Julie Bartucca: Happy new year and welcome everybody to the big 50th episode of UConn 360 the only podcast in the universe that covers the University of Connecticut from every conceivable angle. I'm Julie Bartucca filling in for Tom Breen, who's somewhere on the other side of the world right now. And I'm here with Ken Best.

[00:00:27] Kenneth Best: I am here behind the board.

[00:00:28] Julie Bartucca: Yes. We're back to our regular format, sort of, although we're forgoing Tom's history corner this week for some slightly supersized feature segments. but first, as always, we have some Husky headlines. Ken.

[00:00:41] Kenneth Best: Well, the big news this week, Naismith hall of fame, basketball star and UConn board of trustees member Rebecca Lobo was named as one of the six recipients of the 2020 NCAA silver anniversary award, which is awarded each year.

[00:00:56]for distinguished individuals on the 25th anniversary of the conclusion of their college athletics career. It's been 25 years already. That's insane. now an ESPN analyst, Rebecca was the captain and star of Geno Auriemma, his first undefeated NCAA championship team, and was the most outstanding player in the 1995 final.

[00:01:18] And she'll be recognized with the other honorees on January 22nd in Anaheim, California. Well deserved for Rebecca.

[00:01:25]Julie Bartucca: She deserves every honor. She's a great person and was a great player. I have an interesting research story that combines some hot topics, the ketogenic diet and concussions, UConn neurobiology researchers have discovered that a high fat ketogenic type diet reduces male fruit fly aggression after concussions. Although the study was done in fruit flies, the findings hint at potential treatments to prevent damage after head impacts in humans. The experiment was carried out by graduate and undergraduate students in neurobiologist Geoff Tanner's lab and it involved causing traumatic brain injuries in fruit flies.

[00:01:59] Half of them were fed normal high carb diets while the others were given the fruit fly version of the keto diet. The team found that the fruit flies who suffered the brain injuries were more aggressive with each other than those who hadn't been put in the trauma device, but then those on the ketone supplemented diets behaved less aggressively, more like those that hadn't suffered the injuries in the first place.

[00:02:17]And even those that were given the high ketone diet, only on the day they had the trauma rather than their whole very short lives were less aggressive, suggesting that the diet could protect injured brain cells and help them recover. So it's kind of cool.

[00:02:29]Kenneth Best: We shouldn't say anything about them having brain traumatic injury.
Julie Bartucca: No, it's terrible.

But it's good to know with that being such a hot topic that something like being on a different kind of diet could help.

Kenneth Best: If you like keto stuff.

Julie Bartucca: Yeah, I guess.

I don't know. All right. Let's get into our feature segments. So it's our big 50th episode. Unfortunately, our friend Tom is not here right now.

We'll we're going to have to have a bigger celebration when Maxine and Tom return.

Julie Bartucca: Yes, we'll have to have some cake or something. but we're celebrating ourselves because we both prepared some stories that we're really excited about, that we've been talking about for a long time. I'm going to start with mine. I'm going to fan-girl out for a moment. I spoke with who I think is one of the coolest people at UConn, who I've really been dying to talk to since we started this podcast and was lucky enough to chat with for quite awhile.

So I hope you'll agree that this segment was worth going a little bit longer on. Regina or Gina Barreca is a beloved UConn professor. She's a board of trustees, distinguished professor of English literature, and she's known the world over as an author and a humorist. She's been at UConn for 32 years since first landing a teaching job here, straight out of grad school in 1987 and in that time has written 10 books and edited 17. Her weekly syndicated Hartford current column is published all over the world. She has dedicated fans as far away as New Zealand, an expert in women's humor, Barreca lectures around the country and internationally and has appeared everywhere from Oprah to CNN.

We talked about comedy, about her life and what she's learned along the way and why in 2020 we're still discussing whether women are funny.

Gina Barreca: About every five years I'll get a phone call from a magazine or someone writing an article and be like, men don't believe that women have a sense of humor. I don't know if we need to put a plaques in different places or there need to be monuments.

It's something that it keeps reappearing. I think it's in the same way that we have to be reminded to eat vegetables on a regular basis, or that fiber's good for you, or that pets can help you live longer, or that violence is an issue in relationships and that is not a good thing as a way to solve problems.

