

John Boccacino:

Hello, and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University.

Alex Middleton:

Scholarship opportunities have been especially important to me. I came into Syracuse University from homelessness. I was kicked out of my house at the age of 18, and I was couch surfing before coming to Syracuse. So all of the opportunities that I have had throughout the past four years in being able to do everything I have has come through scholarships and grants.

John Boccacino:

As the United States celebrates pride month, the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast wanted to spotlight the LGBTQ+ community here at Syracuse University. In honor of pride month, our guest today is Alex Middleton, who recently graduated with a bachelor's degree in speech language pathology, from the communications, sciences and disorders program in the college of arts and sciences. On this episode, Alex discusses how they knew since middle school, that they wanted to be a speech pathologist, providing people with the voice to advocate for themselves. They also share how a paperweight convinced them to travel across the country to pursue the speech pathology program here at Syracuse. And why the university's LGBTQ resource center provided a home and a solid support system on campus. Alex, first question, how are you holding up these days?

Alex Middleton:

Good. I'm still in Syracuse post graduating, and I will be leaving at the end of this month to go to Oregon where I will be attending Pacific University to continue my research in gender affirming voice and communication modification and continue my path on speech language pathology.

John Boccacino:

Congratulations on several fronts, but most specifically, you broke the news to me before we started recording about going to Pacific for your master's program. That is fantastic news. Congratulations.

Alex Middleton:

Thank you so much. I'm really excited to attend that university and see how the energy is different from Syracuse University.

John Boccacino:

What made you interested in this line of study in the first place?

Alex Middleton:

I am originally from San Diego, California. So I am going back to the west coast, but-

John Boccacino:

You've had enough of the snow and the cold?

Alex Middleton:

Yeah, yeah, no, actually I love the snow. That's why I came up here. I wanted to have a different experience than the one that I grew up with, but through middle school and through high school, I was always interested in working with disability populations. I worked with the special education classes in peer mentoring programs, both in middle school and high school. I was the ambassador of Circle of Friends in high school, which is a organization where they peer up general education students and special education students to guide each other around high school.

And so I was really interested in the work that our speech language pathologist at our high school, Ms. Dempsey, was doing with the Circle of Friends kids. Every speech language pathologist I've met has been a weirdly happy person. They just love their job. They love their life. And everybody's like, "It's so rewarding." And I'm like, "Okay, I can talk. I love helping people to be able to talk." And so here I am.

John Boccacino:

I know we talked about this just briefly in passing, but give our audience some insight into your major specifically at Pacific.

Alex Middleton:

Right. So I am so excited. I am going to Pacific University specifically because they are listed as one of the 47 universities out of the 270 something universities in the US that have speech language pathology programs, that has a program for working with transgender populations specifically, and that they very much... They advertise their program for working with transgender populations. And I found my niche in speech language pathology, really in my sophomore year at Syracuse University. And that was through working at the LGBTQ resource center.

And my boss told me about gender affirming voice and communication modification, or as it was called then transgender voice modification. And I was like, "Oh, what's that?" That has all of the science behind understanding resonance and understanding pitch and how to modify voice and language. And it has that social aspect of how people interpret gendered language or language in general. And I was immediately interested with it. And so I went up to my mentor, Dr. Stephanie McMillan, in the diversity and language and literacy lab, and I expressed my interest about it to her.

I did a independent study and I read up about the techniques used, and I realized that there isn't a lot of discussion about this already out there in the field. And I thought that was a travesty because I went around to my classmates saying, "Hey, I want to do this." And they'd be like, "Oh, I've never heard of that. That sounds really cool." Like, "Yeah, yeah, it is." So I was wondering why we weren't hearing about it in our classes at SU. So I developed a survey with my mentor, Dr. McMillan, and we did a national survey of speech language pathologists who work clinically with populations currently, and ask them about their training to work with transgender populations based off of their graduate school training and any extra kind of things they might have sought out to support transgender clients.

John Boccacino:

What was it from the research that you gathered that led... That there wasn't a lot of attention being paid to this topic? There wasn't a lot of skills or trainings being given to speech pathologists. Why was that?

Alex Middleton:

A lot of it is that, if there is training for it, it's one little piece of a course and it comes through voice course because it has to do with modifying voice, which we usually look at in the context of populations that are in remediation, rather than voluntary services. So it is a voluntary service, but it's such a life saving voluntary service to be able to give someone the gender euphoria of having the voice that they feel represents them.

