welcome to the garden gate project a podcast where we talk to professionals across many fields who work directly and indirectly with fans in our natural world we're students at american university in washington dc and interns at the smithsonian gardens we created this project with the hopes of inspiring a new generation to make sustainable and meaningful change in our world i'm mckenna friedman i'm kat ryano and i'm annie berlin in this podcast we are talking with mike mister mike mistrota is a landscape architect for american university what does a normal day look like for you and how did you end up at american in the first place yeah so um my current job at american university is i manage our campus arboretum so my day-to-day role uh is a varies from with the seasons the weather and just lots of things going on we get involved with a lot of different things on the
campus some of which you might not think would be part of a you know taking care of the grounds of the campus but for example um that we're working with this learning by leading program which is uh which is great because it's it's a way for uh folks like me that are in facilities management they don't usually teach classes or things like that but to be able to be involved in the educational offerings of the university so we love working with our students and find them so engaging and smart so and helpful to some of the things we're doing so that's one you know thing that we're involved with uh things like you know clubs like the beekeeping society and the community garden and zero waste club and the engineers for a sustainable world club and all different types of student club activities that are involved with environmental things that we can get involved with one of the things the arboretum does is uh really promotes the university not only in attracting future students but as well as getting the word out that american university is a nice place to visit a lot of our neighbors you know use our grounds as their kind of public park we especially noticed this during covet when everyone was cooped up inside we didn't have any students on campus but our neighbors were still out uh strolling through campus and things like that walking their dogs and their kids was uh interesting to watch but how did i get here so i mean i started out in uh way back when i was a college student i
thought i want to be an architect never
heard of landscape architecture and i
was in a first year design class and
sitting next to someone who was in
landscape architecture so i asked a few
questions and went and talked to one of
the professors and they basically said
landscape architecture is similar to
architecture but you get to do things
that are outside and more in tune with
the environment if you like that type of
thing might be a good career to think
about so i really did like that and um
loved the outdoors love nature always
have liked building things as a kid so i
always like designing and creating
things so it seemed like a good fit and
has been a good fit when i graduated
college i went in to start working for a
small landscape architecture firm in the
washington dc area and that firm grew
from i was like the third person
in the firm and grew to like 25 people
ended up leaving there and going to work
for the national park service for a few
years which was a neat experience
getting to travel a little bit and go to
some of our national parks which was
always a fun thing but then this job at
american university showed up and it's a
really kind of a unique position uh for
landscape arctic because you get to you
know basically stay in one place work on
one property and see it used so you get
to kind of create something and then watch and
tweak it as as people use it so that's
kind of a neat experience and um like i
said i've been here for a long time i've
really enjoyed it and we've done quite a
bit it's hard for students that are here
now to imagine what it was like 25 years ago because it was not the green uh sustainable campus that it is today so we really do feel that we've transformed this campus in many ways and really um it shows and i just saw just talking someone yesterday the number of applications to come to au is uh over 20 000 which is a record and when we first started it was like 5 000 so i think you know having a beautiful campus one that's green and sustainable and really helps people want to be here that's one of the selling points because i think we have a campus that he has all the benefits of being in the city but when you're on campus you don't feel like you're in the city and it feels you have kind of a you know green space an open space i mean you're not like down in the middle of
kind of like a small city because we have all the amenities of a city we have our library we have public works we have cultural events we have a lot of learning opportunities we have guest speakers and dignitaries coming in to give lectures and things like that so it's kind of those are all attractive things a nice fitness facility center that you can join and all those things but it seemed like a really good position where i could um you know make some positive changes and like i said live with it so you know in private practice you design something and oftentimes you aren't involved in the construction or if you are you don't get to go back and see it too often so here every day i can watch people walk through and experience the things we've done on campus what are some resources that helped you along the way yeah i think the best resources are we've got a great team that's here and it's changed a little bit over the years but i think every time it makes change we make it for the better so i mean obviously this is not a one person transformation of this campus it's been a team effort and just having great teammates that all kind of believe in the same philosophy and goals and having the support of the administration has made it possible all the things that we've been able to do there's still more things we want to do i think you know we've come a really long ways and really made american university a much better place than it used to be looking back at your career what is some advice you to give yourself
