

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, Senior Internal Communications Specialist at Syracuse University.

Marykate Keevins:

Being a part of the AAPI community on campus has given me so much opportunity to reflect on how much I appreciate my heritage in all the different ways it manifests. I really find that cultural celebrations like what we do with a AAPI Heritage Month is important because it not only allows for us, on the committee, to create events that reflect us, it also allows for other people to get in touch with either their own heritage or heritages of people that they don't know too much about and they can learn.

John Boccacino:

Here on the 'Cuse Conversations podcast today we are talking about Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. It's coming up in April. It's one of the sensational cultural Heritage Month celebrations we do here on the Syracuse University campus. And we are going to be speaking with two students about their culture, their heritage, what it means to them, and then what you can expect on campus as part of AAPI Heritage Month. Our first student to come on the podcast, she is Marykate Keevins and Marykate, we thank you for making the time today. How are you holding up?

Marykate Keevins:

I'm doing pretty well. I'm really excited for AAPI Heritage Month to start. We've been planning since the beginning of the year, so always is exciting since it's at the very end, so it feels just like a culmination of all the work we've done.

John Boccacino:

Before we get into some of the ways that we will get a chance to celebrate Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month here at the Syracuse University campus, give our audience a little background on yourself. What year in school are you and what are you studying?

Marykate Keevins:

So I am currently a junior and I'm studying television, radio, film and political science.

John Boccacino:

Nice. So you're a dual and Maxwell and Newhouse?

Marykate Keevins:

Yes.

John Boccacino:

What you choose Syracuse? Why was this the right place for you?

Marykate Keevins:

I think Syracuse was, in a way, unexpected. I grew up in New Jersey, so I was looking at places that were more closer to either New York City or more metropolitan areas, but when I toured Syracuse, they just had so many great opportunities in both my majors, so really drew me to the university and I'm very glad that this is where I have ended up.

John Boccacino:

It's pretty evident Marykate, that you're very passionate about your heritage and your culture. Before we get into the celebrations and the planning of this month, give us a little background on what your heritage is and what your culture means to you.

Marykate Keevins:

I was originally born in Kazakhstan, which is a country in Central Asia, and I was born there, but then I was adopted to the United States when I was an infant. So I do feel like I have grown up in a cross-cultural environment because I feel very connected to my Kazakh heritage, but I also feel connected to the Irish heritage of my family. And I feel like that's given me a lot of perspective because I've gotten to really understand how I can relate to different cultures, whether it's ones that look like me or that I have recent or ones that I've just become a part of. And I really find that cultural celebrations, what we do with API Heritage Month, is important because it not only allows for us on the committee to create events that reflect us, it also allows for other people to get in touch with either their own heritage or heritages of people that they don't know too much about and they can learn.

John Boccacino:

That's really the goal for all of us here on campus is we don't know what it's like to walk a mile in your shoes, but if we go through and go through the programs, we can learn a little bit more about what makes every culture special that we have here on campus. And with that being said, why did you want to get involved in planning our AAPI Heritage Month celebrations?

Marykate Keevins:

Last year, I had gone to some of the Heritage Month events and I just really enjoyed it and I had heard about the committee, but I was given an invite to join for this year, and so I just really love being able to have a voice in how we organize it. A big thing of the planning committee is coming up with what kind of themes we're interested in for the events that we're organizing and influences how we think about our identities. I think a big thing is that, while AAPI Heritage Month is somewhat similar each year, we still have a different connection to each year's theme.

For example, this semester we are incorporating a theme of our diversity, but also our unity in diversity. And that's a very unique thing that I think that when we were talking about it in the committee, we all really shared about how we have a lot of different backgrounds in our committee, but we're all still here because we believe in sharing each of our heritages. And I think that's what really makes me very passionate about being a part of this committee and this AAPI community on campus is that we do have a smaller community on campus, but that just makes us more united and allows us to really get to know each and every person, whether they're people that we directly interact with because we share a certain organization that we're a part of or those that we know of because it's so easy to get to know people in our community on this campus.

John Boccacino:

Your committee is tasked with a pretty monumental charge of trying to communicate and put out programming that's representative of the student body, but also to inform those who are not of the Asian American or Pacific Islander heritage about what makes their culture special. Before we go into some of the highlights of this month, what would you want people to know about your culture and your heritage and maybe how it defines you, and then maybe how it isn't a defining factor?

Marykate Keevins:

So I think for me, I definitely identify with both being Asian American and also being Kazakh American. As for being Asian American, I think, just for me being a political science major, I've learned about the history of that term. In the past, people used to be defined by their specific ethnic groups, but the term Asian American was really created so we could all unite and have a collective front. And I feel like that's really valuable for how we have created AAPI Heritage Month on this campus because we're always looking to have voices of different people. On the committee, we have my organization, which is Asian Students in America, we have the Filipino Student Association, we have the South Asian Students Association, Korean American Students Association, and many others. And it really just highlights how there is so much diversity in the AAPI community, and it allows us to have such an ability to look outside of just our own heritages, but at the same time, we also value having those individual identities.

For me personally, I'm Kazakh American, which is not necessarily a very well-known heritage. So being a part of this community and the committee also allows me to advocate for myself and my own background. It's really important to me that we highlight not just the larger identities that may be more common in our community, but also every single person that's part of it. So being able to have a voice from my central Asian and Kazakh background on this committee, I'm able to talk about things that are really valuable to me that may not be necessarily just known about, because it's a smaller identity, is really important.

