

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal communications specialist at Syracuse University. Each April, the Syracuse University community celebrates our Asian American and Pacific Islander students, faculty and staff during Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month.

This year's theme is regrounding, celebrating our identity, focusing on sharing and celebrating the pride, strength and joy demonstrated by our on campus AAPI community. It's an important theme, especially following the challenges of the last two years, including the COVID-19 pandemic and a troubling rise in anti-Asian hate crimes and bias incidents.

One of the highlights of AAPI Heritage Month was the April 7th commemorative lecture with Michelle Zauner, a talented and decorated singer and guitarist who creates indie pop under the name, Japanese Breakfast. Merci Sugai, a graduate student in the school of education and graduate assistant in student activities, served as AAPI planning committee co-chair while Hyejun Yoo, a dual major in new house and the iSchool, moderated the commemorative lecture, Q&A Michelle Zauner.

On this student centric 'Cuse Conversation, we catch up with Sugai and Yoo to discuss planning this year's AAPI Heritage Month celebrations, why they wanted to get involved and how their time at Syracuse University helped them discover more about who they are.

Merci, I appreciate you making the time to join us as we are celebrating Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. And you've played a key role so far in this month's celebrations. Describe for us your role as the co-chair of the planning committee.

Merci Sugai:

A lot of what I do and what Hyejun does as well is co-facilitate meetings with the planning committee. In the fall, we were meeting about once a month. And then, in the spring, it turned into pretty much weekly up until April. Facilitating two hour long meetings, making sure that we were able to get a good representation of students, staff and faculty that wanted to participate. Also, definitely facilitating those conversations around student groups that are associated with a AAPI identities on campus and making sure that they were making progress towards planning their events. We're also collaborating a lot with campus partners to make sure that they could be present at events and they were understanding of what was going on around campus. There was a lot of behind the scenes work, just making sure that a bunch of moving parts were headed on track to be able to pull off successful month, but the bulk of what Hyejun and I did on a day to day basis would be communicate with students and campus partners.

John Boccacino:

What do you hope are the main goals and main takeaways for AAPI Heritage Month?

Merci Sugai:

I hope that it could be a celebration for both students, staff and faculty within the AAPI community here at SU. I think last year's AAPI Month celebration happened to be in the midst of a giant spike in hate crimes against Asian Americans and I think this year, while that hasn't necessarily gone away, I think we're moving towards reclaiming our sense of identity and which is where the theme came from, reclaiming our identities as AAPI students, staff and faculty at SU and how can we empower one another through difficult times as we are moving forward away from, hopefully, what is a large spike in COVID-19 and thinking about, how can we take this post spike in COVID and celebrate how far we've come as a community and more in those we've lost at the same time, which is a little bit tricky, I think, to navigate,

but it was our hope through all of the events and having a celebration aspect of some events and while having like some serious and in depth stations about anti-Asian bias in this country.

We could do both simultaneously, and I think that's a really powerful facet of both of our identities and this heritage month that SU is giving us of highlight different facets of the Asian American experience at SU, and then how far we have to come as well.

John Boccacino:

I love the theme, reclaiming our identities. You could say that applies to every single member of our Syracuse University campus as we are struggling to come to terms with who we are and what life is all about as we, hopefully, emerge from the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic. For you, tell us a little bit about your background, your identity, and maybe how you found your identity here at Syracuse.

Merci Sugai:

I'm Japanese, but I'm half Japanese, half Italian and I think that identity is something that I've come to terms with through young adulthood, specifically as an undergrad, not here at Syracuse, but I think here at Syracuse, I've been really lucky to discover and find the ways that my identity impact my work with students.

I'm really lucky that I get to work with so many students on a day to day basis and a lot of them happen to be within that AAPI community through this role and through my role at student activities, because I advise RSOs. But I think SU has showed me how I can use my identity to relate to students and empower students to find their identity and where they fit in on a predominantly white campus, both finding Asian American and Pacific Islander students that they relate to and can have community with, but also advocating for themselves and for other in predominantly white spaces.

As an undergraduate student not at SU, I think I've started to come to terms with being biracial and the implications that holds, but now, at SU, as a half professional, half student, I'm learning how to claim my identity to help others, which I think is a really important conversation to have for a lot of graduate students, but I'm very thankful that I'm in this place now, in this positionality now, because it further emphasized my identity development as an Asian woman.

