The Santa Maria College Podcast
Episode 6: Nicola Principe (Class of 2014)

Jake: [00:00:00] Welcome to the Santa Maria College Podcast, where once a month we sit down with members of our community who are creating, innovating, leading, and contributing to making the world a better place. From the college's history to social justice to entrepreneurship and innovation, we tap into a wide range of topics that affect our girls who are the leaders of tomorrow.

So come along with us for the ride as we pick the brains of those who have been pivotal in Santa Maria's growth and celebrate those who continue to be change-makers.

So welcome back everyone to another episode of the Santa Maria College Podcast. So with me today I have Nicola Principe, who graduated from the college in 2014. Nicola is in the final stages of completing a PhD in the field of [00:01:00] cancer immunology at the National Centre for Asbestos Related Diseases, which is based at the University of Western Australia.

Nicola's Research is focused on improving a new cancer therapy called immunotherapy. Ever since she was little, Nicola knew she wanted to have a career that helped improve outcomes for cancer patients. This stemmed from some of her close family members and friends being diagnosed with cancer.

Nicola is also super passionate about supporting researchers and promoting a kind scientific community, built on diversity, respect, and wellbeing, to ultimately lead to happy scientists and better scientific outcomes. This led Nicola along with three other female scientists in her lab to start an initiative named Kindness in Science. I could go on and on about what Nicola has achieved so far in the short time since she's left the college, but I don't want to give too much away.

Nicola, thank you for taking the time to come sit and chat [00:02:00] with us. You've obviously had such an incredible career in the STEM field, which I think many of our listeners would be keen to learn more about.

So, how are you? How's life been treating you?

Nicola: Thank you so much for having me. I'm good. Busy!

Jake: Does it feel weird being back on campus? Is this the first time in a while?

Nicola: Probably, actually. It feels so weird. Yeah. I parked where I usually would go from school. So I walked up the same way I come home from school or go to school. So that was really funny.

Jake: Bringing back some memories for you.

Nicola: Yeah.

Jake: So you were also saying that you've recently done a little bit of traveling. Where did you go and what did you do?

Nicola: Yeah, so I just came back from a trip in Canada in the USA. So I went for a conference, learned how to snowboard, which was really cool.

Jake: It's harder than it looks. I feel like you need days and days and days to even just like get the gist of it. You know?

Nicola: Yeah, and now we can't practice in Perth. But no, it was [00:03:00] really good. Then yeah, just traveled around and visited some different labs, so it was good.

Jake: Nice. So I wanted to talk about your tertiary education journey. As I previously stated, you finished school in 2014 and you've almost finished completing a PhD. Before we jump into that, could you talk a little bit about the steps you've taken since leaving school to get to where you are now? Like what was the sort of process going from like a high school student to being a PhD candidate?

So, yeah, could you walk us through that process?

Nicola: So at school, I loved like Human Biology and Chemistry and Maths, and so I always knew I wanted to do something sciencey in my job. I just didn't really know what it was. And like, I always had medicine, like being a medical doctor at the back of my mind, but wasn't really sure.

So I was like, that's okay, I'll go to UWA and do a Bachelor of Science. I started off majoring [00:04:00] in Biomedical Science. Then when I got to do a couple of units and different things throughout my first year, I realised I don't really like Human Biology, but I love Physiology and I don't really like this, but I love that.

So I ended up changing my degree in my second year to do Pathology and Physiology. So Pathology is like the study of disease, so I really liked that because I could learn about cancer and that's what I was interested in at the time. And then Physiology is a study of how your whole human body works together, like all your systems.

Jake: It seems like a good match.

Nicola: Yeah. Cause you could see how it works in normal conditions and then how your body works when it's in disease and I really enjoyed that. That was really fun. So that's a three year degree. When I got to the end, I was like, oh no, what do I do now?

So I actually sat the medical exam.

Jake: The GAMSAT?

Nicola: Yeah. Which was one of the worst days.

Jake: Oh, really? What was it really? Obviously it [00:05:00] was really hard.

Nicola: Because it's like five, six hours long and you have like a half hour lunch that break. It was horrible.

Jake: Spiralling on the lunch break?

Nicola: Yeah and like, it was good I had a couple friends doing it with me, so at the lunch break we were just like...

Jake: That's good for a bit of moral support.

Nicola: Yeah. But that, after that exam, I kind of knew I was over studying. I studied in school doing ATAR Year 11 and 12 and then went straight into an undergrad and studied more.

