

# 142. Audrey Calhoun: Trailblazing

## Gavin Kelly

Hey, everybody you're listening to beyond 1894 this is the official podcast of Louisiana Tech University. My name is Gavin Kelly from the Office of University Communications, and our special guest for this episode is Miss Audrey Calhoun. Miss Calhoun is a 1973 right graduate of Louisiana Tech, and the significance of her being here and of her story is Miss Calhoun is the first black student and the first female student to graduate from Louisiana Tech's forestry program, which also means that she was the first black woman in the United States to earn a forestry degree. Miss Calhoun is on campus today as part of a sort of coming home situation. She's going to be speaking with the forestry program later, she's got a full schedule, so we appreciate her making time to be here on the podcast. It's special to have you here. Miss Calhoun, and we thank you for it. So we're glad you're on campus. Is this the first time you've been on campus in a while? It is okay. It is. When's the last time you were able to be on campus?

## Audrey Calhoun

Oh, it may have been five or 10 years ago to actually be inside. I pass by all the time, but coming inside the campus maybe 10 years,

## Gavin Kelly

yeah, I talked to guests all the time who have been here even just a year or two ago, and they talk about how it's changed, but it's also the same. So I'm sure a lot of places are just how you remember it. Let's, let's, let's drill down into your story. Because, like I said, it's you are a one of one in that sense, and you've had a very storied career. We're going to let you walk us through your career when we get to that part. But let's, let's go back to the beginning for you. I was talking to you before we recorded about you being from Winfield. I'm a fellow win parish native, so I know what that's like. But talk to me about growing up and your parents and kind of those, those early days where you were starting to figure out your interests and what you might want to study in school.

## Audrey Calhoun

Well, I come from a family of teachers. We say the family business is teachers. So if, when on Sundays and everybody sit down to dinner, everybody sitting at the table was a teacher. So the goal was always from the time out we were born, we were told that we were going to college. And so every effort was made that you do this because you are going to college, and whatever step you make, and guy, you couldn't step outside the line, you were going to college. And my mother, as a first grade teacher, was very instrumental in setting the foundation for what we were supposed to do all the way up through college and through the rest of our career. She had a pretty, pretty big hand in controlling everything. I thought when I started high school, I believe that we lived in such a small place, and I always thought there's something else off out there, and I wanted to see what that was, but everybody wanted to make sure that we I stayed in the in my lane, so to speak. So being a teacher was what I was supposed to be, yeah, but I didn't see it that way. So I graduated as valedictorian of my class, and the speech that I made was, you know, of course, I never do what people tell me to do. So they had a prepared speech,

and I refused to do it. So I did my own and what I wanted people to know was that you didn't have to take the same road, yeah, that people prepared for you, that you can do something different. And so I pushed that. And my grandmother always described me as a peculiar child. They could never figure out just what I was, yeah. So they gave me a name a peculiar child. And so after graduation again, one of the things that our family was where we were grammar nights. So there was no other college that you could go to. You had to go to, you had to go to Grambling. And so followed in those two footsteps to Grambling, but I deviated in that I did not go into the education field.

**Gavin Kelly**

Was that a tough conversation you had to have with your with your mother? Or was she pretty understanding about that?

**Audrey Calhoun**

The good part about having parents that are at that generation that when you got go outside, outside of their understanding, then they don't understand you can get away with a lot of stuff. As far as they were concerned, I majored in Biology at Grambling, and it was their understanding that your. Hey, that's an education field, but I was in liberal arts, which meant that that was not a teaching field. Got it okay? And they had assumed that when I graduated, I will be I would be going on to teach, but when I graduated with a liberal arts biology degree, you needed a master's in order to really get a job that was worth something. Yeah, so I had to look at going after a master's in order to really get a job that I felt comfortable with.

**Gavin Kelly**

Did you know how? Let me ask you, how you how'd you settle on biology? How'd you how'd you pick that field

**Audrey Calhoun**

in high school? We, we had a biology teacher in in that day, of course, under under segregation, it was a separate but equal right in instances when school books for us meant that we took the second hand books from from the white schools, that when they got a whole new set of books, well, we got the set that they that they had used, which mean th pages were missing or they were all scarred up stuff. So the biology teacher had to kind of make up a curriculum around the missing pieces. Yeah. And so we did a lot of lab work in which he was explaining stuff and we would do the experiments and that that really excited me. Okay, this is what I want to do. Makes sense. So, so that's how I got into into the biology field.

