

Community Archives Initiative
LaPortia Mosley, GHS Community Engagement Officer

Georgia Southern University
Dr. Alex Reyes, Associate Professor

Dr. Checo Colón Gaud · Oral History Transcript · Fall 2026

Buckley 0:22

Thank you for agreeing to be interviewed for our class project. This conversation should last between 30 minutes to an hour. We [will] record the interview and take notes as we talk. The recorded interview will be archived as part of the Georgia Historical Society's Community Archives Initiative. At the end of this interview, I will ask you to fill out a Deed of Gift that indicates that you are willing to donate your story to the Georgia Historical Society for preservation.

So, I'm gonna start by asking you questions about yourself. You already introduced yourself. Do I have permission to record you for this interview?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 0:57

Yes, ma'am.

Buckley 0:58

Perfect. Do I have permission to take photos, [and] scan your sources that you're going to bring for us today.

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 1:03

Absolutely, yes.

Buckley 1:04

Awesome. So, who are you, and what do you do?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 1:06

So, my name is Dr. Checo Colón-Gaud. I am the Associate Dean of the Graduate College, and I am also a professor of Biology at Georgia Southern.

Buckley 1:15

Awesome. How'd you kind of get into that?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 1:18

Into being a professor of biology? Ooh, lots of years [of] school. But if I go back to just biology in general, growing up, I spent a lot of time outside and in the coast. Being from an island, I had a lot of opportunities to just explore the natural world. And as I was graduating high school and thinking about what the next steps were, I knew I wanted to be outside and I wanted to kind of just spend time, maybe enjoying the outdoors. Maybe that became by accident an opportunity to study biology.

So, through my undergraduate degree in studying biology, kind of learn a lot more about what opportunities might been out there for me after earning a biology degree, and most of the ones that that were out there were really not things that I was interested in. So, wanting to find out more that accidentally probably led me to go to graduate school.

So I earned a master's in slightly a different field. It is more towards agriculture. I got a master's degree in Fisheries and Natural Resource management, which was relatively applied. But I got to spend a lot of time outside in the water. I studied rivers as a master's student, so that kind of became somewhat my specialty as a graduate in biology or in natural science, and then after doing about two and a half years of graduate school in a master's, I got the itch to do more graduate school, and that led me to towards a Ph.D. in Animal Science or Zoology, and I yeah earned my PhD with a specialty in Ecology. Really got into studying the natural world, particularly rivers and streams and any sort of freshwater body. And after you go to school for a long time, you end up getting a job at school.

So, after many years of graduate school, I pursued a career in academia, which is what I do now. And I think that would have been about 12 years of college, from undergraduate to master's to PhD, and additional couple of years as a postdoc. That after that landed me in my role or my initial position at Georgia Southern as an Assistant Professor more than 16 years ago in in 2010.

So, I've been I've been at Georgia Southern through my entire transition of academic life from being an Assistant Professor to an Associate Professor to a Full Professor to now in my role as an administrator as the Associate Dean of the Graduate College, so long story short, if you go to school for a long time, you find yourself being in school forever.

Students 4:13

[Laughter]

Buckley 4:15

So, you talked about being from an island.

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 4:18

Yes.

Buckley: 4:19

When and where were you born?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 4:19

So, I'm originally from Puerto Rico, from a town in the west coast of Puerto Rico called Maya West. I was born in 1978. Doing the math right now, that makes me 48 years old.

Students 4:33

[Laughter]

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 4:34

Yeah. So, but I left the island as a sophomore in college. So, I did my first year in college at the University of Puerto Rico. I was fortunate enough at that time that I was good in a particular sport, so that gave me the opportunity to leave the island to

go to school here in the in the mainland in the greater U.S. I left the island in '97 and I went to El Paso, Texas, where I earn[ed] a bachelor's degree in in Biology.

Darian Doster 5:03

You talked about playing a sport. What sport did you play?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 5:07

I ran track and field for as long as I can remember, and then that gave me the opportunity to go run at the University of Texas El Paso.

Darian Doster 5:15

Talk to me. I did track and field. too.

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 5:18

The 800 was my event, and then so two laps around the track, and then a lot of cross country and distance, and I found out very quickly that running in Puerto Rico in a small island, you could be really good. And then you go to a to a big university, and then you're just another guy. So, I learned that quickly.

In the University of Texas El Paso, I had teammates that were Olympians, and coaches that were really world-class coaches. So very quickly, I found out that it was a good opportunity to go to college with that transition or that type of support. But it was not going to be a career. I very quickly learned this is an avenue for getting a degree. But I still run every day. So, very different than when I was 18 or 19 years old.