John Boccacino:

We all have struggles growing up. We all have struggles in college. College is your formative experience where you try to figure out who the heck you are and what you want to do with the rest of this thing called life. And when you factor in your background, trying to figure out exactly who you are can be a really overwhelming time on a college campus. What kind of struggles did you have growing up as both Japanese and Italian heritage?

Merci Sugai:

I think the biggest struggle was, I think a lot of biracial and multiracial people face is not feeling like I was blank enough for a space, so not feeling like I was Japanese enough with my Japanese family as most of them are monoracial and most of them are Japanese. Some of them immigrated from Japan. Some of them have been living America and speak both Japanese and English. I think a lot of them still have a larger part of their Japanese identity that I didn't really relate to growing up.

And then, in the same way, I definitely don't present as white in most spaces, so I never really felt like I could fit in with my white family because obviously, I look significantly different than them and

there will always be a part of me that won't present fully as European or white or Italian or anyway because of just the nature of genetics.

I think growing up, I never really felt like I could fit into one space, which, for some reason, I felt like I had to. Then, at the same time, when I got to college and was able to interact with a lot of people who were going through a similar dilemma of some sorts, I could find my place as a biracial individual, interacting with a lot of students who were multiracial or biracial and thinking about the ways that we could claim our own spaces. Even if it didn't look like fitting in exactly with one ethnicity or the other ethnicity or one group of people or the other group of people, I think there's something pretty powerful about having multiple identities that you can claim and you can feel strongly towards. I still feel an affinity towards both sides, I guess, if you want to call it that, of my identity, but being able to be confident in that took a long time, most of my adolescence and young adulthood, but I feel confident, at age 24, I've fully understood where I'm sitting and where I'm positioned as someone who is biracial.

John Boccacino:

I feel like our students, just based on our brief conversation, are very forced to have your perspective because you get to work with our students as a graduate assistant in the office of student activities, passing on these life experiences. What are some of the best words of advice you can give when it comes to counseling our students as to how to find their identities and how to really find out who they are on campus?

Merci Sugai:

I think the biggest piece of advice I try to give and will always give is to never stop talking about your identity. I think I'm fortunate enough to work with student organizations that are centered around Asian American and Pacific Islander identities on campus and I think a lot of times, they feel discouraged, that they don't feel supported by the university, or they don't want to pilot a new initiative, again, because they don't think they'll have that campus or community support. But I think once we stop having that conversation about our identities and wanting to celebrate those, the momentum goes away. And I think the university, while making steps to support students who aren't white, could do a lot better, and I think once we stop talking about the ways that we can impact others in the campus community, that's when the ball drops. I always try to encourage students to continue advocating for yourself and for others and keep advocating for the community and also know when to ask for help.

So know when I need to step in to advocate on your behalf, know when a faculty or a staff member that you trust can step in, but also recognizing that there's power in numbers and finding a space where you can have a lot of people together that identify similarly as you and identify within the AAPI community, using your voices collectively to make a difference for or you and for your experience, but also for future generations of AAPI students who are going to come into SU. I think continuing the conversation and making sure that momentum never dies because of just being discouraged, which is so valid to feel discouraged, but I think that's where staff and professionals can come in to give you the extra push, the extra motivation to keep going.

John Boccacino:

How would you describe the resources that you have found on campus through both the office of multicultural affairs and the unbelievable and amazing intercultural collective that we have here on Syracuse campus?

Merci Sugai:

I'm really fortunate that I got connected with Omagh just because transparently, there's not a ton of spaces for staff and students who identify within a certain population to interact other than in the intercultural collective. I think having the opportunity to be part of a planning committee and to co-chair that planning committee gave me the opportunity to interact with a lot of people who I probably wouldn't have got the chance to interact with just candidly here at SU without that formal committee meeting. I think the fact that Omagh pilots a lot of those heritage month planning committees and tries to get a lot of people from a lot of different offices and departments involved, I think is a great step in the right direction to make sure that students especially feel like they know exactly what staff members they can turn you in times of need and faculty members, and also can create a community with each other from a lot of different organizations on campus.

We had representation from Greek organizations, from student orgs, or just, honestly, random students who weren't affiliated with either and wanted to join. I think having that community and creating that community through heritage month planning committees is something that I've really enjoyed that Omagh does and I hope that they continue to find a wide variety of staff and students and faculty who fit into that particular identity of whatever month they're planning. I'm thankful that Omagh takes the initiative to set up planning committees that are based around identity so that it feels like there's a community that I honestly probably wouldn't have found without it.