**Gavin Kelly**

So did you know, you know, once you realize, oh, I need to get my master's degree, did you already have plans for a career, or were you kind of just letting, letting the education take you where it was, where it was taking you.

**Audrey Calhoun**

When I graduated from Grambling, I knew I needed a job. And at that time, the National Park Service came to grammar recruiting for Summer Park Rangers. And I was at the point I had applied to medical

school because that was one one track that I wanted to go. And I said, Well, I needed a job. And so I got that job, and I went to Yellowstone, and that first summer, oh, I changed everything. Changed everything. So that's introduced me to the National Park series.

### **Gavin Kelly**

That's kind of the switch flip moment it sounds like where you sort of pivoted everything towards forestry, but undertaking forestry as a new degree, as a new career, probably wasn't a decision that you made lightly. So talk to me about deciding to go to Louisiana Tech, deciding to get that forestry degree. Because in a way, it was, it was a it was starting over in terms of your career goals, I'm guessing, but also something that you realize you're passionate about. So talk to me about that.

### **Audrey Calhoun**

The first summer, summer at Yellowstone, I fell in love with it, but a park ranger position is highly competitive, and the people that were working there for summers were trying their best to get a permanent job with the National Park Service, and there were people with PhDs trying to get a park ranger position that pays \$7,000 a year, and so the competition for that was extremely tight in my having a biology degree with a focus on Cell Biology, that it just couldn't stand up to that. So I needed to find something that was in wildlife management or something like that, that would say that I had an extra piece that actually set me up to have this position as wildlife management or something like that. So after that summer, I came home and I decided I was going to go back to school and get a master's. And I came to Louisiana Tech to looking at their wildlife management program, I believe, and I was going through the auditorium classes and stuff, and I was walking around trying to set classes up. And I met Dr Blackwell, okay, and he, I don't know, he may have followed me around, around the area, just listening to what I was trying to do and what I was taking and so when I had a break, when he walked up to me and said, you know, we have this forestry program. And then, and then, after he explained it to me, I said, Okay, that is something that will set me up very well with the National Park Service, because it's an it's a natural feel. And the kind of things that I wanted to do that degree was which set me up for it,

### **Gavin Kelly**

very nice. And you, I mean, you kind of blazed through both your degrees on you got your degree from Grambling and from tech, pretty, pretty quickly, right

### **Audrey Calhoun**

from Grambling, I did three years, but I did the maximum courses. So a four year degree, I did in three because I went year round and I took maximum load. So I finished going. Rambling in three and then, because I already had a degree, then coming to tech meant that I didn't need to take all those general education courses, because that was already done. So the only thing I needed was the two years of the specialist courses. And so that's what I had here at Tech? Yeah, was those two years of special forestry courses.

### **Gavin Kelly**

Well, talk to me about those two years, because at that point you're taking, you're actively engaging in classes that align with this new passion of yours. And you're, you're realizing, I'm guessing, that this is,

you're confirming to yourself that this is something you want to do. But what was it like going through those classes and getting some of that hands on learning experience in forestry,

**Audrey Calhoun**

it was different, and it was the same. Yeah, my family was rural, so to speak. You know, grandmothers and everybody lives out and out in the country, and wood stoves and killing hogs and cows and that kind of stuff.

**Gavin Kelly**

So that's Winfield, all right.

**Audrey Calhoun**

So being outdoors was was not a different thing for me. So going it plus my my father worked at the sawmill. He put in 30 some years, I think, at the salt. So I was familiar with saw mill operations and what that you know what that entails. So coming into forestry was not a difficult thing. It was a mindset to change, to look at some bigger organisms. Yes, yeah. In cell biology, all I'm looking at, yeah. And then in forestry, I'm looking at this big tree, which is a whole bigger organism, and then learning to tree identification, which really set me well for the first job that that I got because nature hikes, tree identification, okay, take me up for that.