But an island to El Paso—that was my transition.

Buckley 6:19

So what were some initial differences you notice[d] whenever you first finished your sophomore year?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 6:25

It's just overall size, right? Like size of the city, the school. Living in Puerto Rico, you could go from corner to corner of the island by car in about you know three and a half hours. And I remember moving to El Paso, my first experience relative to the size of where you were at, was having friends that said like, "Oh, we should go on a weekend to Austin, Texas." The University of Texas is out there. Great, you know, we'll get to celebrate, find friends out there, colleagues of ours that were going to school there. And very quickly we found out that it's way longer than three and a half hours by car, and we thought, "Oh man, how far is this place?" So, travel was really an eye opener

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud:

that that how vastly large a state like Texas or even going across state to Arizona to California and traveling that by car was beyond the reach of like what any Puerto Rican mind could lend me to.

The university was huge too. El Paso, Texas was really large as well. Was a lot of open space and just the reach of people going to school in Puerto Rico. Most of my classmates obviously were going to be Puerto Rican, and you know some of them were probably had come from the states out there, and in our track team we had we had teammates from New York, a lot of Puerto Ricans in New York or from Florida, but in El Paso we had teammates from Spain, from Germany, from I mean, you name it.

So just that reach or that level of how small the world could seem in a corner where everything is very large. And then lucky for me, going to El Paso meant that there was a lot of students there from Mexico. So even though it was a very different dialect and very different accent, we could still very easily speak Spanish every day, so that made it relatively comfortable.

And then I didn't know at the time, but the University of Texas El Paso is a minority-serving institution, or I didn't think about it at the time, where most students were Hispanic Latino, so then you really got to see similarities between students, at least in the smallest connection that we all at least went back and spoke Spanish. Very different Spanish, but we all spoke Spanish, and then that made it a lot easier to transition [as opposed to] had I, you know, moved to a university or a state where it was just English all the time.

Buckley 9:07

Did you pick up on English, or did you initially come into school?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 9:10

Well, so I mean, in Puerto Rico, we speak a lot of English, [there is] English in textbooks, and you know, Puerto Rico being a colony of the U.S.. Right, there's a very large American influence, but you're not speaking English every day. So, and I think I mean we would even joke that that the dialect for Puerto Ricans speaking English comes more from family members in outside of the island. Like I mean a lot of family members, like say like in New York, for example. So, it was really more of a dialect than really speaking a very formal English. So I think that was maybe the difference. So even though we all spoke English, it was a little different to kind of go, "Oh, you

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud:

have to speak it every day.” And you have to kind of you know apply it to class or apply it to like your every day, you know, getting groceries or

stuff like that was relatively different. So that was that was a bit of a transition, and it helped having enough people that if you didn't know, there's enough of like an influence from you know Mexico or from that large of a Hispanic population that you could kind of go like, how do you say, and you'll get to some something.

Buckley 10:27

So, going back to Puerto Rico, we want to learn a little bit more about that. What was your family dynamic there? If you're comfortable talking about it.

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 10:37

So, all my family, like my immediate family, my parents, brother and sister—they were all in Puerto Rico at the time. So, I was kind of like the first from the close-knit family to leave to go to school. But I mean Latinos and Puerto Ricans in general [are] super family oriented, super connected, and that was relatively far. So, I didn't have the chance to say like, “Oh, for Christmas I want to go to Puerto Rico.” I mean, it was...you're [a] far, poor college student. So, like that, that wasn't necessarily happening. But you got a lot of connection, you know, either like through the mail.

I'm gonna say something, [and] you're gonna laugh. Back in the day, there was like no FaceTime or no Zoom. There was hardly email, you know, very limited access to internet like that in the you know mid to late 90s. So, a lot of it was just by phone, right? So, you kind of talk to your family over the phone regularly, like I mean at least weekly or so, and it was always like a conference call like everybody's here, your neighbors are here or something like that. So, there was a lot of communication like that, and you kind of you know you really get to miss the little things from the island.

And we were far, right? It was, even though in El Paso, El Paso has a large military population because of Fort Bliss, so there were Puerto Ricans there, and there were Puerto Rican restaurants, and there was like a little bit of finding the Puerto Rican connection, which the food, for example, that you grow up getting used to...with little effort you could find it, and then find--it's gonna sound funny—but the opportunity to speak to other Puerto Ricans, right?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud:

So, you maybe think about it like if you happen to go to like the UK. Let's say you go across the pond, and even though your British counterparts speak English, right, you're not speaking like American English, right? So [it's] the same thing. To speak Puerto Rican would be like getting out with other Puerto Rican people, and then having those conversations and talk about things in the island. So that was that was really needed at the time, and then allow you to kind of get connections from home.