It's really astonishing to me that we need to be reminded of this. And I do think that women's humor is very different from men's humor, and that's what I've spent. The 35 years of my life writing about the topic and it does change. I think things have changed in the
time that I've been looking at it, but it does seem as if the point has not quite stuck in a way that it, it continues to surprise me because of what we see represented in humor is still mostly male comics.

[00:05:16] Julie Bartucca: What I love about you is you talk about these very deep issues. Not only this type of thing, but you talk about in your columns, your mother and her struggles with mental health and anxiety, things like that. Your relationship with her, your mother, body image, things that women know all too well. People think of humor sometimes as being kind of frivolous, but you've made this career of really studying it and understanding it and then writing about things with this humor lens.

[00:05:41] How do you kind of thread that needle?

[00:05:43] Gina Barreca: I think that's a lovely question because I do think that the best humor, and not just women's humor, but perhaps, especially women's humor has always dealt with taboo subjects. What humor does is to deal with topics that nobody else wants to touch, and so it deals with sex. It deals with death, it deals with money.

[00:06:03] It deals with trauma. It deals with misery. It deals with discomfort. If a comic is not making somebody uncomfortable, that comic is not doing his or her job. And because what you're supposed to do with comedy, and Mark Twain talked about this, our Stephanie's talked about this, Sarah Silverman talks about this, is you make the comfortable uncomfortable and you make the uncomfortable comfortable so that you.

[00:06:33] Switch around the balances of power, that those who believe they are in a position where they're secure or made antsy, and those who are anxious and nervous or may just recognize that they're not alone, that other people feel exactly that way. And so. By talking about what's meaningful in life. What comedy does is to emphasize what's significant and not dismiss it.

[00:07:02] It's sort of run towards the things that we're most afraid of as opposed to backing away. So it might be frivolous. I mean, I love the word frivolous actually, because it literally makes light, it sheds light, but what it does is it sheds light on the dark corners of things. It takes things out of the shadows and makes them the center of discussion, but it never trivializes. The best comedy doesn't trivialize. It emphasizes, it italicizes, it makes us remember and understand something from a different perspective and that's why it's important and that's why it's always been part of every culture. Every culture has a version of the comic and uses humor. It is a fundamental human expression and way of thinking.

[00:07:51] Julie Bartucca: So how does this jive with this whole cancel culture thing? In one of the videos I was watching of one of your talks, you said how women can have a great sense of humor and also assert their power by not putting up with offensive jokes. So is it that people can only joke about things they've experienced?

[00:08:04] How do you feel about that?

[00:08:06] Gina Barreca: Humor at its best doesn't attack what's vulnerable or weak or defenseless, and so humor that's going to be original, that is not just a repetition of
nastiness, that is not something that is designed to shut somebody up, is never something that we have to worry about. Humor that is a gag is a whole different category because think about the word gag for a minute, because a gag is a joke that's played on you. But a gag is also something put across your mouth so that you shut up.

And when humor is used to silence somebody, to make somebody feel awful, to make somebody feel that they have no right to speak, to make them feel as if they are displaced out of the conversation, then that's not useful. And that doesn't mean that you have to whine, cry, or call a lawyer.

What it means is that you have to come up with an even better response. If somebody tells you a joke, not only that you don't find funny, but you actually find painful that you find offensive, you can say,

“If you forgive me for not laughing, I'll forgive you for telling that joke,” and that way you’re not up all night. You know? Because most of us, when we hear something like that, we're like awake at two o'clock in the morning going, I should have said this, and I should have said that. Where if you learn how to say something quickly, even if it's only to express like, you know what?

No, I'm not so happy with that little exchange we just had. So maybe you need to understand that. You just said something that doesn't work for me, and you might need to rethink saying that to somebody else, and you have the strength to say that you have the confidence to say that. And you can say it in a funny way.

It allows you to keep your sense of self and not be erased because the worst kind of humor. Makes people feel as if they're diminished, silenced, or raced. And so learning how to use humor not as a weapon, but as a tool. Learning how to turn it back on somebody almost as a way of sort of martial arts gives you a sense of power and that's really important.

Julie Bartucca: When did you figure out that you could juxtapose your studies of literature and feminism and humor?