**Gavin Kelly**

Very good. So I mentioned it up top, but, but when you graduated from Louisiana Tech, you were, you were the first female student and the first black student to go through the forestry program here. And when you earned that degree, you were the first black woman in the entire country to earn a forestry degree. Did that ever come up at the time? Was that anything that anybody mentioned to you the significance of that, or were you just kind of locked into your studies and making sure you got that degree?

**Audrey Calhoun**

Dr Blackwell really pushed to have to promote women in forestry and the one of the things that he encouraged me, and again, there was a scholarship program to pull minorities into forestry. He had a, I guess, a student who had set aside a scholarship fund just for that. So I was bought in under that scholarship, and he really worked to promote women in in forestry. And at the end of it is when he told me, Well, you know, you're the first one, but being the first one meant that that my name started with a C instead of a D.

**Gavin Kelly**

Very nice. Very nice. Well, it obviously set you up. Because, you know, I'm glancing at your your sort of your career path here, I'll let you walk us through it, but you kind of mentioned your first job after getting that forestry degree, and how tech and that degree set you up to to have the career that you wanted to have. So walk us through where forestry took you after Louisiana Tech and those jobs that you've had in the career that you've built since then.

**Audrey Calhoun**

When I graduated from from tech, Dr Blackwell had the connection to set up interviews for his students that were graduates to go to the different meals and things in interview. So I had that interview. I also had an interview from casachi National Forest. So that third summer at Yellowstone, I wanted to go to to the National Park Service, but the Forest Service is our it already offered me a permanent job, and so I kept pushing them off. So okay, let just, let me take this one last summer to Yellowstone, and then I'll come back and I, and I still don't understand how I did it. That was crazy to do it, but that was a temporary position for a park technician in in the metropolitan, Metropolitan Washington, DC, okay, the Forest Service Job was a permanent job, so I put down a permanent job to take a temporary job and drive 2000 miles away. And but it worked out, yeah, and, and once that happened, the. Pharmacy degree was what people looked at then that I could say that I qualified that when I stood with my peers, then that degree said, Well, you know, you have what's necessary to do this job. It's kind of sad about it, because my biology degree should have said the same thing, but it did carry the same weight. Yes, the forestry degrees carry the weight.

### **Gavin Kelly**

Interesting, did you as a trailblazer, pioneer, whether you want to refer to yourself as that or not, you know You seem very humble, but you did have, you have had a Trailblazers career, so throughout your career, those sort of roadblocks or complications that arose from being the first to do so many things was that something you kind of didn't think about at the time. You know, these challenges were just challenges. It's just what they were, and you just kept your head down and focused on being the best at your job. Or was it something that you did notice along the way?

### **Audrey Calhoun**

What I approached each job is that it was a job, and I took on the responsibility that whatever this job required, I would do the work. And in a lot of the positions, it meant working 80 hour weeks because the didn't have enough staff to do everything. So you wind up having to do a lot of their stuff, but there were people in the National Park Service that guided my career. I was really stubborn. When I went to Washington, I wanted to go back to Yellowstone, and everything I was doing was to head toward Yellowstone. And they would say, No, the your career is here, because most park rangers at that time didn't feel like that. There were national parks east of the Mississippi. If you were east of the Mississippi, you weren't worth anything. You were not a park ranger. If you are park ranger east of the Mississippi. So they forced me into and I, I get tickled about it, because they had to take away all of my routes in order to force me into some of the positions that that I got into. But they in the initial stages, initial part of my career. They were the ones that kind of set up the career ladder at the beginning, and then from there, then I could jump to to all the other positions but the foundation position, they forced me into

### **Gavin Kelly**

it, yeah, but they they had your best interest.

### **Audrey Calhoun**

I didn't think so at the time, right, right? They might have known

### **Gavin Kelly**

you better, a little bit better you know yourself. So your career has taken you all over. You mentioned Washington walk us through kind of those, those positions and the high points of your career.