i guess looking back and i've done so many different things one of the things the nice things about this kind of career is that there's a lot of variety and a lot of different things you can get involved with landscape architecture as a profession is a very broad profession there's lots lots of ways you can go for example you know some people focus their whole career designing golf courses for example or something like that very specific but most most of us get involved with all types of different types of projects whether it's public parks or residential projects or commercial projects or on university we get you know there's like all different types of new buildings that are built and sites around those buildings and doing things really for our audience and our audience is students so um i think that the variety is something that's really that i really enjoy you know you're not doing the same thing every day that's for sure a lot of exciting you know types of projects coming your way so i've enjoyed it when working with this bayside american did you find it difficult to incorporate sustainability yeah so that's a great question so when i first started again 25 years ago sustainability wasn't really emphasized like it is today we started doing some green and sustainable things really before it became popular now you know it's it's expected i think in every college campus
we didn't have an office of sustainability back when i first started
and we were one of the first schools to actually have an office of sustainability and really to take it to the forefront you know eu has been one of the leaders in green infrastructure and sustainable sustainability the first university to be carbon neutral in the country and all those different things and the landscape certainly plays a big part of that and our our practices for example we don't use pesticides on campus any longer and things like that so um things have changed over the time and they're good i think it's been a learning experience we have to be able to adapt to new things that come out and one of the good things here is we get to try out some new technologies and
be kind of a leader and um you know to the landscape industry as well to try some new things and promote them what would you say is the most challenging aspect of your career so that's a good question today so one of the things landscape architecture is probably one of the more misunderstood professions um people hear the word landscape and they automatically think of plants they think okay well this landscape architect must be involved with plants and the profession is really so much more than just the plant part of it we are involved with all types of things like pedestrian and vehicular circulation and designing hardscapes and lighting and creating spaces that are used for people and different types of events on college campus being a great
example you look at like our main quad on campus and it could be used for somebody's you know sitting out under a tree with their laptops studying or it could also be an event of 3 000 people or protest designing spaces that are adaptable and it can be used in many different ways and just understanding your audience i think is one of the bigger challenges that we face that is super interesting i didn't think of it like that i knew there was a design aspect but i didn't think of the practical parts of the job right yeah the way we like to look at it is you know architects design buildings and buildings are an important part of the landscape because the outside of the building that you see is what frames the outdoor spaces but we you know like to be involved with everything that's outside the building so and even what the building looks like because that does influence the landscape as well yeah i never really thought of it like that does your work at american give you more of a sense of community than working at a traditional firm definitely you know being part of a campus community so you've got students faculty staff they're involved with alumni our neighbors so we always talk about the au community it really is a community feeling and you're part of you know something bigger my other jobs you know the national park service that was kind of a family atmosphere if you were work for the park service you know you had lots of other people to
communicate with that kind of understood
the you know the natural aspects of
when you work for a smaller private firm
you know it's still because we spend a lot of hours together it's a profession
where you often work late uh meet
deadlines sometimes and things like that
so you get to be friends with your core group but um you know here at au or any university i guess you kind of get a larger kind of sense of community just because it's a large number of people involved and so yeah i think plus you're always kind of working for a common goal to make the university better or your you know students learn more or things like that so what are the biggest differences you found from working somewhere like the national park service as opposed to a university campus like american national park service is a federal government agency um so there's a little bit more bureaucracy involved and things like that you know what i really enjoyed there was just getting the chance to travel some of our national parks they're all beautiful or historic in their own right and learning about them and getting to talk to the folks to take care of them um everyone's very you know kind of passionate about what they do sometimes even to an extreme it seems like coming here you know people are more concerned about the student experience and not so much about whether the tree on the quad is protected the park service like everything's about protecting the natural resources but
here it's you know
on a college campus the students are
your resources that are primary so as it
should be
um so it's a little different and you
know i wasn't coming here i was working
with lots of different types of
professionals in different fields park
services was more you know landscape
architects and historians and ecologists
and everyone kind of focused on the
environment there we're here it's not as
just a wide variety of different people
you have to coordinate with well again
thank you so much for taking time with
me today
yeah i enjoyed it
the garden gate was created by kyra
burba and carolyn mcdonald as part of
learning by leading initiative with the