But also, there are language aspects to gender, or gendered language aspects that a lot of people don't look at in the field, or they're just not historically recognized. And so a lot of the earliest voice training was done on a transgender woman. And there's a lot more gender affirming voice and communication modification being done with transgender women than trans men, because HRT hormone replacement therapy for trans men naturally lowers the voice. But in women, it does not because it has to do with the mass of the vocal codes, and a couple of other features.

Yeah. There's not a lot out there as much for trans men as there is for trans women. And then also, looking further at there, even the field is still working within the binary if we're talking about gender, about feminization and masculinization, and there are a lot of people out there that get the binary enough in their day to day life that don't need it in their therapy services. So there's even an ongoing conversation about how to deconstruct that.

John Boccacino:

And how do you think your training here at Syracuse, you are working with your mentor and the role that you've taken, how do you think you're going to be able to help and enhance this line of study?

Alex Middleton:

Definitely here at SU, I was able to get my foot in the door with research. I feel there has been a heavy research focus on my education, and I appreciate that as somebody who wants to go into research. My mentor, actually, this was her devious plan all along to get me on the tenured research track. She won. And especially the professors at, in the speech language in the communication sciences and disorders program at Syracuse University, have all been fantastic and really into supporting their students wherever possible. I really appreciate, especially, the candor of professor Laura Vincent in getting her... In letting her students know how much, what her path was to get into speech, language pathology.

And Dr. McMillan, I don't even know how to properly credit her. She has done everything for me to be able to... She's helped me start this project obviously, and then taking me to Argsha and involving me in all of her projects, and always introducing new scholarship opportunities to me. Scholarship opportunities have been especially important to me. I came into Syracuse University from homelessness. I was kicked out of my house at the age of 18, and I was couch surfing before coming to Syracuse. So all of the opportunities that I have had throughout the past four years and being able to do everything I have has come through scholarships and grants.

John Boccacino:

It's such an inspirational story to hear where you were, not having a roof over your head, going from couch to couch, not sure what your present was going to lead to, much less, your future. And now you're going out to Pacific for a fantastic master's program. Connect the dots. How did you go from that adverse circumstances to rising up and giving yourself a great future?

Alex Middleton:

So this is actually why I like speech language pathology, because I've always been able to use my voice to advocate for my needs. I had always been a 4.0 student, 4.0 plus, I graduated high school with a 4.3. And I always participated in class. Nobody was really worried so much about my academic pieces. I was also a tri-varsity athlete. I was incredibly involved in clubs and everything at school. And I always knew that I would be able to work my way through school and get a good scholarship and go to college. So I've been planning this since elementary school. It was not luck at all. It was very much planned from elementary school that I would work hard and get my way out.

And I am very lucky that there are people in my life that told me that I could do that, and believed in me. So I applied to Syracuse University, obviously, and I got in, and I started living at in Day Hall, go Day [inaudible 00:12:46], and I felt a sense of stability that I hadn't felt in a long time. And again, I reached out to my support services at the San Diego Syracuse meetup. I asked around, "Hey, I've been homeless for a few months. I don't know who to talk to get help when I get into Syracuse, because I don't even know what I'm doing. I'm applying alone. I'm doing all of this paperwork alone. Every year I have to call the financial aid office and be like, "Hey, I can't fill out the parent form of my FAFSA because I have been disowned."

And I was put in touch with Colleen Bench who at the time worked at the parents' office. So she really got me started on understanding Syracuse University or understanding university life in general, and how to navigate everything. And then from there, I had help through this Syracuse University LGBTQ resource center, because I very quickly started using that as a home. I spent a lot of time in the LGBTQ resource center to the point where, when I started complaining about having to use my student work program, they offered me a job there so I worked there for four years.

John Boccacino:

There's a lot to one pack, Alex, from that story. It's emotional from someone who's listening to you say it because you could have every right to be bitter to be angry, and I'm sure you had those moments. I'm sure you went through that, but the way that you are presenting, the way that you're talking about your story, it's inspiring because you didn't let this get you down. You found a way. You had a plan since you were in fourth grade, and that resiliency is just such an inspiration. And I wanted to ask you about how you develop that resiliency when you don't have the proper support system in place that people at your age should have?