**Audrey Calhoun**

When I went to Washington, my first job was as a seasonal or temporary park ranger, and that was just given nature hikes at some of the natural areas in in Washington. And that was the at all, Roosevelt Island, CNO canal, Arlington House. And then I received a permanent position, and that was at Prince William Forest Park. That was the one that they forced me to take and at that position is where I learned all of the skills that were necessary to be a park ranger. That was park ranger school through there. That was the law enforcement school. Because the position as a park ranger, you're doing the nature hikes. You're doing the law enforcement, you're doing the historical stuff, so it's all around things. So you have to three jobs in one, yeah, well, actually five or six. You have to have all these skills. So this position did that. It introduced supervision, introduced law enforcement, and, of course, the natural stuff, the school stuff, and developing curriculums in with the school system for nature hikes, for their classes. All of that was part of this position, wow. And then from there, the next position, and this one was, I don't, I don't have a autistic bone in my body, but they asked me to be a temporary manager over a park that had been an amusement park that had closed down, and all The buildings were dilapidated, and the way they were trying to save the park, figure out some use for it was to do artists in residence, and where the artists would have a building in exchange for having a place, they would rehab the buildings. And then they were required to teach classes interesting. So we have a. Potters, sculptures, painters, photographers, dancers and all this kind of stuff. And I did, I didn't know anything so when?

**Gavin Kelly**

But you said, Sure, why not?

**Audrey Calhoun**

Because, again, the goal was to to, because it was so unusual, was to bring a national park service structure to that and putting them under cooperative agreements and everything to get them to do what they were supposed to do on their legal framework. We did that, and of course, they decided they would teach me the things that that I didn't know, but I had a good staff, and the staff were also artists, so that kind of helped a little bit. And what was unusual to me, that kind of let me know that my thinking was not quite is what it should be. The but the staff was again autistic, so they pull their their ability to think from different sources. So I come in to work one day and I look out and they're all in bathing suits, in a kiddie pool, out in the out in the park, and said, Well, we're doing brainstorming. So what we're doing brainstorming, you cannot

**Gavin Kelly**

do it, put some clothes,

**Audrey Calhoun**

and get out of the again, get out of the pool, and trying to get them back into Park Service uniforms was very difficult because they were resistant to it so but that one is the place where I really learned to to manage because it was so diverse and the demands Were so so critical. Plus, I have facility that was



falling down, basically deteriorating to the n th degree, and trying to get that one up, get the programs up, get the funding for repairs and operations. So that one set me up for the next position, which was president's Park, and that Park was all the parking area around the White House outside the White House gates. And I spent six years there being involved in a lot of of the nation's politics and a lot of First Amendment because the park was the park for first amendment rights to all the areas outside the White House. You know, you see people demonstrating and complaining. Well, all of that was there in the park. So we had some of the biggest demonstrations in the country there at that park. And the one thing that also had to happen was that that park, the the land outside the gates were considered to be an extension of the White House grounds, so it had to be maintained at the same level as the White House grounds. Wow. But you've got all, you know, get a demonstration of 100,000 people, and when they leave, everything's messed up, course, yeah. So the next day, you know, you everything. Before the end of the day, everything had to be put back to the way so they didn't look like it was still that nice even lawn. So that one was was interesting, a lot of contact with the White House and the First Lady and trying to resolve issues that were outside the gates, because, again, that staff did the tickets for the White House. If you wanted to get in to tour the White House, well, then you had to come through this park to do that. And so that meant a lot of White House contact and the National Christmas Tree that gets lit every time. That was one of my major jobs.