The worst thing as far as like missing home is El Paso is just a gigantic desert...nothing but land this way, that way. And in Puerto Rico we're used to the ocean and the beach, and so not having that was pretty hard. I was probably always thinking about "where's the beach?"

So that was a little bit difficult, but you know you're in school like everything seems relatively temporary. Maybe like you kind of feel like that as students, right? Like you're close, but you're away from home. So, at times you feel like, "Oh man, this is kind of feels like a transitional stage." Like you're not there for a very long time. You had that kind of feeling, but then that just never ended, right?

Since I left Puerto Rico as a student in '97, I never really moved back to the island. So now, think about that. So now I've lived longer outside of the island than I lived in the island, right? We didn't think about that before this summer. But that's kind of how it goes...life takes the wheel.

Buckley 14:01

Does your family still live out there?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 14:04

My parents are still in Puerto Rico. I have an older brother still in Puerto Rico. I have a younger sister that lives in Florida, but that happened after I had left. Then kind of similar situation. She left the island looking for work and school and things like that. So, for us now, from going all the way to Texas and wherever that took me, now being in Georgia, she's in Florida, so we're relatively close.

Darian Doster 14:31

So back in Puerto Rico, what were your favorite things to do on the island back when you were a kid growing up?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 14:38

Definitely time outside...being in the beach, being in the river. And this connects to things that led to the career that I chose. When I say being in the river, I mean flipping rocks and fishing and being curious about...I end up work[ing] with river animals or river critters. And we spent a lot of time just in the water, right? Doing things in the water.

So that was one thing that connects. And then just being out, right? Like listening [to] or watching music shows, things like that. Music has always kind of been a connector to things that I was doing, and even throughout my academic preparation, that was the one crossroad that I was as a career thinking I'm either gonna do music or I'm gonna do academics.

So a lot of that was really connected to growing up in the island where music was present all the time. Music was always playing at home. As far as I can remember, every time you were doing something, there was always a playlist in the background of like Latin music or even, at the time, younger popular music for the island. So I think that's still a thing today and even the things that I do now still, weirdly enough, revolve a lot around like music and a lot of Puerto Rican influenced music.

Darian Doster 16:09

So, did you used to make songs?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 16:16

Yeah...I did spend a lot of time, and this was before even leaving the island. So, I have uncles and my brother and a lot of cousins that were into music...we played music in bands or like even just young from groups like that or from even music school. So there was always an influence in music. When I was in college, [I] played a lot of music. Then even through graduate school, [I] played to the point that [I] recorded music, been in music videos, things like that. A lot of strange music influence, which I don't know. I mean, I don't know how many other professors you meet that look like this, but mainly that's the musical influence at some point in the career pathway.

Buckley 17:12

So, after college, how'd you come over to Georgia? Was there anywhere else in between?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 17:21

Yes...College is a long transition. I went to El Paso for my undergraduate degree in biology. When I finished at El Paso, I graduated and I did my master's. I was in Louisiana. I went to Louisiana State. I was there for three years. I met my wife there. Got married. Started my PhD in Southern Illinois University, but for my PhD, the research component of it was in Panama in Central America. So, I moved from Louisiana to Panama, Central America for about three years—I got married on a Friday and [on] Monday, my wife and I packed and moved for Panama three days later. Lived in Panama, very kind of honeymoon/work life of a of a graduate student. Then moved to Illinois. Was in Illinois. I want to say probably about five years or so in Illinois.

[In] between my PhD, I did a postdoc back at the University of Puerto Rico, but I was still living in Illinois. So, I would go back and forth. I never moved back to Puerto Rico. The postdoc meaning you finish your PhD, you're looking for a job, but you have like this transitional position where you're doing after your PhD, but not an academic. It's...almost like a like a gap year, except it's like multiple years.

So, I did that and was doing projects with the University of Puerto Rico, but related to the University of Georgia, so that gave me exposure to the academic system here. And I was lucky enough that there was a position that came up at Georgia Southern. I applied. It's hard to get an academic job, and I was fortunate enough to get this one. And for 16 years, has been everything that I never knew I always wanted.

Buckley 19:26

I like how you jumped from so many different areas and [have] seen schools in so many different states, like different places.