And I was like, I need to do something different. I need to be a bit more practical. So I was really unsure at that stage and my stepsister had a friend who was doing research at Harry Perkins Institute where I am now. Her name is Ciara Duffy. So she's an ex Santa student as well.

Jake: Oh, yes, I've heard that name. Yeah.

Nicola: Yeah. So she was like, why don't you meet with her? Go see what she's doing, what her friends are doing, what research is like. And I was like, okay, we'll just see. And I met with her and she's so lovely. And I spent the day with her going around the lab and [00:06:00] like talking to researchers and I left and I was like, this is what I want to do.

Like, this is so amazing. The researchers were like all working hard, working together. So that was really cool. And I was like, okay, how do I get to where you are? So I had to do a one year Honours degree. The Honours degree is like a nine month research project. So you apply through UWA and you get a supervisor, and they give you a project to do.

So then I did that and I loved research. From that, I was like, I wanna do a PhD. And that led me into my PhD. Which is instead of a nine month research project, it is four to five years. So that's the journey. Very long journey.

Jake: Oh, cool. Do you need to maintain certain grades in your undergrad to then go on and do your Honours?

Yeah.

Nicola: You do. I mean, they consider really highly of you to do, um, to be like a very high student in terms of getting distinctions of high distinctions [00:07:00] because they're the top. But then again, if you show that you have practical experience in a laboratory somewhere else that actually counts as well.

So it's not just your grades. You can also have other skills as well that can add to it.

Jake: Oh, cool. And what about for your PhD? Like how do you apply to be a PhD like candidate?

Nicola: You have to have a undergrad, a Bachelor of Science, or Bachelor of Arts or whatever.

Then you have to have an Honours or Masters on top of that to be able to get into the PhD program. Um, and you do need to maintain high grades for the PhD, specifically for your Honours and Masters. So in my honors I got graded in terms of my like lab work and research skills. Um, and that gets considered really highly to then go into the PhD.

Jake: Okay. And I guess just going back to sort of, you know, the whole concept of like studying, what did, [00:08:00] do you enjoy most about studying in the field of science? Maybe for someone who's like interested in, you know, Jumping into that type of work.

Nicola: Yeah. I really love learning new things. I think that's the biggest thing.

Being able to find a technique online through other scientists around the world and being like, that'll be really cool if we can do that in our lab and see what happens. Learning that technique and then getting really cool results. The thing a lot of scientists say is like, some findings that you have, like after an experiment you're like, wow, I'm the first person to know this result.

Like this is so amazing. And now I'm gonna share that to other scientists and hopefully that will like improve the science field or the cancer field or whatever science field you're in.

Jake: So I guess that you kind of answered my next question, but I was just going ask, what would your biggest piece of advice be to someone who is considering a career in [00:09:00] science research?

Nicola: Yeah. I definitely think you have to give it a go. It's one of those things, especially with science, that, because a lot of the field is so practical that you need to go in and give it a go and if you don't like it, that's okay. But if you do like it, that's amazing.

Yeah. Because I find in school and also in undergrad, you are learning how the human body works and how like chemistry works and all of those things. But you're not, like in the real world in science, you're actually doing those things in real time so it's very, very different.

Jake: Totally.

Nicola: When I was studying it in school and in undergrad, I was like, oh, I don't know, like this is a lot of studying. Then getting into the practical world, you know, I'm actually using those concepts that I've learned like in my experiments, which is really cool.

So yeah, I definitely think you just have to give it a go and take as many opportunities of like work experience and volunteering in labs, whenever and wherever you can.

Jake: And like, if you could go back, would you have changed the way you did [00:10:00] anything or the path you sort of took to get to where you are or?

Nicola: No, I don't think so. I think I had a pretty good path in terms of doing stuff quickly. I'm one of the youngest PhD students in my lab. A lot of people actually like do their three year undergrad and

then they work for a bit in a lab. And then they're like, okay, I think research is for me. I'll go into a PhD.

Jake: But you just hit the ground running.

Nicola: Yeah. Which is a good and bad thing.

Jake: I feel like once you've sort of got that momentum and you're in that like head space and mind frame of like researching, it kind of makes sense.

Nicola: Yeah. And like for me, a a lot of other students are different to my story in terms of like, in my honors, I had a really good supervisor, he's still my supervisor today in my PhD. And my lab was really supportive and my supervisor was also a really good mentor in terms of my career development in the research field.