Alex Middleton:

That's a great question. Partially, I think it's internal. A lot of people told me... My cousin who is in a very similar situation to me or my friends, they often tell me, "I have no idea how he did it," and I don't know either. Therapy, definitely therapy helps. I recommend it. But also there's always been something that I click onto. And I struggle with depression, anxiety, PTSD myself. And so I'm not saying this is a solid plan or even easy, but there's always been at least one aspect of life that I've been like, "Okay, I love this. Let me focus on staying alive and keeping going for this."

And for a lot of the time, that was my little brother who I felt like I raised a little bit growing up, but I held on for him. And actually, I wouldn't have gone to Syracuse University without his blessing. I was about to accept my offer of a full ride to San Diego State, but I really wanted to go to Syracuse because it was across the country from San Diego. And I was about to accept San Diego State because my brother was angry at me for leaving the home at 18, and he really needed me there to be able to support him and take care of him.

And I got a text during my third period class, "Alex, you have to come to my class right now." And I was like, "Okay, I hope he's okay." He gets these really bad migraines. So I always meet him in the nurse's office when he is having one so I can calm him down. And so I go to his classroom, I excuse myself for my own class to go to the bathroom. And I go to his class and he hands me a Syracuse University paperweight and says, "Alex, I won this during my last class, and it's the sign that you need to go to Syracuse University." Actually I have the paper weight right here. So this is the reason I went to Syracuse University.

John Boccacino:

And I get it. Your brother is one of your huge supports in life, and you need to make sure that everything was kosher with him to move all the way across the country. And we're so glad that you did come to Syracuse to earn your degree. And it seems like you, from the get go, were connected with the LGBTQ+ resource center. What did that mean to you, and how did they really help you support you becoming who you are today?

Alex Middleton:

That's a great question. The Syracuse University LGBTQ resource center again has been a home. I had a teacher in high school who was a gay man who told me about how he used his university's LGBTQ resource center when he was in college. And so I was anticipating it as a resource for myself. The way he described it, it was just a lot of late nights and chats with people that have similar identities and experience the same things. And so I started going to it when it was in the house on Ostrom back in 2018, and it was a nice little stop off campus. It felt very homey because it was off campus and it was in a home structure.

So I spent a lot of time sitting on the couch there. And there was always a student staff member there to talk to me, be welcoming. There were game nights, there were things that could keep my mind off of the whole scary part of being at college seemingly alone. And I came to really love the people in the Syracuse University LGBT resource center, the first person that greeted me, a student staff member, Andrew Hammond. He ended up being my roommate a couple of years later in our off campus apartment. And so I really gained a lot of friends and knowledge of how university works through that. I saw my first snow at the LGBT resource center.

John Boccacino:

That's quite a shock for someone from San Diego.

Alex Middleton:

Yes. Yeah. It was really exciting. I jumped up and I was like, "Guys, there's snow." And they're like, "It's not even the pretty snow."

John Boccacino:

Finding that sense of home, finding that community because you're right. Any college, any university can be incredibly intimidating even if you go 15 minutes down the road from where you're from. You're coming all the way across country to a brand new environment, a brand new campus. Thankfully you had... Did from day one that you were going to be studying in the program that you were going to be here at college of arts and sciences, the speech pathology, the speech language program?

Alex Middleton:

Kind of. I had no idea what that meant. I didn't know... I knew that I wanted to be a speech language pathologist and I knew I was going to Syracuse University to get there, but I didn't know how to enter the program. I didn't understand that I had to go to the office on south campus for CSD specifically, to register for the major until the end of my freshman year, maybe even my sophomore year. So I wasn't technically a major coming in, but I had planned on being a speech language pathology major. I had known since middle school that I wanted to be a speech language pathologist. I just love, again, being able to give people the voice they need or the communication that they need to advocate for themselves. It's very important to me.

John Boccacino:

What are some of the other ways that the LGBTQ+ resource center really did turn into a home for you?

Alex Middleton:

That's definitely through the staff. I spent a lot of time in the LGBT resource center from my 10 hours a week shift to just sitting there for fun, getting my homework done. And especially when we merged with the other offices of the office of multicultural affairs and the disability cultural center, there was always someone there that had some knowledge that I didn't have. And I was always learning about how to be more respectful of people. I was learning more about cultures and I was learning about other people, and that felt like a place to thrive to be able to grow myself within the safety of people that I knew loved me for who I am.