Gina Barreca: I think it was when I was doing the work for my PhD. I knew the only way that I was going to be able to actually write a dissertation, the most daunting part of the process was going to be if I focused on a topic that.

I actually liked, not just, you know, everybody comes up, you're, you're dealing as my graduate students do over the years. You come up with something that's interesting that hasn't been done 10,000 times where you can do original research. So I had my professors at the Graduate Center at City University where I got my degree and they were saying, well, you could do working women in the novels of Charles Dickens, and I'm like, yeah, yeah, I could, you know, I knew how to write a paper. I had gone to Dartmouth College and Cambridge University and I mean, I knew I could perform, I could do that stuff. I was a good student. That was always a good girl. I have abandoned that project, but I started out as a good girl and then I thought, no, if I'm going to actually sit down and write.
250, 300 pages on a topic, it better be something that captures my imagination. And so I did my dissertation on hate and humor and the novels of 20th century women writers because I decided that those were the two parts of any text that really got my attention, and I saw them as twinned. I really saw the humor and the sort of anger and outrage braided together, and I realized that that really hadn't been written about before and I was sort of amazed by that and not so amazed. Then when I went to, my professor says that I would like to do humor and women's novels, and they said, well, there is no humor in women's novels.

And I was like, nah, I think you're, I think you're wrong.

Julie Bartucca: That's your whole career right there.

Gina Barreca: I think you're wrong about that. Yeah.

And then I found that there was one other woman who is sadly passed away, but a woman named Nancy Walker, who was my senior, but just started about five years before I started by just rotation working on

Women's humor as a scholarly topic, but it really was, it was new. No one had actually theorized in terms of literary studies, the idea of gender and humor. And so once the committee that I had said, okay, go ahead. You know, we don't know what you're going to come up with, but we'll let you do it. I just had a great time, and so I did the dissertation and then I got the job here at UConn and the summer after my first year, I was busy trying to turn my dissertation into an academic book and desperate to get tenure. I mean, I had been a self-supporting student my whole life. I, I needed the job and I wanted to keep the job. And so I was living in the Mansfield apartments.

Yeah. And before … now they look like, you know, Paris to me, but in those days they're poured concrete walls, linoleum floors, there was no air conditioning in the, the walls would sweat. I was there in the summer. They were not, yeah. And I was sitting on like really with a card table and I had no one at the card table in the middle and practically a naked light bulb over the card table.

And I read a book review by a woman who was an editor at Penguin and Isent her a postcard and said, that was a really interesting review. I just wanted you to know that because I think it's important to hear from writers to hear if you've written something good from somebody. And she said, Oh, we should have lunch.

And in those days, the idea that someone would buy me lunch was, I continue to be a cheap date, but I was really a cheap date. She liked the topic of women's humor, and she said, would you consider doing a trade book? And I said, well, I have to do this academic book. I have to get tenure. I really, I need to turn this into this.

This is what I'm working on now. And she said, we would pay you. And I said, I can do two books at the same time. I can do that. I actually did sit and which one does when one's young did not sleep, and I wrote the book that became the scholarly book out of
Wayne State University press called "Untamed and Unabashed: Essays on Women and Humor in [British] Literature."

[00:14:50] And then for Penguin, Viking Penguin did, "They Used to Call Me Snow White, but I Drifted: Women's Strategic Use of Humor," which became a very popular, bestselling book and, where instead of using examples from George Elliot and Jane Austin and Muriel spark and Fay Weldon and Elizabeth volun, I used I love Lucy and the dating game and that girl and standup comics, Joy Behar and, people who were around in the early nineties. Doing those two simultaneously was

[00:15:22] Exhausting, but really useful cause it got me thinking about both the, the scholarly sort of underpinnings and the sort of philosophical and academic underpinnings for the arguments. But then to really learn how to apply it in terms of people's real lives. And that was fun and it was worth. Losing the sleep, but I, I, I, I now nap.

[00:15:46] I make up for those early years.

Julie Bartucca: My last question is, what have you learned through all of this studying, teaching, writing that has kind of impacted your life or affected how you live your life?

Gina Barreca: That almost anything in the world that happens to you can make you either laugh or cry. That we're not going to go back to, you know, sort of Shakespeare's, nothing is either good or bad, but thinking makes it so that choosing how to tell your story, how to look at your story really is how we write the script of our lives.

