectacular if you get a good day.

Sami Brown: It's beautiful. Yes.

Matt Hickey: We often do, of course the weather's so fantastic usually.

Sami Brown: Yeah. And we don't do those bigger hikes as much anymore just because our dog is getting a little older and so we like to kind of do a family experience, but unfortunately he suffers if we continue too long. So the other hikes that we really enjoy are Peaceful Valley. I'm not sure if you've been in that area. Yeah. And again, that for the fall and even into the winter months, it's beautiful.

Matt Hickey: We are spoiled living in Colorado, aren't we?

Sami Brown: Yes.

Avery Martin: Yes, we are. I'm not much of a hiker, but I am an amateur foodie. So what's the best restaurant in Denver to you?

Sami Brown: Oh gosh, that's so tough. We really like this place in downtown called Work & Class and also another place called Urban Beet, which is in Old Town Arvada. It's like a vegan vegetarian restaurant, but has some of the most amazing flavors and foods. And it tastes like... One of our favorite meals is it's called a Gordon's Crunch, and it tastes like a taco, like something from Taco Bell, but it's like a healthy version.

Matt Hickey: Only better.

Avery Martin: I'm adding that to the list.

Matt Hickey: That's great. Good. So tell us a little bit about your educational trajectory. As you were moving through at some point, maybe several points for many of us, somebody, a mentor, a teacher, an influence, sort of lit your fire and inspired you to think about the next step. And I'm always interested in hearing those stories.

Sami Brown: Yeah. I'm not sure that it was one specific mentor that really changed the trajectory for me. I think it was probably an accumulation of mentors, work experiences. I, like I mentioned, studied psychology and criminal justice in undergrad. And that was really influenced by in high school, there was an opportunity to do a running start program where we could take some college courses and so then those were transferable to undergrad. But I was really interested in the overlap. And so I worked in a lab in undergrad under the mentorship of Dr. Rob Flint. And so he did a lot of animal-related research with substance use. And then I wasn't really convinced that I wanted to do research at that time. I was really interested in more of the clinical side of things. And so I applied to the forensic psychology program at the University of Denver and really led a clinical trajectory at that point.

And so after I completed that program, I worked in different clinical settings, child welfare, substance use, domestic violence. And so those experiences then influenced my motivation to pursue a doctoral education in social work, just working with children and families who've experienced different traumas and adversities. And so I think that up until that point, I just had mentors who didn't necessarily sway me to do a PhD or to go down the research path, but I think that they also offered little kernels of support or excitement when I would talk about some of the areas that I was interested in. And so just kind of having that as a foundation was really helpful.

And then I think that for me in my doctoral studies, my mentors at the University of Denver and post-doctoral mentors were really impactful for me. And so I think retrospectively I can look back and piece the trajectory together, but at the time it was very much, I had just very short term goals and then just different life experiences influenced the next step.

Matt Hickey: That's great. Now tell us a little bit about how long you've been with us. We were lucky enough to recruit you to CSU. So how long have you been here?

Sami Brown: Yeah, so I've been here for four years, so I'm in my fourth year.

Matt Hickey: Fantastic. And when you think about your research program, what excites you the most about what you've got going on right now?

Sami Brown: So I work with children and families who've experienced adversity both with respect to more clinical research and intervention research. And so I think what excites me is really engaging with families. We do a lot of our data collection in homes, and so just hearing their perspectives on their life experiences and taking that information to try to turn it into something that might help them or meet their needs. And so that's exciting. I also really am excited about the community-engaged research. So a lot of the work that I do partners with the agencies that serve children and families with adversity. And so I appreciate having their input and making the research experience mutually beneficial in terms of how can we answer this research question in a rigorous way, but then, with that information, how can we give that back to your agency or the families that you serve to better meet everyone's needs? So that's kind of what excites me. It's not necessarily a specific research question, but more of the process.

Matt Hickey: Yeah. And this is the underlying motivation for everything you do. It's really neat and important. That's what matters. So one of my favorite jobs as the associate dean is to celebrate wins. And we've been able to stand up and applaud Sami on many occasions. So tell us who supports your scholarship funding agencies? Brag a little bit. Feel free to [inaudible 00:12:15]

Sami Brown: I have an NIH award or NIH KO1 award that is a mentored award. So when you asked about mentorship, I should also acknowledge that I have an amazing mentorship team currently. So it wasn't just mentors who've influenced me to get this position, but also who continue to influence me as I engage in this work. So NIH and then also I recently received a RO3 mechanism from NIH as well. And I've also been fortunate to receive funding from different foundations like [inaudible 00:12:52] Fund for Research and Evaluation and HRSA, basically the Maternal and Child Health Bureau funding agency as well, and Society for Research and Child Development. So different funding agencies that have really contributed to the success with NIH and ability to pay families for their time to participate in these research studies.

