

SE02EP08

Becca Cunningham

H: Welcome to Noles Abroad, a podcast by Florida State University International Programs! I'm Hannah

Z: And I'm Zoe! And we're your hosts. On this podcast we'll talk about study abroad from the perspective of the students, faculty, staff, and alumni who make it an experience worth sharing. We'll also bring you travel tips and fun facts from around the globe.

Z: For this episode, we interview FSU alumna Becca Cunningham about her experience studying abroad in London and what she's been up to since then. Becca's brand, Cuning Co, has led her to collaborations with Anthropologie, teaching watercolor workshops, and painting lots of dog portraits! Becca talks about her love for creative communities and how study abroad gave her increased confidence to go out and do things on her own. Let's jump into our conversation with Becca now.

Z: Hi Becca! Thanks so much for taking the time to talk with us today, we're so excited to have you on the podcast. First off, can you just introduce yourself to our listeners?

Becca (B): Of course! Hi Zoe, really happy to be here. My name is Becca Cunningham I studied abroad in London and I am currently an artist and illustrator living in Atlanta, Georgia.

H: Can you tell us what you studied at FSU and when you graduated?

B: Sure I studied Retail Merchandising and Product Development and I had a minor in Business and I graduated FSU Spring of 2015.

H: Amazing and so you already mentioned a little bit about what you're up to now but can you expand on that a little bit, what you were doing?

B: Absolutely, so I have a small business called Cuning Co. It's a watercolor illustration studio and basically I teach online virtual watercolor classes, I used to do in person but COVID has kind of changed that, and then I also sell and license illustrations to commercial companies like Anthropology. And on top of all of that I also do custom commissions, a lot of house portraits, dog portraits just anything that people would want in their home.

Z: That's so fun! We want to ask you a little bit more about that but first we're going to ask you about your study abroad experience with IP. So we want to know just why did you choose to study abroad?

B: Sure so, I decided to study abroad because I was living in Florida before I decided to attend Florida State University and I always wanted to have an experience that was either out of state or ideally out of country but obviously that comes with a large expense, so I thought hey why not go to a college in-state but then go to a college that has an amazing program like IP to be able to go abroad and have more international experience. So I just kind of wanted to expand my horizons and meet new people and IP was a great way to do that.

H: So during your time at FSU you participated in the previously offered International Merchandising and Product Development program in London, what influence has that program had on you since then?

B: So studying abroad and doing the retail merchandising program has definitely affected me in so many ways. The biggest one would be the connections that I made abroad. Going into that study abroad experience I actually didn't have that many friends at FSU yet because I wasn't in Greek life, so studying abroad I was able to make friends that had common interests as me, were really adventurous, wanted to step outside their comfort zone and that also loved fashion. So I'm still friends with a lot of people that I studied abroad with. It's been great for professional networking as well, a lot of the people that I studied abroad with went on to have amazing careers across a variety of different industries not just retail. So I would say the people are definitely like the number one impact from my study abroad experience.

Z: That's amazing. We hear that so often that you know study abroad students go abroad and they don't know anyone when they do and they you know sometimes that experience helps them to find their place at FSU a little bit and find new friends and people that they can connect with for a lifetime really so that's really awesome that you had that experience.

B: Absolutely.

Z: Yeah so as you mentioned earlier about your business, being an entrepreneur, can you just tell us a little bit more about your business and then like what inspired you to start that?

B: So I was someone that, I never really thought about doing my business full-time. initially. I had a 9 to 5 after I graduated from college, I worked for West Elm in Brooklyn, New York. But then I always, I didn't work in a design job I worked in textile sourcing so it was something that was a lot more logistics and coordinating but I still had like this big creative itch I wanted to scratch and so I started painting in my spare time at home. And so I think that starting Cuning Co really just came out of like a desire to be creative and I realized that a lot of people feel that way or it might be hard to identify as a creative if you're not in like in a design job. So I just kind of let it snowball from like one dog painting into becoming an illustrator, which snowballed into growing it into the company it is now where I get to like help other people be more creative through teaching watercolor lessons or just making their creative visions come to life if they have an idea that they want me to paint.