[00:16:29] It's not that somehow too. Tell a funny story about a terrible thing that happened, diminishes the importance of it, but it gives you control over it. It becomes. Your story as opposed to something that happened to you. I talk about this in my last book, which is if you lean in, will men just look down your blouse.

[00:16:50] One of my favorite things, I got the award from the Girl Scouts of Connecticut for storytelling, for writing, and I said, I write in order to be able to tell the story so that it's not just a series of random things that have happened, but I get to be the narrator of what happens. I get to talk about what happens.

[00:17:13] So if there's something like depression, anxiety. Both things that I've dealt with in my life and in my family where you're talking about, you know, the complex relationship with my mother who died when I was very young or any of the difficulties. You're growing up poor or having a struggle and in the earlier part of my life that telling those stories makes me not only

[00:17:37] examine them and understand them and also be able in the best ways to help other people who are going through them, especially other women and my students who are going through difficulties where you feel like you're never going to be able to get outside the other end to say like, this is how you get outside the other end and there is joy that can happen after this and all comics,
anybody who does dealt with comedy, understands that pain plus time equals humor. And that’s because you do get a different perspective on it, but it's not to go back and undo what’s happened or again, to trivialize what happens, but in order to put a frame around it so that you can look back and say, this was that moment.

Things have changed. This was what I learned from it. This is what benefited me and this is who I am now because of that. And it’s also a way to understand how not to repeat what you've done because you understand what happened, how to be able to move to another chapter where you're able to write a different script from the one that you were handed.

And also to understand that sort of life is about improv. But improv also takes an enormous amount of discipline, and that being able to tell that story takes the kind of discipline that telling the story regularly and understanding how stories are told gives you, and that that’s why it's important to do it on a sort of a regular, ongoing basis and also to listen to the stories that other people tell.

Kenneth Best: Well, little known fact, my discussion with Gina 10 years ago now, almost was one of the inspirations for what we're doing right now. And it was really funny because her book, "It's not that I'm bitter, or how I learned to stop worrying about visible panty lines and conquer the world" had just come out in paper back. And one of the things she started talking about very early is how she delighted in having men read that title as she was introduced.

Julie Bartucca: She's fantastic. I had so much fun talking with her. She's just inspiring and interesting. And makes you realize that there are so many different ways to look at life and it's all what you make of it.

Ken, well, this is kind of a different type of piece, but you've been looking forward to doing this for a while, too. Tell us what you have.

Kenneth Best: A whole year in fact.

Julie Bartucca: Yes.

Kenneth Best: Last year. I started this process, that will culminate on Tuesday, January 14th, UConn's department of dining services will hold its 20th culinary Olympics, which showcases the skills and expertise of our staff of professional chefs.

The event is free. It's open to the public and has several components, including a recipe contest, cooking demonstrations, and a display of 20 cakes. This year, knowing the anniversary. But there's also the boiling point competition, which has evolved into kind of a hybrid between Iron Chef and Chopped. 12 teams of three chefs from different campus dining facilities
[00:20:45] each get a mystery box of ingredients and have 75 minutes to prepare three different tapas, which are small food appetizers on a single plate. The judges are professional chefs and food industry specialists. Last year, as I said, I went to the Rome ballroom where they will hold it again this year on South campus and during the competition, I recorded the event where I spoke with assistant director for culinary development and cookbook author Rob Landolphi first about the history of the culinary Olympics.

[00:21:16] Robert Landolphi: You think back 19 years ago when we started this and Putnam refectory, which was a smaller venue, we at the time, I think when we first started, we did the recipe contest in the morning where we had maybe six or seven people who participated in the recipes, and then in the Boiling Points we probably had somewhere around six or seven teams. Since then, we outgrew that venue.

[00:21:40] We moved here to roam ballroom, which is. You sell at eight we now have well over 14 recipes in the morning, and 36 chefs competing in the afternoon, 12 teams. I think the maximum we ever had was 16 teams. So it's open to the public. As you can see, when you look around now, there's hundreds of people here.

[00:21:57] Whereas when we did it at Putnam, you were lucky if you had a couple of dozen. It's kind of taken on its own momentum.

