

[Music]

0:10
welcome to the garden gate project a
0:11
podcast where we talk to professionals
0:13
across many fields who work directly and
0:15
indirectly with fans in our natural
0:17
world
0:18
we're students at american university in
0:20
washington dc and interns at the
0:22
smithsonian gardens
0:24
we created this project with the hopes
0:26
of inspiring a new generation to make
0:28
sustainable and meaningful change in our
0:31
world
0:31
i'm mckenna friedman i'm kat ryano and
0:34
i'm annie berlin
0:36
in this podcast we are talking with mike
0:38
mister mike mistrota is a landscape
0:41
architect for american university
0:45
thank you for meeting with me today mike
0:46
can we start off with your name and a
0:48
little bit about what you do

0:49
i'm a landscape architect i've worked
0:51
here at american university for 25 years
0:54
and
0:55
we've turned our entire campus into an
0:56
arboretum and gardens and it's been
0:59
quite an experience and prior to that i
1:01
worked in several different areas i've
1:03
worked for the national park service for
1:05
a few years and i've also worked in
1:07
private practice landscape architectural
1:09
design
1:10
what does a normal day look like for you
1:12
and how did you end up at american in
1:14
the first place
1:15
yeah so um my current job at american
1:17
university is i manage our campus
1:19
arboretum so my day-to-day role uh is a
1:23
varies from
1:24
with the seasons the weather and just
1:27
lots of things going on we get involved
1:28
with a lot of different things on the

1:30
campus some of which
1:32
you might not think would be part of a
1:34
you know taking care of the grounds of
1:36
the campus but for example um that we're
1:38
working with this learning by leading
1:40
program which is uh
1:42
which is great because it's it's a way
1:44
for uh folks like me that are in
1:46
facilities management they don't usually
1:48
teach classes or things like that but to
1:50
be able to be involved in the
1:52
educational offerings of the university
1:54
so we love working with our students and
1:56
find them so engaging and smart so and
1:59
helpful to some of the things we're
2:01
doing so that's one you know thing that
2:03
we're involved with uh things like you
2:05
know clubs like the beekeeping society
2:08
and the community garden and zero waste
2:10
club and the engineers for a sustainable
2:12
world club and all different types of

2:14
student club activities that are
2:16
involved with environmental things that
2:18
we can get involved with one of the
2:19
things the arboretum does is uh
2:22
really promotes the university not only
2:25
in attracting
2:26
future students but as well as getting
2:29
the word out that american university is
2:31
a nice place to visit a lot of our
2:33
neighbors you know
2:34
use our grounds as their kind of public
2:37
park we especially noticed this during
2:39
covet when everyone was cooped up inside
2:41
we didn't have any students on campus
2:43
but our neighbors were still out uh
2:45
strolling through campus and things like
2:47
that walking their dogs and their kids
2:48
learning how to ride their bikes and it
2:50
was uh interesting to watch but how did
2:52
i get here so i mean i started out in uh
2:55
way back when i was a college student i

2:57
thought i want to be an architect never
2:59
heard of landscape architecture and i
3:01
was in a first year design class and
3:04
sitting next to someone who was in
3:05
landscape architecture so i asked a few
3:07
questions and went and talked to one of
3:09
the professors and they basically said
3:11
landscape architecture is similar to
3:12
architecture but you get to do things
3:14
that are outside and more in tune with
3:16
the environment if you like that type of
3:18
thing might be a good career to think
3:19
about so i really did like that and um
3:22
loved the outdoors love nature always
3:24
have liked building things as a kid so i
3:26
always like designing and creating
3:28
things so it seemed like a good fit and
3:30
has been a good fit when i graduated
3:32
college i went in to start working for a
3:35
small landscape architecture firm in the
3:37
washington dc area and that firm grew

3:40
from i was like the third person
3:42
in the firm and grew to like 25 people
3:44
and
3:45
ended up leaving there and going to work
3:47
for the national park service for a few
3:49
years which was a neat experience
3:50
getting to travel a little bit and go to
3:52
some of our national parks which was
3:54
always a fun thing but then this job at
3:57
american university showed up and it's a
3:58
really kind of a unique position uh for
4:01
landscape arctic because you get to you
4:04
know basically stay in one place work on
4:07
one property and see it used so you get
4:10
to kind of
4:11
create something and then watch and
4:14
tweak it as as people use it so that's
4:17
kind of a neat experience and um like i
4:19
said i've been here for a long time i've
4:21
really enjoyed it and we've done quite a
4:23
bit it's hard for students that are here