Matt Hickey: That's great. So as an early career investigator, you're really flourishing. That's certainly the perspective from my chair for sure. Tell us about of a day in the life of you, your research team. What does a typical, acknowledging there are no typical days in many ways, but what's a day in the life of Sami and her research team look like?

Sami Brown: Well, no day is the same. It's very unpredictable. As I mentioned, we collect data mostly in families' homes. I know that we've had some adaptations during the pandemic. But we drive around the Denver Metro and Fort Collins areas to meet with families. And so that's kind of what is prioritized. And so if there is data collection to be had, then our team members will be meeting with families and families homes.

Otherwise, it is really flexible in terms of coding, cleaning data. It's not like a traditional lab experience since a lot of the data collection is home-based. But we do have things that we bring back into the lab like saliva samples for assessing salivary cortisol. And so we have some people who will process those data. And then a lot of it is writing. I think that I spend a lot of time working on grants or trying to disseminate some of our findings. But everyone, in terms of who comprises the lab, I have some students that I work with in Denver as well as Fort Collins. And so the remote and hybrid work has actually been really beneficial to our lab experience to create more of a holistic or community with that lab.

Matt Hickey: It's interesting because as a college, we think about this translational model with some regularity and look at the diversity of scholars in units we have. And sometimes we'll see niches that tend to be on one end of that spectrum or the other, the bench to bedside metaphor. But you sort of bring that whole thing, that whole package with you to a certain extent. You're out talking to folks in their homes and then doing some biomarker work back on campus. It's kind of neat.

Sami Brown: Yeah. And it's not always clean in terms of what we think about if we bring families into a lab and there's this more contained and structured process. But I think that that's why I really enjoy this type of work because it brings a more real life experience to the research process. But with that, there's been a lot of learning experiences as well.

Matt Hickey: Sure, sure. We've heard from several colleagues in these conversations about the kind of moments in the course of a day or a semester where you get that reinforcement that I'm doing what I want to do, those aha moments, the empowering moments. Can you share an example of, this is an episode of what reminds me why I enjoy being an academic so much?

Sami Brown: Yeah, I think it's both with research and teaching. So I teach the research method sequence in the school of social work. And so many social work masters students come into that class thinking that research is very daunting because it can be. And so seeing them and walking them through the process of engaging in a program evaluation or research project and then seeing them defend that and having all of the pieces of the puzzle connect and seeing their excitement and their ability to translate that in their presentations, I think that is really impactful. And so I think that has motivated me to want to bring teaching into more of the clinical-related professions as well, just in terms of how important that is.

And then I think from a research perspective, gosh, there's been so many moments where I have had those experiences that have continued to motivate me. I think often it could be working with a family specifically and just talking about what the purpose of this research is and what we plan to do with it. Some of the work that I've done is intervention-based, and so seeing the families reflect on their experiences in terms of how that intervention might have been helpful for them. And then I think there's also other moments where maybe it's getting that grant or having someone reach out to present some of the work that we're doing just to know that it matters at a larger scale as well. So I think that there's been multiple moments that have fueled that motivation and there's been moments where it's been difficult and challenging. And so having those moments spread out and come unexpectedly is really helpful.

Matt Hickey: In the spirit of applauding you for your accomplishments, I'll note for our listeners that you were one of two CSU speakers that were invited to the CCTSI summit this summer, and I really enjoyed listening to you. I think that was neat. And another opportunity to celebrate the scholarship in the college for sure.

Sami Brown: Thank you.

Matt Hickey: Well done. So we want to ask you to exercise your imagination a little bit. You're five years down the road. What does it look like to be Sami Brown and engaged in scholarship, teacher, enjoying restaurants and hiking and all those things? What does life look like five years down the road for you?

Sami Brown: Well, I hope to have an RO1 which is... And that is at my forefront of my mind because I'm submitting a resubmission in a couple weeks. So I-

Matt Hickey: In the near future, you may have the challenge of having three NIH grants funded at the same time.

Sami Brown: Yes.

Matt Hickey: It's a nice problem to have, isn't it?

Sami Brown: Yeah, it's overwhelming, but really exciting. I think that that funding is, like I said, it really kind of keeps everything going and so that there's not any roadblocks or barriers for continuation of this work. Yeah, so that would be really lovely to have in five years. I also hope that some of the recent work that I've been doing is better translated into current child and family serving systems and programs so that families' needs are being met. And what I mean by that is I think there's a lot of existing programs that are really helpful for the families that I work with, some of the home visiting programs or nurse family partnership type of programs. And I hope that some of the things that we are unpacking in my work would be added as enhancements to those programs since we are kind of identifying different targets for intervention. And so that would be really lovely as well.

Matt Hickey: Can you share a little bit about how you've managed to navigate COVID-19?