So I was like, this is where I should be to do my PhD. And so I just went for it.

Jake: Amazing. [00:11:00] So now I want to jump back to the present and talk more specifically about your PhD. So you mentioned that it takes about four or five years. For those who may not know, could you maybe explain like what a PhD is?

Nicola: So, PhD is different in different fields. So like an Arts PhD or a History PhD would be very different to a Science related PhD. So usually a PhD, like you said, takes four to five years. Basically you need to discover something new to be able to add to the field that you are working in.

In order to do that, you submit like a big book basically with all the experiments that you did throughout your four and five years mm-hmm, showing that you've found something new that will help the field. And then you submit that to the university at the end of your four to five years.

Um, and then they examine it. You have a couple of examiners. And then after that you become a Doctor [00:12:00] of research, basically. So it's different to a medical doctor, which a lot of people are like familiar with. Fun fact is that medical doctors actually didn't used to be called doctors like back in time.

Jake: Really?

Nicola: So people with PhDs were the only people that were called doctors.

Jake: So what were like they called back in the day?

Nicola: Just the Mr and Mrs.

Jake: Oh, really?

Nicola: Yeah.So they've adopted that, because I guess a lot of clinicians do end up getting a PhD. So yeah, so that's kind of what a PhD looks like.

Jake: And I guess what do you personally believe are some of the benefits of completing a PhD?

Nicola: Um, in terms of sciencey stuff, like you learn so many new skills in such a short timeframe. It allows you to think about like, what's my aim of this experiment? What's my hypothesis? How are we going to do it? And writing all those down and then critically thinking about the results that you get and how that will [00:13:00] benefit the field or not benefit the field or what, what are you gonna do next? Um, that's a big benefit to a PhD for going into like a research field.

But then on the other note, like the managing skills that you get, the leadership skills. So I've had a lot of opportunities to um, mentor students under me, as well as participating in workshops and seminars and things like that. So I've gained a lot of skills in managing my time.

Jake: I guess, how have you found it rewarding for yourself personally? Like on a more personal level?

Nicola: Oh, I found it very, very rewarding in the sense that I feel like I'm the only person that's discovering the research that I'm doing and figuring out, I think we'll talk about it later, like what my research is and how that will help the field.

That's really rewarding to me because of a lot of people in my family suffering with cancer. So, Being able to do that little bit and [00:14:00] improve these treatments for these patients is really cool. So that's super rewarding for me.

Jake: Yeah. That's awesome.

So your PhD is focused on improving a new cancer therapy called immunotherapy. Could you dive a little bit more into this so our listeners can gain a deeper understanding of like what your research project entails?

Nicola: Yeah, sure. So, immunotherapy is new to the cancer field, like you said. And there's a couple of different types of immunotherapy. But what it means is, basically using our own immune system to be able to kill the cancer cells.

So one of the main immunotherapies that I use is called immune checkpoint therapy. So what it does, is that our immune cells in our body, when they see a virus or a cancer cell, they will go and attack it and kill it. But then over time these immune cells start getting really tired and exhausted.

And we know [00:15:00] that is by, they express these, proteins on the surface of their cell. And that means they're really tired. And when there's a huge cancer there, we see a lot of T-cells that are just really, really tired. So what immune checkpoint therapy does, is it's these little antibodies, so just a drug.

And these antibodies basically bind to the protein on the immune cell that's tired and basically makes the immune cell like excited and energised again to then go and kill the cancer cell. Um, so it's really, really cool because we see that some patients with really, really aggressive cancers like metastatic melanoma, some patients, their tumor completely goes away.

Um, and they survive like a lot longer than standard therapies like chemotherapy and radiotherapy. So that's really, really cool in the field.

Jake: It's amazing.

Nicola: Yeah.

Jake: I don't know how to word this, but like what, obviously, like I understand what you're doing, but when you get to the end of your PhD, [00:16:00] what would be the conclusion you come to? Do you know what I mean?

Nicola: Yeah.

Jake: You know, it's like you have your aim, your hypotheses, your method. How do you sum up everything? Is that too tough of a question?

Nicola: No, no, it's a good question because it's really hard for people that aren't doing a PhD or haven't done one, it's really hard to conceptualise what what I do. Because like some people are like, oh, you just go work every day and come home. And other people are like, oh, you're studying and it's like, it's a mix of the both. That's a good question.