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 19:34

And yeah...and that leads me to the job that I do now in the Graduate College. So graduate education was an opportunity not just to live in different places, but to really get exposed to different fields...because a lot of times we think that, as an undergraduate (maybe at the years that you are now), I would have never thought in

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud:

a million years that “Oh yeah, I'm going to be a college professor.” That would have never crossed my mind, a teacher would not cross my mind. So, bless y'all for saying it that way, right?

But I did know from having the opportunity to leave Puerto Rico to go to school in El Paso, [that] I could use this avenue to kind of learn, go to different places. Particularly, I mean, I was fortunate enough that there was support. There was financial support for all those things. There were scholarships as an undergrad, graduate assistantships as a graduate student. There was funding support, so I was able to make those moves without necessarily having it become a tremendous financial burden. So...I left Puerto Rico by myself. I came to Louisiana. When I left Louisiana, I was already married. So I was already like, “oh God, I got to really find a job or something.” So, that led me to opportunities where...if there was an opportunity somewhere that was feasible, I was willing to take it. Whereas sometimes you know folks might be tentative to go [because] “I don't want to leave Georgia or I don't want to leave my apartment here or my family.”

At that point, I already made such a long jump away from the island that it was easier for me to [think] “All right...this is just part of the journey.” So that kind of helped. And then, I had the opportunity to go back to Puerto Rico as a postdoc, doing projects out there, and I'll never forget coming back. My friends from high school or childhood [were] like, “It's like that fool that was out there flipping rocks.” So that was kind of neat to have.

I remember my parents coming when I was about to graduate [with] my master's degree. My parents came to Louisiana not for my graduation, but they came at the end of the degree. You have to do a public exit seminar and go through a defense. My parents came to that, and that was the first time that they probably saw me in that type of venue teaching to the masses or giving a lecture.

And my dad was like, “Whoa, that's not who I remember.” So that was kind of neat for them to see that growth, the maturity...towards the professional.

Buckley 22:36

That's awesome!

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 22:37

And the opportunity to move to Panama, too. I mean, Central America, right? That was something that graduate school allowed me to do—to go and live in a different country at that point already with a family. So, that was a really neat experience, and I think about that today when I recruit students or when I tell students about opportunities, or even students that I bring here. I've been fortunate enough [that] I've had multiple students from Puerto Rico come to Georgia Southern to work with me. I could tell them that it's an opportunity.

Darian Doster 23:15

Now, when you visit America, could you see a difference of the culture between Puerto Rico and then visiting to all the different cities?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 23:28

100% yeah. So, from Puerto Rico to El Paso, I was lucky because there was enough of a Mexican influence that there was still a Hispanic/Latino connection—even as simple as saying most of my classmates were brown like me, right?

Then I moved to Louisiana. Louisiana was completely different. That was my first exposure to like the South, like the South South. At that point, I was the only brown guy, right? And especially in the natural sciences [field], from my professors to my lab mates, colleagues, everybody in the classroom it was primarily just white and white males, right? Not a lot of females, definitely not a lot of, well, non-American, non-white people.

So, that was something that I was naive about. I had no idea. I come from an island where we're a rainbow. I mean, it's just, I mean, even in your own family [at] the table, you're like, "This is completely normal." But then you see [and] you're like, "Oh wow, this is actually this is different." And being naive is probably at the time...well, for me it was probably a good thing because I wasn't aware of when there were microaggressions coming towards me or when people were trying to exclude me from things. I had no idea. I was just doing my thing.

So, accidentally, it allowed me to be more resourceful or...by being less aware, it was harder to put me down, right? So, then that kind of led me to keep moving [to] Southern Illinois, so still kind of South, but Midwest...definitely different. Then at that point...the South, and the friendliness and the food of the South you kind of start missing. You're like, "Oh man, yeah, the South is great." My wife is from Louisiana, so

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud:

we were already moving away for both of us. So that was different. And at that point, in both Louisiana and in Illinois, we have very little connection to other Latinos or other Hispanics.

I have two daughters. They were both born in Illinois, and when they were very little, we were really gonna speak Spanish to the babies. And my oldest daughter goes to Georgia Southern now, when she was...in a university daycare [we] went to pick her up one time, and the teachers said, "Oh, she's behind on her speech. She's not saying a lot of words." And then we freaked out. We're like, "Oh God, we gotta just speak to her in English now." Which was a huge mistake, because in our part she was doing well. She was just learning Spanish--

Student 26:47

She was learning two languages

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 26:48

and nobody else out there [was]. So, now we backtrack, regret that a little bit, and we're a little bit more purposeful with our youngest daughter. So strange, right, the little things?