Sami Brown: It has been challenging. I think that, like many of us, we thought there was more of an immediate end in sight. And so I think at first we just said, "Hey, let's just take a time out and we'll reconvene when we can." But we've soon realized that we're still living in a pandemic. And so I think that we've managed this by first asking some of the families about their experiences.

So you had mentioned that CCTSI presentation. And so we had asked some of the families that we had already been working with, how have they been impacted by the stay at home restrictions and the safety protocols that had been in place. And families expressed both negative in that it's impacted their mental health or their ability to stay employed and care for their families. And then at the same time, families expressed that it presented different opportunities for them to kind of be forced in situations where they were able to spend time with their loved ones. And so they were both positive and negative experiences. And so that was really impactful just in terms of understanding where our families were starting at this new baseline, so to speak.

And so then we also talked with a lot of families about their comfortability and continuing to engage in some of the research-specific data collection that we were doing. And so the specific projects that I'm talking about did have longitudinal data points. And so we adapted as families felt comfortable in terms of being able to either ask questions over the phone or meet to do some data in someone's backyard where we were able to be outside or have that space to social distance. And then also because this work is grant funded, we're able to compensate families for their time, which has been really helpful for a lot of the families who were economically impacted by COVID.

It's also been a learning experience in terms of the lab. So I mentioned that we collect salivary cortisol just as a biomarker of stress. And so we have had to pause some of that. And so that might kind of impact the dissemination of that particular work. But I think at the same time, we're capturing, again, families' experiences in the moment. And so that is also impactful in and of itself. So it's been both a challenge, but also there have been beneficial things that have come from it, like hybrid work and just meeting families where they're at.

Matt Hickey: That's great. Thanks so much. So a couple more questions we've got for you. We all sitting around the table here together, our colleagues in this dynamic College of Health and Human Sciences. Tell us what you like best about being a faculty member in that college.

Sami Brown: Oh, wow. I mean, there's a lot of things I think that in my graduate education was in a school by itself. And so my first introduction to being a department within a larger college was here at CSU. And I've really appreciated the effort and intention to kind of break down the silos between departments and that there's specific initiatives that support the interdisciplinary collaborations in terms of submitting a grant, but also that people in other departments have really been mentors to me during this time. So HDFS or NHES, and so I've really appreciated that. And I think about had the school of social work just been a school of social work in their own little bubble, would those opportunities still exist? And I'm sure they do. CSU is very collaborative. But I think being housed under that college also just creates the opportunity to build those connections, which I've really appreciated.

Matt Hickey: Well said. For me, when I think five years in the future, that's an area where I think we do a good job as a college. But we can be incredible if we continue to figure out ways to build bridges and maybe think outside the proverbial box in terms of collaborations where some of this translational stuff, we've got people that are pipe headers and people that are out in the community and they're doing collaborative work together. That's great. That's one of the things I [inaudible 00:25:01]

Avery Martin: In Sami's case, both.

Matt Hickey: Yeah, exactly. That's right. Well said. So the next layer institutionally, of course, is that we're at Colorado State, which is a land-grant institution. And that land-grant mission means something. It's not just words on a piece of paper. So talk to us a little bit about what being an academic at a land-grant institution means to you.

Sami Brown: I think, again, some of the recent initiatives that I've familiarized myself with over the last couple years has been those that have encouraged connections with the community. So I was talking about the connections within the college, but I think the land-grant mission has also encouraged us to build connections with communities, particularly communities that might be harder to reach. And so even last year I worked on a mini grant with extension in terms of translating some of the work that I was doing with early childhood mental health providers throughout Colorado. And so I think that that land-grant university mission also not just encourages, but really makes it central to the academics work to make sure that they're being inclusive of the community and that it's mutually beneficial.

Matt Hickey: I have to tell you that from my perspective, you embody that mission really, really nicely. In the last 30 minutes, we've heard you talk a lot about what do I do? What is my work aimed towards? What's the impact? And there's this wonderful blend of kind of scholarly work that the NIH is going to be interested in funding and you've had fantastic success so far, and we expect much more. But it's all oriented towards the impacting families who find themselves in very difficult circumstances. I heard nothing about your CV and impact factors and metrics and which is all that is, it's got its little niche. But let me take opportunities, funded by the federal government, by taxpayer dollars, and do what I can to translate it into better lives for people who are facing circumstances. It's fantastic as far as I'm concerned. It's incredible. It's got land-grant written all over it. So we look forward to celebrating much more in the coming years.

Sami Brown: I'm excited, too. Thank you.

Matt Hickey: Yes, indeed. Well, thanks for joining us.

Sami Brown: Thank you. I appreciate the opportunity.

Avery Martin: And that's our show. Thank you for tuning in to Health and Human Science Matters. If you want to learn more about our CSU College of Health and Human Sciences, go to chhs.colostate.edu.

Matt Hickey: Here, here.