[00:22:03] Kenneth Best: Team one from the McMahon residence hall dining facility included veteran chefs, Scott Chapman, Susan Chang, and Charlie Strong. They received their instructions and began to cook with ingredients from the mystery basket and included cooked duck parts, black beans, sweet potato, mash, goat cheese, Indian pickled vegetable, and the jelly donut.

[00:22:23] They also could use items from the pantry stocked with a variety of ingredients set up for the competition. Chapman talked with reporters as they began.

[00:22:36] Robert Landolphi: There's ingredients right there. There's your pantry. You can think any of the pantry ingredients to use for your topless time starts.


[00:22:52] Scott Chapman: Ravioli. That's exactly what I was thinking. All right.

[00:22:56] Reporter: How are you feeling right now? How do you feel about these ingredients?

[00:22:58] Scott Chapman: There's a lot of different things you can go with. You can go with, you know, something more gourmet or something traditional. I think with a dessert you can go traditional with the duck we're going to do something gourmet. We're going to make a homemade ravioli with that.
[00:23:09] **Reporter:** You say this one is tougher than last?

[00:23:11] **Scott Chapman:** I think this is one of the toughest ones we've had because it's not like you've got a duck breast or anything.

[00:23:17] I mean, this is a fully cooked duck leg. We can shred it and then just cook it once and have it played itself. Jelly doughnut is out of this world. That's something that's off the charts. That's why we took the chambord because we think we can make a dessert with that, with the chambord and the jelly donut.

[00:23:36] How to incorporate it into something is a different story.

[00:23:39] **Kenneth Best:** Is this more like a chopped than an iron chef?

[00:23:42] **Scott Chapman:** It's becoming more like Chopped. I think in the beginning when we started doing it, it was more like Iron chef where we got some really nice, not off the wall things. Now we're getting him sandwich and a jelly donut.

[00:23:55] What'd ya do? So that is more like chopped, right?

[00:23:57] **Kenneth Best:** I remember when venison was the secret ingredient

[00:24:00] **Scott Chapman:** We had beef jerky, beef

[00:24:03] jerky one year. Standard egg wash, I have no idea how his is going to turn out

[00:24:15] **Kenneth Best:** Take care of the raviolis.

[00:24:25] **Scott Chapman:** So I took, yeah, fresh tomatoes, peppers, and I took a little salsa and I just got some sweet chili sauce. This is going to be, yeah, I don't know how it's going to taste, but it's an interesting combination. It is. Yes. It will be almost like a cold salsa

[00:24:43] I can pan fry those and put this on the bottom. And put this Just a little bit. Have this like for a little dipping sauce right

[00:24:57] here.

[00:24:58] That's beautiful. That's good. It's like a sweet chili salsa. I think it's good. It's going to have to do.

[00:25:15] **Kenneth Best:** Two of the judges

[00:25:15] are veterans with the culinary Olympics at UConn who return for this year's competition. Christopher Prosperi is the chef and owner of Metro based restaurant in Simsbury. He is a familiar figure in the state food industry from his Hartford Courant column, as host of new England cuisine on NBC 30, and with Faith Middleton's Food Schmooze on WNPR.
Rand Richards Cooper is a long time food and travel writer was also a New York Times food critic. I spoke to Prosperi and Cooper as they observed the chefs working during the competition. We’ll first hear from Prosperi, and then some kitchen sounds before hearing Cooper.

Christopher Prosperi: This has gotta be my 15th year judging this.

And the one thing I notice every single year is the chefs they get, get better and better and better. I think that the quality of the food at this school is as high as any restaurant and the fact that they’re doing that number right. What did you say?

Kenneth Best: 185,000 a week.

Christopher Prosperi: A week. Right. And they’re doing it at the level of the restaurants now you got to admit, that’s really impressive.

Kenneth Best: What do you look for when you are judging?

Christopher Prosperi: What I look for is creativity first. Of course, using the right crazy ingredients he gives them every year they have to incorporate that. But creativity and number one is taste right. It’s got to taste good and it’s got to all make sense together. So the ones that, in ,my mind that always win are the ones that give us three tapas and it’s like telling the story, right? So they all make sense going together. They’re creative and they use all those ingredients that they get in their mystery basket.

Kenneth Best: And what is it you’re making I hear?