4:24
now to imagine what it was like 25 years
4:27
ago because it was not the green uh
4:29
sustainable campus that it is today so
4:32
we really do feel that we've transformed
4:34
this campus in many ways and really um
4:36
it shows and i just saw just talking
4:39
someone yesterday the number of
4:40
applications to come to au is uh over 20
4:44
000 which is a record and when we first
4:46
started it was like 5 000 so i think you
4:49
know having a beautiful campus one
4:51
that's green and sustainable and really
4:53
helps
4:54
people want to be here that's one of the
4:56
selling points because i think we have a
4:58
campus that he has all the benefits of
5:00
being in the city but when you're on
5:02
campus you don't feel like you're in the
5:03
city and it feels you have kind of a you
5:05
know green space an open space i mean
5:09
you're not like down in the middle of

5:10
the grid of the city
5:12
even though you have access to it very
5:14
easily so it's a nice
5:16
combination
5:17
what would you say is the best thing you
5:19
did to get where you are today um
5:21
probably the best thing i did was
5:23
accepting this job
5:25
and seeing it back back then you know
5:27
this is this is like 1990
5:30
four or five time frame um
5:33
there were still things like classified
5:35
ads in the washington post and not so
5:37
much internet uh job search tools that
5:40
you have today but um i think just
5:42
seeing that the uh the ad in the paper i
5:44
remember and applying for it and
5:45
thinking it could be kind of a neat
5:46
position because i'd be able to work
5:48
with students um and be on a campus
5:51
which i always think of our campus as

5:53
kind of like a small city because we
5:55
have all the amenities of a city we have
5:57
our library we have public works we have
5:59
cultural events we have a lot of
6:01
learning opportunities we have guest
6:02
speakers and dignitaries coming in to
6:04
give lectures and things like that so
6:06
it's kind of those are all attractive
6:08
things a nice fitness facility center
6:10
that you can join and all those things
6:12
but it seemed like a really good
6:14
position
6:15
where i could um you know make some
6:18
positive changes and like i said live
6:20
with it so you know in private practice
6:22
you design something and oftentimes you
6:25
aren't involved in the construction or
6:26
if you are you don't get to go back and
6:28
see it too often so here every day i can
6:31
watch people walk through and experience
6:33
the things we've done on campus

6:36
what are some resources that helped you
6:38
along the way
6:39
yeah i think the best resources are
6:41
we've got a great team that's here and
6:44
it's changed a little bit over the years
6:46
but i think every time it makes change
6:48
we make it for for the better
6:50
so i mean obviously this is not a one
6:53
person transformation of this campus
6:55
it's been a team effort and just having
6:57
great teammates that all kind of believe
7:00
in the same philosophy and goals and
7:04
having the support of the administration
7:06
has made it possible all the things that
7:08
we've been able to do there's still more
7:10
things we want to do i think you know
7:11
we've come a really long ways and
7:14
really made american university a much
7:16
better place than it used to be
7:18
looking back at your career what is some
7:19
advice you to give yourself

7:21
i guess
7:22
looking back and i've done so many
7:24
different things one of the things the
7:26
nice things about this kind of career is
7:28
that there's a lot of variety
7:29
and a lot of different things you can
7:31
get involved with
7:33
landscape architecture as a profession
7:35
is a very broad profession there's lots
7:38
lots of ways you can go for example you
7:40
know some people focus their whole
7:42
career designing golf courses for
7:44
example or something like that very
7:46
specific but
7:47
most
7:48
most of us
7:49
get involved with all types of different
7:51
types of projects whether it's public
7:53
parks or residential projects or
7:55
commercial projects or on university we
7:58
get you know there's like all different

7:59
types of new buildings that are built
8:01
and sites around those buildings and
8:03
doing things really for our audience and
8:05
our audience is students so um i think
8:07
that the variety is something that's
8:09
really that i really enjoy you know
8:11
you're not doing the same thing every
8:13
day that's for sure a lot of exciting
8:14
you know types of projects coming your
8:16
way so i've enjoyed it
8:18
when working with this bayside american
8:20
did you find it difficult to incorporate
8:22
sustainability
8:23
yeah so that's a great question so when
8:25
i first started again 25 years ago
8:27
sustainability wasn't really emphasized
8:30
like it is today we started doing some
8:33
green and sustainable things really
8:34
before it became popular now you know
8:37
it's it's
8:38
expected i think in every college campus

8:41
we didn't have an office of
8:42
sustainability back when i first started
8:45
and we were one of the first schools to
8:46
actually have an office of
8:47
sustainability and really to take it to
8:49
the forefront you know eu has been one
8:51
of the leaders in
8:53
in green infrastructure and sustainable
8:56
sustainability the first
8:58
university to be carbon neutral in the
9:00
country and all those different things
9:02
and the landscape certainly plays a big
9:04
part of that and our our practices
9:07
for example we don't use pesticides on
9:09
campus any longer and things like that
9:12
so um things have changed over the time
9:14
and they're good i think it's been a
9:15
learning experience we have to be able
9:17
to adapt to new things that come out and
9:20
and one of the good things here is we
9:21
get to try out some new technologies and