### **Gavin Kelly**

And I bet that was fun. Oh,

### **Audrey Calhoun**

it does. It was done before we had the technology that we have now. So the President would be in the White House, or he would be on the stage, and he would push the button in the tree would light up. But he had a dummy, yeah, cutting up there, yep. And so the TV cameras would would put it up, homing on his finger. And I had an employee back behind stage where all the power was, and we were watching, and I had to be back there with him. So if something went wrong, I had to say, Okay, this is what happened. And so he had to monitor that when the President pushed the button, he also pushed so that the tree lit up at the same time. And nobody knew that the President wasn't wasn't actually national button. And that went well until the year after I left. Then it didn't like when the President pushed the button, it didn't come on. And I'm thinking, Oh, I'm so happy I left just in time. Yes, ma'am. So those kinds of things where you you're in the National Eye. I. Was that was a learning experience. And then from there, I spent the majority of my career at the George Washington Memorial Parkway as a superintendent. And this Parkway, while it is a roadway and it's a memorial to George Washington, it has attached to it several other little parks. It's called the conglomerate of parks, which included Arlington House, which sits up in Arlington Cemetery, uwjima Memorial, Theodore Roosevelt Island, Great Falls Park, which is our Clara Barton Glen, Echo, and all the other little monuments a lot. Yeah, it's a 7000 acres, wow, that receive over 7 million visitors per year in this 7000 acres, and that was the most difficult thing to do, is to manage a park that had so much use, and at the same time trying to preserve and maintain the facilities and the resources that are supposed to be important to the park, it was frustrating some days, because, you know, you couldn't meet everything. And in that kind of position, the parkway was one of the main routes into Washington, DC. So the congressman and the ambassadors and all would drive it road to work in the morning, and so they would call me first thing in the morning driving down, there's a piece of paper on the parkway. Why? Why is it paper down? Okay,

all right. So my first part of my mornings were spent fielding all of the complaints and trying to see what happened. What in what everybody knows is that you can pick up trash on the road and it'll be clean for about five minutes, and then somebody throws something else out. But it was supposed to be clean because it was this the scenic route into Washington, DC in the same with all the other monuments and memorials along it, they all had to be maintained at the same rate and at the same quality. And that's what quality is. One of the things that was pushed very hard for for parks in Washington,

**Gavin Kelly**

DC, I bet. Let's, let's talk about your time at the George Washington Memorial Parkway. And let's talk about your role during 911 because I know that you played a part in evacuation from the Pentagon. Is that correct? So let's, if let's, let's talk about that, if you don't mind, and kind of walk us through what that was like

**Audrey Calhoun**

for you. It was very difficult, because we got the word that something was happening, and we knew that the plane had hit the Pentagon, and that that there was a still another plane out there, and the park headquarters was about a mile from the CIA facility. So everybody's saying, well, it's aiming for the CIA. So if it hit CIA, would also hit my my headquarters right. And with the Pentagon, there were park areas down at the Pentagon, Pentagon, just across the river, and so that we had facilities down there, so moving the staff and everybody to get down there, to try to handle traffic, getting out of Washington, and trying to get people settled, and then at the same time, recognizing that This, this horrible event had happened at Pentagon, and moving staff around, trying to get them down there, and we didn't know how we were going to help until we were asked to help with the daycare center that there were children in the Pentagon's daycare and They needed to pull those children and bring them somewhere until they could get them sorted out and get them to a safe place and find their parents, if their parents could be found, right? So we, my staff, was in this pattern of trying to help settle kids to handle that. And the other side was my maintenance crews and my road crews were putting up barricades and trying to move traffic and pulling cars off all the off the roads, because people got frustrated, yeah, they couldn't go anywhere, so they just get out of their vehicles and leave it there and start walking. Well, then nobody could move. So you're trying to get the cars off the road so that traffic could continue, and then at the same time trying to be aware that there's another event that is going to happen. And the stress of that was just, it was amazing. It was just major.

**Gavin Kelly**

I. Yeah, because you you're having to do a job, you're having to focus and perform something that you've never had to do before, unprecedented circumstance, but also you're still just a person that's that this event is happening to your mix up in it. So I can't imagine, but when I try to imagine, I I do think that it couldn't have happened without you and everybody else in your staff doing doing their job and and making sure everybody was safe. What was it like in this, the sort of aftermath of that, and going back to quote, unquote, business as usual? I mean, I'm sure that wasn't the simplest thing

**Audrey Calhoun**

is never returned to as usual. We went through a whole two or three years of trying to determine how we would manage if a situation like that came up again, how we would manage getting people out of