But then you look at all those things, and when we moved to Panama, it was like going back, for me at least, to the core of Latin American culture, everything from the food to the music to the fact that everybody was Latino then. In Panama [it's] a complete rainbow again of all the cultures because you got the canal, you got all the influence over the years, a lot of big Asian culture, big South American culture, and then a big Caribbean culture, and even a big American culture. Panama has a big blend of American culture there too. So that was pretty cool.

Darian Doster 27:54

What are some traditional foods that you guys would eat back in Puerto Rico?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 28:00

So, a lot of plantain-based stuff, like bananas. So in the Caribbean throughout, there's a lot of fried plantains and sweet plantains; rice and beans is always in every meal.

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud:

Here [you go] to a place, and they always offer you a side—"You want fries a side or a salad?" In Puerto Rico, they don't even ask. You're gonna get rice and beans.

[When] I go to Puerto Rican restaurants now...it's really very simple, affordable. It [is] just food that you could get even if you're poor, right? So, rice, beans, chicken, plantains, things like that. So...you're not necessarily getting anything that's like out of the ordinary. We're not eating lobster and salmon or something like that, right? We eat fish and we can fish for fish.

And then drinks, too. A lot of different drinks from coffee in the morning all the way to mojitos at night. The festive drink culture was always there.

Buckley 29:31

Have you taken those things that you grew up on with your daughters and now they're starting to like grow up on that stuff, or has it changed?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 29:39

Well, yes, except so my daughters probably have a larger Southern Louisiana influence than Puerto Rican influence because we've never moved back to the island. So, they get to see their Louisiana grandparents and their Louisiana relatives a lot more than they see their Puerto Ricans. And plus access-wise...

There are things that they know are like from the island...like the fried plantains. I think everyone knows [about] Mexican tamales—we have a similar thing, but it's made out of a different mass, right? Pasteles [are] like a Puerto Rican tamale, and that's a Christmas food. So, my daughters and even my wife, they know that that's the thing. Rice and beans is a thing. They know rum is a thing...that's just the culture, right? But in the same ways, they eat a lot of Louisiana flavorful, spicy Southern food.

Buckley 30:55

So, they're eating good no matter what.

Everyone

[Laughter]

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 30:58

They are, they are! We joke. They are “Hick-Spanics” [and] they have that southern feel, but then at the same time the Caribbean feel. It's Creole, right? It's like a Creole situation.

Darian Doster 31:12

So, would you be the cook, or would your wife be the cook in the family?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 31:17

My wife, 100%. I mean, I could survive. And especially when we're like, “We're gonna make pastelas” and [then] we're like, “Um...we should just go to a restaurant.” So, I can make a mean mojito, right? But the food itself...no, my wife is definitely the cook. I'm the clean...after the madness, I come and put it all together again.

Buckley 32:01

Do you want to talk to us a little bit about the possessions that you brought?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 32:07

I got some here. The first thing that you will see...I'm willing to bet...if you ever like stumble into a Puerto Rican, they will have a flag. Like we love to put the flag on everything. It's always been there. I probably got like six or seven different flags in different places. So, the flag [is] always a thing.

The other thing...and when I was talking to Alex about this...the examples that she mentioned didn't really resonate with me. So I brought this...a typical Puerto Rican straw hat, and we call this a pava. [When] you grow up you, you have one of these. [When] you go to like traditional...Puerto Rican night, and there's dances and stuff like that...we always would have a pala...I would love to tell you that this is the pala that I grew up with, but it's not true.

Bad Bunny brought this back, so Bad Bunny kind of went out to like the Met Gala with a pava, and Puerto Ricans were like, “Ohhh.” I mean, they all know what a pava is, but you know, we probably have pavas out in the deep end of the closet. And now we're like, “Wait a minute, it's a thing, right?” So, [with] everything that he's done the

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud:

last couple of years, things like this [are] coming back. It's a simple hat...you think about in the tropics having a straw hat, but this is just a traditional Puerto Rican [hat]. The campesinos, or the people out working in the fields, will all like have straw hats, and they come in different sizes. So, I love having that.

So, this [next item] might not seem like a like an artifact...I'm into music a lot...so, [do] you know what this is? I mean, you gotta know what this is.

Buckley 34:24

I don't know what that is.

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 34:25

Well, [at] the Super Bowl, Bad Bunny had the halftime show, and people don't realize that Benito is Bad Bunny's name...You know, people that don't know football back home, and they're like, "Oh, I'm here for the Bad Bunny show."