Z: Coo, I'm intrigued as to like how you started in teaching people about watercolor or like made what made you want to share that with other people?

B: Great question. I would say, I absolutely love painting but I am 100% an extrovert. I love talking to people and when you're working from home, I'm sure we all know this now because of COVID, but when you're working from home it could be a little isolating and as much as I love art, I love building creative communities. And so I was thinking okay what's a way that I could be interacting with people but also helping foster their creativity, so that's kind of how classes were born. And at the time I was also working part time at a stationary store and so they gave me the opportunity to teach classes within their store and that kind of like kicked off the classes and people loved it and we just had wine and there was flowers and we all painted. And primarily women were attending workshops and it was really cool just to see all these women come and try something different and meet other people and just a lot of fun.

Z: That's so cool, I wanna do one of your workshops now. That sounds so fun!

B: Yah, well that's a good thing about being able to teach online now too, is I can reach so many more people rather than just people in Atlanta.

Z: Exactly, yeah that's really cool. I love how you talked about being like building that creative community and I think that that's something to like that I wonder if on your program if you also felt that like during study abroad that you're with other creatives and yeah I just think that that's really cool.

B: 100%. The people that I was studying abroad with, everyone had their own like sense of style which was really inspiring. I think that sometimes when you're in college it could be really easy to want to feel like, to fit in, or to look like everyone else, or sound like everyone else, but the people that I was on this trip with everyone had such a unique sense of style and a different background and different just

interests, and music taste and then we're all getting to share this international experience together and maybe also hang out with some people that you wouldn't have initially but when you're in a group of like 20 people you bond really fast and kind of form connections that you never thought you would have before.

H: You've talked a lot about these connections which is amazing and I think that you're so right that study abroad brings together people who can be like minded in some ways but also challenge you and inspire you in so many others but I'm also curious what other lessons did you learn through your study abroad experience that have either influenced your career, your business, your entrepreneurial spirit, like what lessons have you learned from study abroad that you still use today?

B: I think one of the biggest things was to step outside of my comfort zone and maybe do something I had never done before and do it alone, initially. When I decided to study abroad I did not know anyone else going on the program, I was the youngest one attending the program because I was graduating early so it was really scary to step into that as someone who had never been abroad before, didn't know anyone and I think that risk paid off in such a big way that it made me a little less afraid to take risks like that in the future. SO after graduation I moved to Philadelphia for an internship with Anthropology and I didn't know anyone there and I was doing it by myself but it felt a lot less scary because I had already done it through attending International Programs. So I think just having a really positive experience that maybe feels intimidating or many feels impossible or you might feel like you need someone else to do it with you and then realizing oh no, I can make friends, I can enjoy this city and really grow as a person was the biggest take away.

H: That's awesome, I think that that idea about being less afraid to step out and do things on your own in the future is huge because study abroad can be that can be such a big step especially for folks to maybe I've never left Florida I have never left the country who don't know people before they go and we hear time and time again that it is it's not nearly as scary as it seems and then it makes you that much braver for the next step in your life and your career so I'm so glad that you had that experience and you can share that with other people jumping back to your business a little bit 'cause I am very curious I definitely check out your website I really want to look at the calendar for your next watercolor class it looks amazing but what would you say are some of your biggest accomplishment as a business owner?

B: Great question. I would say it's such a ebb and flow of hardship and success that it's funny to think about like what are my biggest successes because I feel like I'm still always striving to get to the places that I want to be. I would say probably like the things that I'm most proud of are my collaborations that I've done with Anthropology, I've done three of them now. And then I would say starting this workshop series, I've been able to connect with people all over the world. I've been teaching classes for corporations a lot during COVID because HR Department are looking for ways to connect with their team. So I've had the honor of teaching classes for employees at Spotify, McKenzie Consulting Group and just like other really like big names and then getting to be the small business that helps people maybe in a more corporate environment feel creative has been really fulfilling because that was something that I was searching for when I was in corporate.