Washington, getting them to safety, and that was the main thing. And for the park that I had, that was one of the main entrance and extra route, so it had to be maintained, and then keeping employees in position, yeah, which was the most difficult thing, because they also had families. And I had people abandon their their stations because they were just so afraid that families were in it. So trying to make sure that that staff person stayed in place, did what they needed to do, and then make the determination. We were getting all of these reports, and at the level that I was in, well then I would be getting the intel that says we're going up to yellow, red, or something like that. And this happened several times a day, and when they hit that point of yellow, well then you know you were supposed to close certain areas. And because the Marine Corps memorial was was part of the park, but then that was an icon, so they were looking at weird. If they were going to hit anything, they would hit the icons. So closing down those park areas and clearing the park of people, and if there, if you couldn't get people out of the park. Where could you hold them to be safe until was time to do something? So all of this planning was three, three years or better, and never could resolve anything, because you could plan for

**Gavin Kelly**

it. And too many moving parts, yeah, too many

**Audrey Calhoun**

moving parts, yeah. And the what everybody feared was a double the dirty bomb and, and there was no way to defend against that, right? So it was, it was terrible, and people came back with an attitude. Then, where the relationships became very, very tense. Everybody, all of the everybody wanted to accomplish something today, yeah, because they may not have tomorrow. So you're pushing what people want to to make you do things, solve problems then and there, and it's very difficult to do, because some things take time. So the attitudes of people changed in that too, and I don't think it's ever returned, because we lost the ability to be civil people in that everybody was just afraid, and I need to protect myself, right?

**Gavin Kelly**

Yeah, again, I can't imagine, but I appreciate you sharing your story from from there and talking about your perspective and being a part of history, for better or worse. You know, you've not only been directly a part of history in that way, but in the places you've worked. You've been responsible for maintaining history and preserving history, you know, talk to me about why that's been so important to you and has the emphasis on that throughout your career. Was it something that came about? Was it something that was important to you from the beginning, working at these sites where there's so much history, working at places where the civil rights movement was such a prevalent thing. Why has taking on roles? We're preserving that history is part of the role. Why has that been important to you?

**Audrey Calhoun**

In my family, we always had the historian, the family historian, that would go back and tell the stories of what happened. And there was always this person that each each generation, you sit down and you tell and you talk about this person, what they did, what the life was like, and everything. So when I got into these positions, I came in with, with that said, we, we already identified. And say. Our history. So it was not any big deal for me to to do the same with the jobs that that I had that we were preserving

something. If we were preserving a natural area that was that was critical, we were preserving a historic site that was critical. Same thing started with growing up with it.

**Gavin Kelly**

Yeah. So again, preserving history and being making sure that the history that you're a part of is kept, is kept where it needs to be. I'm gonna ask you one more question before we let you go. And again, I appreciate you making time for us today, you've done a lot of kind of storytelling and reflecting on your career. I know later today you're going to be talking to the forestry program here on campus, and I'm sure you'll have a lot of words of wisdom for them as well. But when you think about a field like forestry or AG, business, these kind of programs that are similar, and how there are special emphasis is on women in the field and trying to make space for women in those fields, and thinking about where you were growing up and your mentality through that. What would you say to young people today who you know are thinking of kind of this path for themselves that's not aligned with something that maybe their parents are thinking or what they think for themselves. What would be your kind of advice of them? What would you say to those people who are kind of thinking about their future in terms of what they're supposed to do versus what they want to do?

**Audrey Calhoun**

Don't stop. If you know where you want to go, you keep going toward it. And there will be a lot of people along the way that will say that you can't do or you shouldn't do that. Tell them my it's my life, and this is what I want to do. So you keep moving, keep moving toward it, and if, as long as you're committed to it, then you'll succeed at it. But if you let somebody try and talk you out of it because they think you're not qualified for it, don't do that. Don't let them talk you out of your life.

**Gavin Kelly**

Beautifully said, and you're the living proof, right? Well, Miss Calhoun, thank you again for making time in your day to be a part of the podcast. I really appreciate having you on and listening to you and listen to you tell stories. I think I could do it all day, but And thanks again for being you know, we don't, I don't get to talk to too many people who have origins and win parish, so it's always fun to talk to somebody that can can stand out in the group of people that are from Winfield area. So thank you again. This has been special. Thank you very much. Thank you.

**Gavin Kelly**

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