So I have like a general aim of my PhD and that is to understand why some cancer patients respond really well to immunotherapy and other patients don't. Right. I'm really focusing on a cancer called mesothelioma. Um, because our lab focuses on that cancer most because it's a asbestos causing cancer.

So basically my whole aim of understanding why patients responded or don't respond, I have to answer that at the end. And I do like a whole bunch of experiments to figure out,[00:17:00] what's going on, if that makes sense.

Jake: That totally answers my question. Yeah. And I want to know, what does a typical day look like for you? I'd imagine it would be so hectic. Yeah. Can you walk us through morning to night, what happens and everything else in between?

Nicola: Yeah, sure.

So it differs day to day and I guess every researcher is very, very different. But for me, we are expected to be at the lab every day. I guess with COVID, we do sometimes like to work from home.

But on an average day I would go into the lab. I have like an office desk and a lab desk. So I will probably go on my office desk for a little bit, figure out what I'm gonna do for the day. Plan my experiments that have ongoing, and upcoming as well. And then go into the lab and I have cancer cells like growing.

I'm looking at these specific types of immune cells called T-cells. [00:18:00] Um, so I have them growing sometimes as well. And I would do a whole bunch of experiments figuring out, how immunotherapy is working on the cancer cells and the T-cells.

And then we have a whole bunch of meetings as well. So I meet with my supervisors every two weeks or once a month to discuss my results and what I'm gonna do next. We have meetings with other students as well, so we catch up with them. Lots of walks to go get coffee and workshops and there's a whole bunch of things at UWA, which is really good, like workshops and seminars you can attend, so.

Jake: Oh, amazing. Sounds like no day's ever the same really.

Nicola: No, it does change a lot.

Jake: Yeah. Oh, that's cool.

So while science is very exciting, the research environment can be quite difficult. As you would know, scientists lead very stressful and busy lives, you know, working long hours to meet research targets and they don't have many rewards in their careers since [00:19:00] there is such small funding opportunities. What is one of the biggest things that has surprised you about the research environment in that regard?

Nicola: I think exactly that. Everyone is so passionate about science and love it so much and want to make a really good impact to improve cancer patient outcomes.

I think that's everyone in our lab, but the fact that the funding is so scarce or I guess there is a lot of funding opportunities, but I guess they're not spread widely amongst Australia as well as WA.

Jake: Why do think that? Why do you think the funding's so scarce? Yeah. I think one thing is that science is so expensive.

Nicola: The good thing being in like the 21st century is that the technologies are amazing. We can get all of a patient's DNA in two weeks. Like, amazing. We couldn't do that before. Um, so it's [00:20:00] expensive to do these things to be up to date with the research.

But also I think while Perth has a lot of research output here, we're still very, very small compared to like Melbourne and Sydney and then overseas. So that's probably where the funding kind of gets distributed with the amount of research that goes on.

But none nonetheless, like Perth is still a really, really good place to be for research. There's still a lot going on and there's a lot of good leaders here. So I wouldn't discourage anyone from doing research here. But I was surprised at the fact that while there's so many people that donate to like Cancer Council and stuff like that, it's still really hard to spread the money across to everyone.

Jake: what do you think is one of the biggest misconceptions about the research environment? Because I feel like a lot of people often just make these really bold statements about research that don't actually work in the field and they have no sort of association with it.

Nicola: I think the biggest [00:21:00] misconception is, like the collaboration that goes on. I've personally always thought that researchers, like, it's always like a old white man with crazy hair, sitting by himself in a corner, in a very, very white lab, doing research experiments.

Like he doesn't even know, like sometimes he's doing good stuff. Other times he's doing bad stuff. Like, who knows? It's actually so, so different. Everyone is so collaborative. We all work together. We're all going to that same goal of trying to improve treatments for patients.

So I think that's a big thing in terms of like what outside people see when they think of research and also the funding as well, I think. A lot of people think that we have all this money that we can use, but we actually don't. It's quite hard to be able to direct funding to various people and researchers.

Jake: Like I sort of mentioned before, you know, it's a very stressful environment. And obviously, you know, [00:22:00] it's that for five years. Do you have any strategies in maintaining a healthy work life balance so that you don't burn out?