And then, similarly, with the intercultural collective, being able to work with Hyejun and Omagh gave me a lot of exposure to other staff in the intercultural collective and other offices there. So I'm very thankful that they exist in that space and are able to help students even very casually and informally when I pop by the office, I can still have conversations with a lot of different professional staff members and graduate assistants who work in different offices in the intercultural collective.

John Boccacino:

What advice could you possibly give, as far as to people who aren't of a Japanese or an Asian American cultural background to become an ally? What advice would you offer to them?

Merci Sugai:

I would recommend taking small steps in your everyday life to become more educated, whether that means following an AAPI creator on Instagram or whatever social media you use, just to see the lived experiences in the day to day, happenings and advocacy that a lot of creators advertise. I think that's a powerful tool because if you're already scrolling on Instagram every day, you might as well pass a few posts that are educational and can teach you a little bit. And while that seems kind of silly, I think that's a really easy way to incorporate it into things that you're already doing.

I also think that if you're a university student or staff or faculty member, attending lectures or educational sessions or programs that are put on by the university, a lot of times, if you're a student, they use your student fees to put them on, so take advantage of those learning opportunities and try to find ways that the university is trying to educate the campus community, especially those who don't identify within a particular population.

And then, obviously, just taking time to be empathetic to people in your life that might identify within the AAPI community and actually having a full conversation with them and giving them opportunity to explain their identities, how they feel about their identities and how they feel in a predominantly white space like SU.

John Boccacino:

You've got your bachelor's degree in human development and family studies from Colorado State University before coming to Syracuse to study higher education here. What made you want to come to Syracuse in the first place?

Merci Sugai:

I think the higher education master's program here was a large reason of why I wanted to come to SU. It's pretty well known in the community, but I also feel like Syracuse is pretty nationally known for being a large private school with a lot of resources and a lot of opportunities for both connections after graduation, and then also connections while you're at SU and I'd have to say that holds pretty true. This is definitely a completely different experience from my undergraduate institution, which is what I wanted.

I think the pride that students and staff and faculty hold, but yet, I also have recognized there's a lot of trends of students, although they have pride to be a Syracuse orange alum, they also are willing to call out the university and think critically about the choices that the university makes and advocate on behalf of students and staff and faculty and I think that's really powerful and I found that in the student body here and I know that's sometimes not present at every institution and also, while it might be present at every institution, it's not always welcomed by the institution, so I'm very thankful that I've found a university that both supports and challenges its students in the same way that students support and challenge that university, if that makes sense.

I think there's a really strong campus community here that I know will carry me many years after I graduate, but I also think that students and staff and faculty here are really critical thinkers and will push the university to be better.

John Boccacino:

We appreciate everything you're doing to advance AAPI Month here on campus and we wish you nothing but the best of law as you pursue that master's degree.

Merci Sugai:

Thank you so much.

John Boccacino:

Hyejun, we're talking here during AAPI Heritage Month, and it's really something that Syracuse University has prided itself on putting forth these activities and these celebrations to really get to know our students who happen to be of Asian American and Pacific Islander heritage. To you, why did you want to get involved in planning the events that were taking place on campus?

Hyejun Yoo:

Yeah. I wanted to be involved because I've always felt that when I was younger, I had to put my Korean or Asian heritage on a back burner, almost, in a way, because it wasn't really something I could really talk about to my peers or anyone else around me because it was more just like a, I guess not a foregrounding characteristic of mine. So I think being able to be proud of my identity and heritage and just being able to be part of something that celebrates my identity and others' identities as well was something I wanted to explore more of in college and stuff. So Justin Kayago, who is actually also part of the planning committee, he was the one who told me about the event. And at first, I was a little hesitant because I had never really been part of any planning committee or any planning of any event on campus

other than, I guess, for my other org, so nothing of this scope, I'd say. I think just being part of it just made me feel like, oh I can connect to other people and connect with my identity in general.

John Boccacino:

You happen to be of Korean American descent and your parents moved to this country when you were younger, so obviously you've got a history and a connection with both Korea and here with the United States. What role did your identity, I guess, play in who you were when you were in high school? And then, how has that connection to your identity changed since you came to Syracuse?

Hyejun Yoo:

In high school, I didn't really, I guess, talk about my Korean heritage or the fact that I'm Korean to a lot of people. I think it was just like, oh, I'd briefly mention it to my friends and stuff, but I think towards the end or middle to end of high school, I started getting more into Korean culture, so art forms and music. And I also wanted to try more of the food even though I had grown up on it, but I wanted to explore from the recipes of my mom would show me and I wanted to explore more into that. And I think at that point, I was less, I guess, for a lack of better word, embarrassed by my culture and I wanted to embrace it more as I grew up because I think I was able to mature more into appreciating it instead of tucking it away in the background. I think when I got to college, so when I came here, I wanted to continue exploring my identity and meeting like-minded people about it.