And so I gained a lot of supports, especially through, so Jorge Castillo, the director of the LGBTQ resource center, he early on was very involved with the students and helped to establish a lot of programs. When I was working through the LGBTQ resource center, that was always a place... Programming was always a place for me to express my needs. I started this group called Stitching Bitch, which I am very proud of. It started when we were in Bird Library and I was just exhausted from classes. And I found knitting back then to be a way that I could relieve stress. And then talking with people, I realized that...

I found out about the political history of Stitch Bitches, which arose just after World War II, understand with a history of industrialization, fighting against industrialization. And yarn bombing is a political statement of making public spaces that are harsh more cozy. And I was like, "This is so cool. This is exactly what we're going for as homosexuals. We're trying to make the world a more cozy, more home place to everybody." And that's what I found at the LGBT resource center. It was homey.

And then, I started this group and we didn't have a lot of people at first, but in my senior year we definitely had a lot more people. And it became a really awesome group of people who are just able to... Like-minded people, because they're all crafters, they're makers, they're people that want to do something productive with their hands and talk about everything that's going on because we've had a hard four years in the past four years. So that became a place for growth. A lot of programming stuff made it very homey.

John Boccacino:

It's always unfortunate, in my opinion, that when pride month falls it's during June, and all of our students for the most part are off campus. And we have this phenomenal LGBTQ+ history month that's put on in October when the students are back on campus. What does pride month mean to you?

Alex Middleton:

Each time a small inconvenience happens this month, I'm saying, "During pride month?" Nobody can be mean to me, it's pride month, not allowed, but I have had a lot of trouble with feeling like every time I'm introducing my pronouns in a class or every time I'm insisting upon my pronouns in a class, I feel like I'm being obnoxious. The people around me, you could see the eye rolls, you could see the discomfort with somebody introducing themselves. And not just because of my identity, but just because they're like, "Why do you make everything about it?" Pride month is a chance to be loud. Last pride month, I actually was in Syracuse during the summer.

I was working 38 hours a week in the diversity and language and literacy lab and 10 hours a week at the LGBTQ resource center in the diversity. And language in literacy lab, I had made a little sign for our door and had a bag full of pronoun pins that was up in the communication sciences and disorders area. And so a lot of professors were coming by taking those and asking if they could get some for their classes. And pride month, I feel without the opportunity to put signs up, to have a place specifically to be loud about it.

I don't think that there would have been the opportunity that I had to open this conversation up within the communication sciences and disorders office. And now, we're seeing a lot more move towards professors putting pronouns in their emails, in their email signatures, or asking for students explicitly for their pronouns on the first day of classes. I attribute a lot of that to being able to have open, loud conversations.

John Boccacino:

I don't know much about the LGBTQ plus history month, give our listeners a little insight into what that's like every October.

Alex Middleton:

So LGBTQ history month, the LGBTQ resource center plans for this. So last year, we actually instituted our first hollow queen ball where we had... It was a Halloween themed ball because LGBTQ history month is during the month of October. So towards the end of the month, we had a dance which had the double benefit of giving kids who probably didn't have their own proms because of COVID a chance to be as queer as they wanted and just dance. Gosh, I was so happy looking at all these like freshmen and sophomore dance on the dance floor. We were in the face below the LGBT resource center, I guess in Shine.

And so, seeing those kids dancing around with their pride flags, it made me so happy. I was tearing up. And so we have that, but we also have during November lookout for trans day remembrance, we do a vigil for all of the trans lives lost during the year. And then during LGBTQ history month, there's always just a constellation of speakers. There's always a keynote speaker, events, movie screenings. So always look out for the calendar for that because there will be different stuff each year. And usually, there's a different theme.

Last year, we kept the theme around prison reform. So we invited a lot of speakers who are coming from a background of prison reform. We try to center intersectionality and understanding how people who hold identities, other marginalized identities outside of the LGBTQ community experienced the nexus of their marginalization. And so looking at prison reform, we included conversations about being black and queer, being native and queer, being a undocumented and queer. So there are always looking at conversations on intersectionality.

John Boccacino:

I have to say, Alex, this has been an eyeopening conversation. I have enjoyed every minute of getting to know you here. They are a fantastic story. They're heading out to Pacific on the west coast Pacific University to further the speech language pathology career. They also were honored again by the chancellor 2022 citation for excellence in the category of excellence in student research. And they are going to make a huge difference when it comes to working with transgender language, both verbal and nonverbal. Alex, thank you so much for the time today.

Alex Middleton:

Thank you so much. I had a great time.

John Boccacino:

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.