So, we all had hats and things representative of Puerto Rico. There's the flag with the football, right? So there's like a lot of things like that that were kind of related to...being Puerto Rican. We already knew that it was cool, but now all the people are getting to see it on like the grand stage. So, I brought that, and then let me get another one.

So...if you go out of the country and they ask you, "What's the national animal for the U.S.?" and you think about the bald eagle. Well, in Puerto Rico, it's actually a little tiny frog called a coquí. So...Bad Bunny...just brought kind of brought the frog back out. So that's actually pretty neat. And for me, being somebody that studies animals and things like that, it's pretty cool to kind of have a coquí all the time. And it became kind of neat.

And then I say...like you know flags everywhere. I have all kinds of like keychains from students. When they go home, they'll be like "I didn't bring you anything, but I was in the airport so I got you a keychain."

...So the natives of the island were the Taíno Indians...the native Caribbean tribe of Native Americans. This is this is supposed to be their symbol for the coquí frog, right? So, the coqui frog really becomes something embedded. So, a lot of people have like little symbolisms of the coquí. I have a coquí tattooed on my wrist there, and then I have another Taíno Indian, so those are things that we get thinking about the island.

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud:

So those are big things. And then I mentioned earlier, I'm from a city in the west side of the island, called Maya West, right? So, this is a hat that says like "Made in Maya West." This is from their basketball team, which are actually the Taíno Indians too, so Indios, and it's got all this kind of symbolisms for the island.

I also have a license plate from my hometown. This will be what the Puerto Rican license plate looks like, except it just says the name of the town. But it has behind it...not quite a lighthouse, but like a kind of like a guard station.

So in the northeast side of the island, where you have the capital city of San Juan, still has all the Spanish kind of structures and forts...and it's got like old school cannonballs. You might see things like that in St. Augustine, Florida.

So those are generally my artifacts. Other than that, [I'm] still a big fan of like the music of today. I wear my Bad Bunny shoes and my Bad Bunny socks, but this is a little bit of the old and then a lot of the new.

Darian Doster 38:30

Let's talk a little bit more about your tattoos. I see you have a guitar on your arm?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 38:34

Oh yeah, so I mentioned music being a part of my life, right? So this guitar, you see how it's missing the fretboard? When I had to make the decision if I was going one way or the other, and I chose kind of academics, was when I when I got my degree in in Louisiana. I went to LSU. Are you a fan of sports? They're the LSU Tigers.

So, I stopped playing music when got my degree at LSU, so there's a tiger right here. You see the tiger...

Students 39:08

[in awe] Wowww...

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 39:08

...and the tiger has the other piece of the guitar in his mouth.

Students 39:09

That's cool. That's cool.

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 39:10

The tiger just decided for me, so I went academic. It all looks like one big piece, but these are like multiple...So I ran track, so here's my little track and field sign, I've got a clock out here...a bunch of island signs. I study a lot of aquatic critters. I don't know if you could kind of see them, but this is a mayfly right here. And then I have a dragonfly somewhere in this arm somewhere.

Georgia Southern was my first real big-time job. So. there's a Georgia Southern eagle right there.

Buckley

Oh, that's so cool.

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud

Yeah, and then I study fish. So, there's a fish out here too.

Buckley 39:56

That's awesome.

Darian Doster 39:58

So, when did you get these tats?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 39:57

So, I got actually my first in Puerto Rico...this is my Bad Bunny socks. It's taking a turn now. This is when I was about 14 years old, and then you just opened Pandora's box from there on. And then I started going down the dark path of tattoos.

I have my daughter's name. I have my wife's name. Yeah, kind of keeps going. But it's all little stories, right? A lot of island stuff, a lot of things in the different stops of my life, right? So that kind of eventually created like a single piece.

Buckley 40:45

Are tattoos a big thing in Puerto Rico as well?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 40:50

Yeah...

Buckley 40:50

Or do they kind of depend on the person?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 40:51

I think so. Well, so, if you think about for my age, right, and when I first started getting visible tattoos, it was not. In fact, when I came to Georgia Southern as a young professor, I had a lot of students will come up to me. I mean, I will come to class, and when I start teaching, people will be like, "Whoa!"

And it was a point of conversation then, and definitely in this type of role. I mean, I could think at Georgia Southern of maybe myself and another administrator that have a lot of tattoos.

Buckley 41:45

Dr. Ray has even talked about that at one point, when she first came to Georgia Southern, covering up her tattoos.

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 41:51

There's probably many layers to this, right? So, I talk about coming up in [my] field, right? You are already a little bit of an anomaly and an outsider, so you don't want to add things that will make you even more of an outsider.