Nicola: I've trialed a lot of things. I think exercise is a big one. Everyone tells me, oh, you should exercise, and you're like, yeah, okay. But you don't actually do it. I think that's a big thing. Every week I go with my friends and we walk seven kilometres around Deepwater Point, and that's just like locked in.

I think you have to lock things in and then you like make time for it and schedule it out. And also just blocking out like, okay, Friday night is one night and Saturday night is one night where I'm doing absolutely nothing. I need to stay home and I need to just lie in bed and just chill out. Like watch tv, whatever. Some researchers definitely they will work 24 hours. They don't switch off.

Jake: It's not sustainable.

Nicola: But also like, your output probably isn't as good as someone who would just work like, standard hours and work really, really hard those hours. And just like talking to [00:23:00] people is probably the biggest thing. I think you can like probably in lots of fields as well, if you're working by yourself, you can get really caught up and overwhelmed in all of the tasks that you have to do.

So I think if you talk to other people, get help on certain tasks, that's really, really beneficial as well. So there's a lot of different strategies that I've learned. I probably haven't got the right answer, but I think it's different for everyone right?

Jake: Exactly. Yeah. it depends on your, you know, personality, interests, all that sort of stuff.

Nicola: Yeah.

Jake: You're also a massive advocate for women and girls in science and hope to contribute towards closing the gender gap. Could you talk a little bit about the imbalance of the representation of women, people of colour, and other sort of minority groups? Like why do you think that there is sort of an imbalance to begin with?

Nicola: Yeah, so it's really interesting in the sense that there is a lot of [00:24:00] representation of women and people of colour and LGBTQA+ plus people in like school and then undergrad. But when we move up the career trajectory, it kind of falls off. There's a couple of reasons. One big one is probably because it's not documented very well, but secondly, particularly for women, to be able to go up the career pathway, you need to have like lots of research output.

And if you have, for example, a year off to go on maternity leave or something like that, that's like a year that's completely blank, that you haven't done anything. And so a male could then overstep that, if that makes sense. So that's a really big concern in the field, especially for funding opportunities, because a lot of men can get that edge compared to women. Um, not really an edge, but you kind of know what I mean?

It's interesting in the fact that like, in terms of academia, so like in science, the balance of men and [00:25:00] women as a whole overall is exactly the same.

But when you separate it into categories like, PhD students and then like, early career researchers and then senior researchers and then higher up academics, um, it's like women are really high at the start and then it drops off. Um, and we think that is because of that career pathway in the sense that if you have breaks in your career, it seems less like in comparison to a man.

But yeah, that's probably where the imbalance stems from. But there's a whole bunch of other reasons that could cause this imbalance. But there definitely is still that power dynamic in the academic world.

Jake: Yes. And do you think there are small ways that we can sort of contribute to closing that gap? What do you think are the steps moving forward to maybe see more women continue on to like sort of doing their PhD? [00:26:00]

Nicola: Yeah, so there's a lot of different ways and we've kind of come up with them, like as a group in our lab as well as other researchers around the world have really talked about it a lot.

Little things like for inclusivity, like showing your pronouns is an easy thing to do. And in terms for women, really promoting that the science career is worthwhile and is beneficial. It was really cool the funding for Australia for research, they've decided in one of their categories, they're gonna give men and women equal funding opportunities, which is really good.

Jake: Oh, cool!

Nicola: So there's a lot of steps that people are doing to be able to like close that gap. Um, and they are taking into consideration now, like when I talked about if you have any gaps in your CV from being on maternity leave or stuff like that, they're taking that into consideration now as well because there's some things that are just totally out of control. Um, that could affect your career.

Jake: Totally.

So you, along with three [00:27:00] other female scientists in your lab, founded the initiative Kindness in Science. Could you explain what this initiative is as well as what inspired you to sort of start it?

Nicola: Yeah, so, all four of us, were all PhD students in our lab and we were looking towards a career in science that we loved, like we love science so much, but we thought there is this gap that we need to close. And there's a lot of support that we do that researchers should get that we aren't getting.

So we ended up with the help of our director at the time, Professor Anna Nowak, she really helped us to get funding at UWA and to form our initiative where we could run a whole bunch of different workshops and seminars and events to bring researchers together and also talk about key topics.

So we really focus on mental health. So we have like [00:28:00] four things. So kindness to yourself. So that's like mental health and wellbeing. Kindness to others. So that's the inclusivity part and diversity in science. Kindness to the environment. So all about sustainability. Because if you think about it, in research we use a lot of plastics to keep everything nice and clean and sterile. Um, so are there ways that we can be more sustainable and help the environment a little bit.