Chef: It’s going to be a stuffing for a croquette.

Kenneth Best: There’s a pineapple?

Chef: Pineapple, garlic, onion. A scallion and then some spices are going to be thrown in.

Kenneth Best: Okay.

Rand Richards Cooper: This kind of challenge requires a chef to have a real big background knowledge so that you know from experience, you know, what kinds of proteins combined with other sorts of complementary ingredients. A chef, a kitchen cook like me, you know, would quake in terror faced with this stuff. Oh, what am I going to do with a jelly donut?

Except have you eat it? So what I’m really impressed by is how over the years, chefs will take ingredients that they’ve never cooked with the field. You know, whether it’s. Sea urchin, or, or, or a snow Ba- a Hostess snowball. And they’ll figure out what to do with it in a way that doesn’t hide it, but sort of normalizes it and makes you think when you taste it,

"Wow. I never knew you could do that with X." And so I, I, I love seeing that it’s really the definition of grace under pressure. Very cool.
Kenneth Best: So as we look at the table or the pantry for the chefs, we have basil, cayenne pepper, chili powder, coriander, ginger, Sage, Chipotle, chili, thyme, paprika, Italian seasoning, Sesame seed, Rosemary, poppy seeds, and black pepper; there's all manner of pasta and rice, grains, flour concoctions.

And there's onions, peppers, celery, and asparagus, eggs, and all sorts of milk and dairy products as well.

Announcer: Teams, come down, Wheel of Fortune time.

Kenneth Best: It's actually the wheel of misfortune, which is another group of oddball ingredients that chefs can purchase between one and $7 of culinary bucks. Based on where the wheel lands, the groups included leftover pizza, rice paper wrappers, a leftover ham sandwich an avocado and other selections.

Announcer: 2,1. 2, 1. Prepare your spatulas!

Boiling Point champions and bragging rights for the next year. Team number 5 from Union Street Market.

Kenneth Best: The winners last year were team five from union street market, the main dining facility in the student union. The Team included Alison Reed, Tom Simmons, and Trevor Flanagan, who create tapas of Indian pickle hummus with pita chips, Korean duck crostini, and a sweet potato parfait.

Allison Reed: It's awesome. I've competed several times and never placed and we're sitting there thinking, no, we didn't win, and then they said our team name, and here we are.

Kenneth Best: What were you thinking when you saw the ingredients that you had to work with, which is a little bit of a curve ball, and then you had to make it happen.

Team members: Oh man, it was, it was the worst bit of ingredients that we had to work with, but we came out on top.

Allison Reed: The Indian pickles definitely threw me for a loop.

Kenneth Best: What do you think did it?

Team members: Teamwork.

Allison Reed: Yes. We all definitely put a touch on each dish and we were sharing tasting and, yeah. We did a good job!

Kenneth Best: There was a reference, when I talked with Chris Prosperi, dining services serves more than 185,000 meals per week for the dining services plan and during the school year, the Not Just Desserts bakery provides more than 79,400 chocolate chip cookies, 72,000 assorted cookies, about 10,000 cupcakes, 11,000 loaves of all kinds of bread, 25,400 wheat rolls and 68,000 pounds of pizza dough.
Julie Bartucca: Those are very big numbers and they do an amazing job. I truly loved eating here as a student, and you don’t hear good things about dining halls, but

Kenneth Best: It's a far cry from when I was in college, I can tell you that.

Julie Bartucca: It is, and it's funny, I actually got in an argument with one of my MBA professors because he thought that UConn was a Sodexo school and I was like, no, they are the largest self run dining services in the country. I believe, and it’s very, very impressive.

Kenneth Best: Dennis Pierce and Mike White and company do a very good job.

Julie Bartucca: They do.

Kenneth Best: With getting things done.

Julie Bartucca: Very cool. Great story. All right, well that's about it for our first episode of 2020. Tom will be back next episode with a fresh history corner, so be sure to come back and join us in a fortnight.

Kenneth Best: As always, today.uconn.edu.

Julie Bartucca: Find all Ken's stories there, and you can follow @UConnPodcast on Twitter or follow @main_old where Tom posts some great UConn historic photos. And that's about it for this week. So thanks everybody. Hope your new year’s resolutions go well.