Now, at my career stage, I'm like, yeah, absolutely. I want to do the opposite. I want you all to know that it's entirely fine. Like, be yourself and let your experience and your career and your pedigree and how good you are at your job speak for what it is rather than people having to make assumptions about...with me growing up, it would have been like "How could this possibly be a thing? Here's a Hispanic guy with a beard, right, and a bunch of tattoos, and oh, it can't be good, right?"

So, you get to get them wrong a little bit. And if that helps somebody in the future, kind of go like, "Yeah, it's okay to have tattoos, or it's okay to be Hispanic in this field, or it's okay to just be a little bit different or unique. Totally fine."

Buckley 43:07

Yeah, that's awesome. I love that advice.

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 43:14

Yeah, and I mean, I think it's better now. If you look around, maybe as you take your classes, I think you see a lot more of the reality of like how diverse our faculty and staff and student body is versus [in the past].

And again, I don't want to make it sound like I went to school in the 60s, right?

Students 43:38

[Laughter]

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 43:39

But it was different...it was different, and it wasn't as welcoming to be different.

And I thought about that a lot, like from becoming a professor. But a lot of things that I did in my specific field was for that: bringing Puerto Rican students here to Georgia Southern. The programs that I brought here as a professor were really embedded in in

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud:

bringing minorities to science, to college, to even my specific area in biology, and maybe even now a little more towards graduate school. So, it was it was very purposeful to do that, and at first it was just like “Okay, well maybe more Hispanics.” But no, now it's like everything. Now it's like more of everything. Like give me the gumbo...or like for Puerto Ricans the asopao...like a soup of everything of like diversity in the field, so that's really cool, yeah.

Buckley 44:46

So when did you say you started Georgia Southern again?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 44:48

2010...[joking] I was six years old.

Students 44:57

[Laughter]

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 44:55

No, no..I would have been about to turn 32 years old when I came to Georgia Southern...I [had] studied rivers that were in this area, but I had no idea what even southeast Georgia was.

In fact, music was one of the things that brought me back to southeast Georgia. If you spend enough time in Statesboro, there's a great blues musician called Blind Willie McTell that has a song called *Statesboro Blues* that is, of course, made popular by the Allman Brothers afterwards.

So I knew that coming in. I was like, "Hey, you tell your friends." It's like, "Oh, where are you going?" "Oh, I got an interview in Georgia...you know, *Statesboro Blues*, like you know the song?" And people were like, "Ah, yeah, absolutely, I know what that is."

But I had no idea what to expect. And like I said, at that time, it was what I never knew I always wanted.

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud:

I mean, like so, 2010, right? Think about that. Where were you in 2010? Huh? Right. So like, how old are you?

Students 46:11

Definitely preschool. Yeah, yeah.

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 46:18

So, it was different. I mean, back then it wasn't 30,000 plus students, and it was different even for me. I had very little idea what was gonna happen, but I was all in. I probably got that tattoo soon after.

Buckley 46:36

So you talked about one of your highlights being bringing diversity into the school.

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud

Yeah.

Buckley

What are some like big changes you've seen, like maybe culturally, language-wise?

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 46:47

Well, so in the time that I've been here, there's been events [that] probably predates you all being at Georgia Southern. There's been events at Georgia Southern that were tough, right? As a minority faculty, too. I mean, there were incidents and things that really changed the way we do things, not just at Georgia Southern, but like in schools in general.

So, there was a time, right, where Georgia Southern was really doing great things. We had a Chief Diversity Officer. We were really purposefully recruiting for positions to be

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud:

more representative of the student body because, that's the thing, the student body has always been incredibly diverse here.

In my classes, for the programs that I had, to bring students to conferences and to bring students to scholarships and things like that were primarily trying to support minorities. It was never hard for me to find students that were already here and doing great. And I was like, "Hey, guess what? You're in my class. I have the scholarship that will give you money to come with me to this conference." That was always easy and key, and to bring students here.

But at the faculty side of things, that wasn't happening. Like when I got my job here, if I looked at the entire Department of Biology, [at that point] maybe like two or three of us that were you know non-traditional like white.

Buckley 48:21

Yeah.

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 48:22

I mean very diverse in terms of like males and females, in fact, like that field has had, I think, at the student side, good representation of females over males. I think in biology, at the student level, lots of females get into the degree, but that doesn't necessarily transition to the profession. Hispanics...worse, African Americans...worse, right?