Z: Wow I love that.

H: That's awesome.

Z: Yeah that's so cool um so our next question is kind of a fun one but as an artist what's your favorite medium and subject? I know you've talked a lot about watercolor but maybe yeah what's your favorite subject?

B: Sure, well definitely watercolor is my favorite medium. I highly recommend it to anyone that wants to get into art but in a very like non intimidating way, easy clean up and it's also very affordable, so love watercolor. And then my favorite subject everything always comes back to dogs for me. Like dogs are just my life. I have a French bulldog named Louise, she's sleeping on the chair behind me. I have like a

painting of her like hanging above my desk. And it's something that I think is really commercial but at the same time I think that's the one thing that everyone always will come to me and be like will you paint my dog and I was just like yes, because their adorable they make us so happy and it's like such a great way to even like remember them if they pass away or just like celebrate them and it's like a gift that you know everyone is going to love like no one's gonna say I don't want a painting of my dog. Everyone wants to.

H: So true I am not currently a dog owner, hopefully sometime in the future, but if you get into cat portraits, I might be interested.

B: I have painted a couple of cats, they're less common but also all animals, very cute.

H: yYah I feel like Zoë and I probably represent the less common animal club. Zoë is a rabbit owner and I could imagine that a watercolor of Jasper would be so, so cute.

Z: Yes definitely.

H: Alrighty, our final question for you today is what advice do you have for students who are considering study abroad?

B: I would say if you're thinking about studying abroad, just do it. Just take the plunge. Look into your financing options I was said on that had to pay for it myself through a loan, so don't let expense scare you away. It was something that I paid for it even after I graduated, but it was worth the experience so I really encourage you. FSU was great to work with throughout that process so I would say don't let monetary limitations keep you, or scare you. Don't let not knowing anyone keep you from doing it because it's going to be one of the most fulfilling experiences that you'll ever have. I still talk about it with my friends and all of my friends that didn't study abroad regret it and then everyone that I know that did study broad always says it was one of their best experiences of their life. So 100%, just don't let fear keep you from doing it, find a way, and you won't regret it.

H: Amazing. Thank you so much Becca I think that students will get, well all of our listeners not just students, will get so much out of this episode just hearing about your study abroad experience but also how that's led you to do incredible things since graduating and the lifelong impacts that you've seen from your study abroad experience so thank you for your time today and thank you for your advice I think that students will really appreciate that as they are considering studying abroad.

B: Amazing, thank you guys so much for having me. I hope, if it encourages one student study abroad, I'll be happy.

H: I'm confident that it will, thank you.

Z: Before we disembark, let's talk about Study Abroad Week!

This year as part of International Education Month at FSU, we are hosting a full week of study abroad related events! Starting on November 16th, you can join for daily giveaways, a virtual study abroad fair and other events, videos, and more!

H: We will be hosting a variety of events throughout the week featuring our study center locations! From a cooking class and a dance lesson to a trivia night and tile painting workshop, we will have a little bit of everything. Throughout the week we will be sharing videos so you can learn more about International Programs, what we offer, and how our staff can help you have the experience of a lifetime! There will also be a chance to win a \$500 airfare scholarship to use towards one of our programs, so be sure to check it out.

Z: Follow along on social media @fsuip where you can find all the details about Study Abroad Week and how to join our events!

Thanks to Becca for talking with us and thank you as always to all of you for listening.

H: This podcast is a production of FSU International Programs. The music was composed by John Bartmann. Our logo was designed by Vanessa Guirey. Sound engineering is done by Chris Bret-Harte. Editing, transcription, and research is done by us, Hannah Meister and Zoë Crook.