9:23
be kind of a leader and um you know to
9:25
the landscape industry as well to try
9:28
some new things and promote them
9:30
what would you say is the most
9:32
challenging aspect of your career
9:34
so that's a good question today so one
9:36
of the things landscape architecture is
9:38
probably one of the more misunderstood
9:40
professions um people hear the word
9:42
landscape and they automatically think
9:43
of plants
9:45
they think okay well this
9:47
landscape architect must be involved
9:48
with plants and the profession is really
9:51
so much more than just the plant part of
9:53
it we are involved with all types of
9:55
things like pedestrian and vehicular
9:57
circulation and designing hardscapes and
9:59
lighting and creating spaces that are
10:02
used for people and different types of
10:05
events on college campus being a great

10:07
example you look at like our main quad
10:09
on campus and it could be used for
10:12
somebody's you know sitting out under a
10:13
tree with their laptops studying or it
10:16
could also be an event of 3 000 people
10:19
or protest designing spaces that are
10:21
adaptable and it can be used in many
10:24
different ways
10:25
and just understanding your audience i
10:27
think is one of the bigger challenges
10:28
that we face
10:30
that is super interesting i didn't think
10:32
of it like that i knew there was a
10:33
design aspect but i didn't think of the
10:35
practical parts of the job
10:38
right yeah the way we like to look at it
10:40
is you know architects design buildings
10:42
and buildings are an important part of
10:43
the landscape because the outside of the
10:45
building that you see is what frames the
10:47
outdoor spaces but we you know like to

10:49
be involved with everything that's
10:50
outside the building so and even what
10:51
the building looks like because that
10:52
does influence the landscape as well
10:55
yeah i never really thought of it like
10:56
that
10:57
does your work at american give you more
10:59
of a sense of community than working at
11:00
a traditional firm
11:02
definitely you know being part of a
11:04
campus community so you've got students
11:06
faculty staff they're involved with
11:08
alumni our neighbors so
11:11
we always talk about the au community it
11:13
really is a community feeling and you're
11:15
part of you know something bigger my
11:17
other jobs you know the national park
11:19
service
11:20
that was kind of a family atmosphere if
11:22
you were work for the park service you
11:24
know you had lots of other people to

11:26
communicate with that kind of understood
11:28
the you know the natural aspects of
11:30
things like that
11:31
when you work for a smaller private firm
11:34
you know it's still because we spend a
11:35
lot of hours together it's a profession
11:37
where you often work late uh meet
11:39
deadlines sometimes and things like that
11:40
so you get to be friends with your core
11:44
group but um you know here at au or any
11:46
university i guess you kind of get a
11:48
larger kind of sense of community just
11:50
because it's a large number of people
11:52
involved and so yeah i think plus you're
11:54
always kind of working for a common goal
11:55
to make the university better or your
11:58
you know students learn more or things
12:00
like that so what are the biggest
12:02
differences you found from working
12:03
somewhere like the national park service
12:05
as opposed to a university campus like

12:07
american
12:08
yeah well it's very different so
12:10
national park service is a federal
12:11
government agency um so there's a little
12:14
bit more bureaucracy involved and things
12:16
like that you know what i really enjoyed
12:18
there was just
12:19
getting the chance to travel some of our
12:21
national parks they're all beautiful or
12:24
historic in
12:25
their own right and learning about them
12:28
and getting to talk to the folks to take
12:30
care of them um everyone's very you know
12:32
kind of passionate about what they do
12:34
sometimes even to an extreme it seems
12:36
like coming here you know people are
12:38
more concerned about the student
12:40
experience and not so much about whether
12:42
the tree on the quad is protected the
12:45
park service like everything's about
12:47
protecting the natural resources but

12:49
here it's you know
12:50
on a college campus the students are
12:52
your resources that are primary so as it
12:54
should be
12:55
um so it's a little different and you
12:57
know i wasn't coming here i was working
12:59
with lots of different types of
13:00
professionals in different fields park
13:02
services was more you know landscape
13:04
architects and historians and ecologists
13:06
and everyone kind of focused on the
13:08
environment there we're here it's not as
13:10
just a wide variety of different people
13:13
you have to coordinate with well again
13:15
thank you so much for taking time with
13:16
me today
13:18
yeah i enjoyed it
13:23
[Music]
13:42
the garden gate was created by kyra
13:44
burba and carolyn mcdonald as part of
13:46
learning by leading initiative with the

13:48
smithsonian gardens season two team
13:50
includes mckenna friedland catherine
13:53
mariano and annie berlin the music is
13:55
royalty-free music on soundcloud special
13:58
thanks to cynthia brown and paula healy
14:00
learn more by visiting gardens.si.edu
14:03
thanks for listening
14:06
[Music]
14:36