And then the last one is, Kindness to the community. So it's all about science communication. So a lot of researchers find it really hard, like myself, to communicate your science really well to the public. So giving researchers those tools to be able to do that.

Jake: That is tough because it's so complex.

Yeah, but you've gotta do it. Like you need to make other people known of your research and how important it is.

It might also encourage other people to move into research, if they understand what you actually do and that, it's attainable sort of thing. So that's really cool.

Nicola: Yeah. Thanks.

Jake: Could you briefly outline [00:29:00] some of the workshops and panel discussions and other sort of community events you've held? Is there a way like people can get involved with what you're doing?

Nicola: Yeah, so we've more focused at the moment on researchers specifically, but we have run some events where we've had like members of Parliament come and see like what we're doing and how we're trying to improve.

Jake: Was it Mark McGowan that you met? No. Who was it?

Nicola: No. I wish Mark McGowan. Yeah, no. Katrina Stratton. She's the member of Nedlands. If you're not in the Nedlands area, you probably won't know who she is.

Yeah. So we've had a lot of support from her, but we are hoping for the general public side, we are hoping to do more workshops that could really help researchers to build those science communication skills or put them into practice.

But other workshops that we've done and we are still doing is a lot about mental health. So giving our researchers strategies and tips on how to maintain that healthy [00:30:00] work-life balance. Also, with kindness to others. So improving inclusivity and diversity. What we did is we had a panel discussion and we got representation from people with like different backgrounds.

So we had women in leadership positions. We had, uh, I think she was a psychologist, but she works with neurodivergent individuals. There's students that are trying to get into the science world and giving them tools. So neurodivergent.

We also had, um, an LGBTQIA+ representation there as well. So we had a whole different opinions, and that could give the audience, a sense of how we could help researchers and be more inclusive in the science community and that was really cool. That's on YouTube if anyone's interested to learn.

What else have we done? We've also run seminars on how to be more sustainable in the lab. So to give researchers some tips and strategies. So that's kind of like a broad range.

Jake: Nice. [00:31:00] That sounds like that keeps you busy too. I don't know how you fit it all in.

Nicola: Yeah. Well, at the moment we've been really struggling to keep up with both because a lot of us have either completed our PhD or I'm finishing and another girl's just finishing. Um, one of the girls actually who is in Kindness in Science, Caitlin Tilsed she's a Santa Maria alumni.

Jake: Santa represent!

Nicola: Yeah. It was so funny when I first, um, like came to the lab, I met like two, three Santa girls.

Jake: That's amazing.

Nicola: Which is really cool.

Jake: So we obviously have to circle back to the fact that you're a Santa Maria College alumni.

Nicola: Yeah!

Jake: After all, it is the reason we are here. So you have a pretty close relationship with the school, I'd say? Like a lot of your family members went here.

Nicola: Yeah. So my auntie went here who's the teacher here. Mrs. Mosole. Um, well, she's not a teacher here anymore.

Jake: She's the Sacrastin.

Nicola: Yes. Um, and then my older cousin and my younger cousins as well.

Jake: [00:32:00] Yeah. Just generally speaking, what was your experience like at SMC?

Nicola: Oh, really good. The grounds are beautiful. Amazing. I really took that for granted when I was here.

Jake: Yeah. That's what they all say! Everyone says that.

Nicola: Um, but no, I think the biggest thing for me was the friendships that I made. So I just went to a wedding on the weekend, and a girl that I went to Santa with. But like there was like eight of us girls there.

Jake: Oh, that's so nice.

Nicola: But we're still really close friends from Santa. So yeah. That's really nice. But as well, like all the teachers were really good mentors to me. The opportunities that we had. All the co-curricular. Like, really good experience.

Jake: I think the co-curriculars really separate Santa from other schools and the whole like service program.

Nicola: Yeah, definitely.

Jake: In what ways do you think the school suited your needs, wants, your personality? Like do you think it was a good fit for you?

Nicola: Yeah, definitely. I think [00:33:00] it fitted me in terms of like my science. Like, I've always loved science. So I really got good skills and learned so much in Chemistry and Human Biology and like all of the other science courses that I did.