John Boccacino:

Did you feel any conflict with who you were? Because I can only imagine how difficult it could be to grow up and have different identities, different cultural identities and what it means to be an American and what it means to be Korean, and then, you blend those two together, trying to grow up here in the States.

Hyejun Yoo:

Yeah. I think a lot of the times, I actually wrote an essay about this for a class in high school. I feel like a lot of the times, people who immigrate two different countries, especially not immediately from birth, but more later in your lives, it's the idea that you have to pick, I guess, or choose one identity for oneself instead of having to share both identities within your own self. But I think it was just, I felt the pressure to assimilate more into American culture. I think a lot of times, I would not that ... I think, hence, that's why I didn't really talk about my Korean identity, because I felt like I had forgo that one to become more American. But growing up, I think I realized, you can have two, you can definitely have multiple cultural identities and there's nothing wrong with just sharing multiple cultures and knowing that you can have a multifaceted part of your heritage and stuff.

John Boccacino:

What have you learned about your Korean identity and your Korean heritage that maybe you didn't know or appreciate when you were in high school?

Hyejun Yoo:

I definitely cook better now. Oh, yeah, I think that's the one big thing. I actually didn't really cook a lot of Korean food or I guess I would eat Korean food a lot, but I think I wasn't really adventurous in my palate in terms of, I didn't really get to try other foods other than the ones I grew up with. I think when I got to

college, I was like, oh, I'll try more food stuff. And I think since food is such a big part of our culture, it's what bridges me and my family together and my extended family, my friends and stuff, so I'd say that would be a pretty big part.

I think also just appreciating the language too. I speak Korean with my parents at home, but there are times where I have to speak English sometimes, because some words are not translatable. Now, I go back to doing both English and Korean, so just reminding myself to speak with my parents more and utilize, remind myself on the lingo and stuff, I think, lets me find roots back to my Korean heritage.

John Boccacino:

What would you describe the goals of AAPI Heritage Month? What are we trying to accomplish with these events that are lined up on campus?

Hyejun Yoo:

Yeah. I think, for the most part, it's just to bring a sense of unity and let people know that ... I know that when I first came to college, it was definitely a lot different because I think, towards the end of high school, I was able to find a very solid friend group that shared a lot of interests or experiences with me and growing up with different heritages and different cultures. And I think coming here, at first, I remember I had difficulty finding people with the same experiences, also because I didn't know anyone, so that was another part.

But I think just these events and the month itself, the heritage month, I think it just reminds people that you're not alone and sharing these experiences, if you feel like you don't have anyone to talk about your culture or experiences with, that's not true and there is someone. There's so many people on campus you can talk about anything with, and I think the events serve as a really good reminder for people if they don't feel like they have someone to talk to about growing up a certain identity or sharing how they feel about their own culture.

John Boccacino:

How did you become involved in multicultural affairs?

Hyejun Yoo:

Yeah. What happened was Justin Kayago, who I mentioned earlier, we met in that class and we actually had mutual friends before. Because of the class we were chatting, and then he was asking me one weekend, "Oh, what are you doing on the weekend?" And then, I was like, "Oh, I'm going to Japanese breakfast show out of town." And he was like, "Oh, that's cool." And then, a few weeks later, he was like, "I have something that you might be interested in." And I was like, "Oh, what is it?" And then, he told me about the podcast with Amy, Amy [Messerschmidt 00:23:51] Horan. She was the one who was like, "Oh, would you be interested in moderating for the shows on our Q&A?" And I was like, "Oh, sure." I didn't think I was ... I was like, oh ... I had never moderated before, at least not in recent years, so I was like, "Oh, maybe I'm not, I don't really know if they would choose me," because I don't really have a lot of experience, but I ended up sending a little essay about why I wanted to do it. And then, a few days later, they were like, "Oh, you've been chosen," and the rest is history.

John Boccacino:

It was the kick off a commemorative lecture with Michelle Zauner, who's an unbelievable story. She's a singer and guitarist for the indie pop group Japanese Breakfast, highly recommend checking out her tunes, it's just a fantastic artist out there. And she was part of the, again, AAPI Heritage Month commemorative lecture and Hyejun got to serve as the moderator for this event. What was that like? Did you ever have a fangirl moment where you're sitting up there and you're so close to somebody who's so talented? You saw her in concert recently and here you are moderating this program.