Like you have the people, the training for people to take it as students, but as you kind of go to like, "Okay, well, how are the professionals looking?" They all disappear, even from getting PhDs.

So there was a time that I could be giving a lecture, and tell people like "I'm a unicorn of this field because I'm still here as a professor," right? My specific field, like fisheries biology and natural resource biology...even worse, right? Like the number of people with PhDs that turned into professionals...it just didn't match. So you kind of go like, "Where do they go? Like, what is happening? Why are they not staying?" And yeah, they were not getting the chance in the positions.

So, for me to be at and now even more to be at a Dean's Office is incredibly rare. But I mean, it's not because there's not people out there that could do it, right? And you should think about that, right? Like, is it when you were growing up, right? If you were inspired by a teacher or by anybody, by an engineer or a coach or anybody. I had a

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud:

student here who's actually very prominent now as a professional, that she was inspired by a zookeeper, right?

And that's the thing. You didn't you didn't really see that as “Okay, that's why I want to have that profession.” But if you're gonna go out in the field and all your teachers didn't look like you, didn't talk like you, they didn't have the same experiences, then you'd have to be naive like me to think like, well, I guess that's normal. Or you really had to be really lucky, because otherwise you go like, “Well, there's really nobody that looks like me or talks like me in the decision. Maybe there's no jobs for me there.”

So, in that one student that I talked about who still is doing great things. She talked about that as like having mirrors, right? Like if I could go, you could show me, you could open the doors for me and show me what's inside. But if nothing inside looks like me or like what I do, then it doesn't matter. But if you have all these mirrors and I could see myself in the mirror, then whoa, wait a minute! I can do this thing.

I think that that's a better way. Like you come here and maybe you kind of go “I don't know, like Dr. Checo—he seems to be having a good time with the Dean's Office. Maybe I can be a Dean, or maybe I can be a teacher, right? Or maybe I can do this or that. But that's easier than saying “I don't see anybody like me doing what I want to do.” What does that mean?

Buckley 51:34

That's awesome.

Student 51:30

In 2010, you said y'all had a Chief Diversity Officer...

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 51:40

Yes...[they] had a year here, and unfortunately, it happened because a bad thing happened during this other...and you could probably find this [online].

Students 51:55

[Laughter]

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 51:56

There was a guest lecture. It was early in a fall semester, and...they invited this Latina author right to give I think it was like a freshman lecture about a book that she had written. So, this was a class assignment that was a class that many people took. I don't know if it was like a first-year experience type of thing, something along those lines, or the second part of that.

So, they had an auditorium, and you know the speaker was talking about her story, and a student debated her about how...she didn't connect with the book. And then she kind of confronted the author. And the author was like, "Well, you know, it's my story as a Latina woman coming up in the profession.

If I said something about being a brown guy coming up in the profession, and then the student said, "That's not my story. I mean, it doesn't resonate at all with me," then I'm like, "Entirely fine...It's my story, right?"

To a point it became confrontational, and for some weird reason a mass of students went out and burnt the book. Like if we were back in the day, right?

So it became a big deal, and it became national news. For me, as Hispanic professor in the university, I was like, "Oh, am I safe here?" And you know, even colleagues and family members were like, "Hey, everything okay? Like, what's going on at Georgia Southern?" And so that became a big incident that got a lot of negative publicity.

Then there was another similar incident, and this one was a little bit more unique. Two roommates got together...and one made a comment, and it was distasteful. So that came up as like "Oh...like Georgia Southern has an issue with confrontation between students and race."

So that became a thing and people were vocal about it, and that led to like "Hey, we need to be better about diversity. We need to be better about, you know, the resources that we have for students to make sure that we're a welcoming environment, because again, a large amount of our student body is incredibly diverse.

So, they did things that allowed the university to grow in that space.

Unfortunately, you know, politics change...

Students 54:51

[chuckle]

Dr. J. Checo Colón-Gaud 51:56

...And now for a certain amount of time, you couldn't you know you couldn't say things like "DEI" and "diversity" and stuff like that. So. You know we don't have those positions as they were before. It's very disappointing. But, in a sad way, I also had to say "I get it, I get it".

You know we have to make sure that we're doing these things, but without putting that much of a red flag on it, where somebody will come and say like, "Ah, you can't use state or federal money to do that." That's you know, and unfortunately, you know, that's the reality that we're today. But I don't think that necessarily means that Georgia Southern is not really trying to do things to make sure that those incidents in the past don't happen. I think. And like I said, I am very naive about this thing on purpose. Yeah. Right. So yeah, you have to be. You have to be so that you could kind of power through.