Um, but also the service side. So I loved that. I loved doing all my service hours. Um, a little bit of a nerd. I loved the whole service program and being able to give back was really cool and I think that's really instilled in me.

Jake: Like all the stuff you're doing with Kindness In Science. Giving back, you know?

Nicola: Yeah, true.

Jake: That is essentially giving back really.

Nicola: Do you think the school really influenced you into the direction of medical research or do you think it was something you always wanted? I know it's something you always wanted to do, but do you think it sort of solidified that career path for you?

Yeah, definitely. I think Santa helped me realise like what the different directions I could go into in terms of like a science career and like list them out. That was really good. But probably the [00:34:00] biggest thing was actually meeting other Santa Maria people. Santa Maria girls, like outside.

Jake: Like alumni?

Nicola: Yeah. Alumni. So like meeting up with Ciara Duffy. And I had like other experiences where I went out and did a bit of work experience and that was really good.

Jake: Cool. Do you have any favorite memories or funny stories or like, does anything come to mind straight away? Like when you think of your high school experience?

Nicola: Oh, there was so many like different aspects I guess.

Jake: The ball?

Nicola: The ball was a big one. And the dinner dance. I think, like having your spot at school to go sit and meet your friends for lunch..

Jake: Where did you sit?

Nicola: We like changed spots.

Jake: Oh, you switched it up? What? Like once a term?

Nicola: No, no, like probably like every couple years I guess.

Jake: Oh, okay. That long.

Nicola: But yeah, that's really good memories of like meeting up with your friends, like at lunch and recess. Having lunch in a little spot.

Also like we sat at, which was [00:35:00] really good, it used to be the art building. The art and science building, but I think it's just art now.

Jake: Yeah. The McCormack Building...

Nicola: McCormack? Yeah.

Jake: Yeah. You're looking at me with a blank face!

Nicola: Yeah. I'm like, oop.

Jake: As if you're going remember though, like it was by 2014. Your 10 year reunion is nearing. It's approaching.

Nicola: I know, it's scary.

Jake: Yeah.

Nicola: But like the school's already changed a lot in 10 years. Well, like nearly 10 years

Jake: We're getting a brand new theater.

Nicola: Yeah. That's crazy. That's so exciting.

Jake: I know. It's gonna be awesome.

You kind of answered this already, but might as well just ask it again. What do you think makes Santa Maria so special?

Nicola: A lot of things. I think the Mercy values that get instilled with us. Yeah. And like learning how to use them in your everyday life. That stuck with me, as well as like the experiences that you get, not just learning like rote learning, but all the [00:36:00] co-curricular activities.

Jake: Even the excursions and stuff.

Nicola: Yeah. The excursions and everything. So good. And probably the lifelong friendships. I hope that the friends I've made at Santa are gonna take me lifelong.

Jake: Absolutely. I've seen it. I've witnessed it.

Nicola: So yeah. That's really cool. Yeah, just all the connections and stuff that you make at Santa is amazing.

Jake: And what do you think of our alumni engagement strategies? Nah, I'm kidding. I'm joking.

Nicola: Amazing! Nah, you're doing such a good job. I have to say.

Jake: You read every story in that blog, don't you?

Nicola: I do.I read every story. I've listened to everything. So good.

Jake: Amazing.

Nicola: Oh, so just before we wrap up, I should say that if students or anyone wants to come check out our lab, have a look or if you wanna do some work experience or volunteering, we're always welcome to have people.

So you can contact us and reach out. Also, the Harry Perkins Institute do like after school programs and holiday programs for students. Um, so there's so many ways that you can get [00:37:00] involved as a high school student just to see like what research is like and talk to researchers and see what the lab is like.

So that's really, really cool opportunities that I can link to you.

Jake: Awesome.

So that brings us to the end of this episode. I mean, I could talk all day with you, but yeah, we're just gonna have to wrap it up.

Thank you so much for coming to chat with us. I think, you know, so many listeners will find this invaluable and for those who are considering a career in, you know, research, I think this will give them a really good insight. So thank you so much.

Nicola: Thanks for having me.

Jake: You're so welcome. Also to those listening, thank you for your continued support. If you head to www.santamaria.wa.edu.au/podcast, you'll be able to find the full transcript to this episode.

Don't forget to subscribe and let us know what you think and if you have any ideas for future episodes, [00:38:00] please feel free to reach out to crd@santamaria.wa.edu.au.

Thank you very much and we look forward to catching you next time.