Hyejun Yoo:

Yeah, it was definitely nerve wracking. I was like, "I don't know what to talk to her about," because we had the opportunity to, we had to escort her from her hotel to campus, basically. So leading up to that, I was like, "Oh, God, I'm going to say something embarrassing," or I don't know. I guess you never know what to say when you meet someone you admire, especially, I have been listening to her music for a good amount of time, so I was just like, "Let me not fangirl, but let me also fangirl to tell her how much I appreciate her music." But it was super great. It went really well. And I was, like I said, I didn't really have moderator experience, so I think, in the moment, I was like, "Oh, how am I going to work through this?" But then, I found out like keeping it a more casual conversation really worked well and I think that really helped in letting the flow of the Q&A go by and it just seemed like a really good conversation and it all worked out.

John Boccacino:

What were you and Michelle hoping to convey to the audience? What was her main point, her main summary that she wanted to express to those who were paying attention and listening to the lecture?

Hyejun Yoo:

I think a big part was definitely about the creative aspect, pursuing creative endeavors in one's career. There was an audience Q&A after and a lot of people were asking about, how do I break into making music or just pursuing a creative track in the future and a lot of it was just her giving advice on being sure of yourself and believing in what your efforts are being put into, believing in yourself and continuing to keep going, I think, was a big part of what she was speaking about.

John Boccacino:

When it came to your essay as to why you wanted to moderate, give us a little spiel. What did you say about why you wanted to serve as the moderator?

Hyejun Yoo:

I have been listening to her for a while and music is a big part of my life, not that I'm playing or anything, just I've always grown up listening to music. I listen to music probably anyway when I'm not doing anything else. So being able to, I remember like when I first heard about Japanese Breakfast/Michelle Zauner, I was really inspired because here was someone that also has Korean heritage or Korean background and who isn't afraid to just be herself and make music, candid music about just her experiences. And I think just being able to be vulnerable with such a general public audience, it's really inspiring and a confidence boost for a lot of people, with a lot of young people I feel. I just talked about that and how she's very inspiring to me and in her memoir that she wrote and how that was also an amazing read and wanting to explore more of that through the Q&A and let her talk about it more. That's basically, I guess the spiel of the essay I wrote.



John Boccacino:

I want to back up a little bit, Hyejun, and get into more of your personal story here of Syracuse University. You're a dual major in Newhouse and the iSchool. What are you currently studying and why did you choose to come to Syracuse?

Hyejun Yoo:

Yeah. At Newhouse, I'm studying advertising and the emphasis for advertising, because there's different emphases, I'm doing digital advertising. That's more just campaign analytics and posts. It's just a lot of numbers and stuff. And then, for my information management technology or, slash, my high school major is just the regular one they offer, which is information management technology. And then, my concentration for that one is data analytics because I really want to get into data analytics and programming. That's basically the track I'm going.

And the reason I chose Syracuse was because my high school guidance counselor actually told me about the dual program, slash, one of the other guidance counselors at my high school went to Syracuse, so he was raving about the different programs here, so I got interested and I was like, "Oh, there's something offered for both people who are interested in IT and public communications," so because of that, I applied and yeah, that's basically the programs here are why I came. And then, when I came here, the campus is just so beautiful and accommodating and I met the best people ever. So yeah, that's why I chose Syracuse.

John Boccacino:

What do you think are some goals of how you might take your degrees and apply them to a career once you graduate?

Hyejun Yoo:

Yeah. I'm looking forward to utilizing both fields to ... I know I've always wanted to make them combined together in that maybe using more technology based or programming based to allow for more diverse advertising is what I want to get into. I know before, it was just the whole audiences thing. I think a lot of people might not, a lot of audiences or marginalized communities might not be getting a certain message or a certain story being put into their regions because of lack of usability or resources and just utilizing science to allow people to share their stories or be, the whole reliability thing, I think, would be what I'm more interested into, but I think, probably more easier than said and I think there's still a long way to go to bridge that gap, but it'd be interesting. I think that's what I'm more going to do.

John Boccacino:

I hope you're able to follow your passions and achieve what you're looking to achieve with your degree. I know that it's, again, a great unique melding of programs with here at the iSchool and at Newhouse, and it's been great to really get to know and tell your story here on the podcast. Hyejun, we appreciate you making some time and I wish you nothing but the best of luck in your future endeavors.

Hyejun Yoo:

Thank you so much. This has been great. Thank you.

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.