John Boccacino:

If you've got someone who, again, you mentioned being a Kazakh American is not the largest of cultural groups here in the country, what stands out about your culture? What are some ways that if you weren't on campus, how would you be celebrating being a Kazakh American?

Marykate Keevins:

For example, I'm in an Asian-interest sorority, Kappa Phi Lambda, and my big, she is also Kazakh. And since I'm adopted, I have an interesting relationship to my culture. But with my connection with her, she's taught me a lot about my heritage. I think a big part of any culture is really food and having been able to get to understand my culture through food, because Kazakhstan, one thing that's really notable is their history has been as a community of nomadic people, so the food is very much made to be long-lasting and food that can be shared by a community. And I feel like that has really made me consider my own feelings about being a part of a community because ultimately, drawing from my heritage, it's that importance of finding people that can support you and that you can support them.

And I think, being Kazakh, one thing that I really love is just having a unique perspective, even within the AAPI community, being able to talk about things that have a different effect on myself versus someone else. And also being adopted has also given me a different perspective as it allows me to consider how I experience my Asian American heritage, but also understand that I have certain experiences that maybe some of my friends who grew up in Asian American families don't share. So I think just being a part of the AAPI community on campus has given me so much opportunity to reflect on how much I appreciate my heritage in all the different ways it manifests.

John Boccacino:

Hearing you talk about food, everybody can relate to a good home-cooked meal that comes from your heritage and your cultural roots. So I'm really happy to hear that you expressed what your culture means to you. When it comes to coming to Syracuse, can you give us a little detail as to ways you found your own community, ways you maybe have been able to strengthen that bond with your AAPI and your Kazakh American roots? How have you been able to further develop that here, when you came to Syracuse?

Marykate Keevins:

So for me, I think, when I originally came to Syracuse it was in 2020, so not necessarily the best year for social connections. So I think, in that first year, I was definitely really looking for a community, but it was difficult to get involved. So it was really more my sophomore year that I became so much more engaged in the community. It was, I think, that lack of having the ability to go to events and meet other people on campus, that really pushed me to get almost over involved in my second year.

So I joined ASIA, I joined my sorority, and I also just got to meet more people in the community whether they were a part of the organizations I was in or not. And I think that that's really allowed me to find a deeper community at Syracuse because, as I mentioned, the Asian American community here is not super large. So in general, a lot of people know each other or know of each other. So I think that just even nominally being a part of certain organizations or going to meetings or even just interacting with people who might know other people has really opened up my perspectives on our community at Syracuse and also allowed me to feel more confident in sharing my own heritage, just seeing how confident so many other people have been as well.

John Boccacino:

And it's really a great opportunity, again for people who are involved in the planning committee, you and your colleagues have such a great bevy of programs that are slated for this AAPI Heritage Month. It kicks off on March 31st with our Heritage Month kickoff celebration and runs all the way through April 26th with a trivia night put on by a member of a Greek life here. There's so many great opportunities and programs. What excites you the most? Give us some insights. What are some programming efforts and opportunities that you're really proud to bring to this celebration?

Marykate Keevins:

So for me, I think that, honestly, I really think kickoff is so fun. It just seems like such a simple thing, but it's a way where every organization in the API community on campus gets to get together and share what we've been working on for the last 10 months or so. And another thing that is big for my organization, Asia, we have Asia Night, which is a showcase of student talent. So that's dancing, singing, performances, and it really allows not just for us to show our work, but also highlight the work and talents and creative voices of the AAPI community outside of just one specific organization.

And then finally, we have two lectures, one from an alumni and one who is our commemorative lecture. I think those are really valuable because one of them is our alumni, and it's really important to hear about how the connections that you form on this campus can extend beyond just being a part of a community here, but also being able to come back and provide future opportunities. And then also we have our commemorative lecture with Hua Hsu who is an English professor, and I think that bringing in notable API people from other places really shows how much bigger the community is than just our own

campus and how much it highlights what we're working towards is not just necessarily API unity on our campus, but national AAPI unity and we're just a microcosm of that.

John Boccacino:

It's really refreshing to hear you mention again, Hua Hsu coming in as the commemorative lecture speaker on April 20th and the alumni is Sharon Lee, who earned her undergraduate in 2014 and her master's in 2015. She will be speaking on April 13th in Hall of Languages. Again, all of these events can be found by going to the Syracuse University events calendar and searching an Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. There's such a great rundown of activities and programs and I know we're celebrating Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month, but these events are open to the entire campus community. We want to get as many people, whatever your background, to come out and support and learn something about this great set of students that we have here on campus who are planning these programs. Just how stoked are you for everything to get going and a chance to kick off our celebrations?

Marykate Keevins:

It's really great to be able to come on this podcast to talk about it because I know API Heritage Month is something that, within our community, we're all very aware of, but it also is refreshing to hear about how the university and outside people also are here to support our organizations and what we've been working on and I'm really excited. This is my first year where I've really had an important role in the planning committee and I've been hearing about all these events and the themes and what we're going to be doing, and it's one thing to hear about them and the planning, but it's another thing to really see it all come to fruition. And I can't wait to see just how amazing all of these programs that we have been developing for so long will be and just how much hard work we've all put into it.

John Boccacino:

I want to thank our guest, Marykate Keevins for coming on to share her passion for Asian American and Pacific Islander Heritage Month. Of course, we want to celebrate our groups year round, but especially in the month of April. Technically this is celebrated nationally in May, but the students are focused on commencement and then their attentions are elsewhere, so we pushed it up a month and do it in April, but it is a great series of programs that are planned. Marykate, thank you for making the time today.

Marykate Keevins:

Thank you for having me.

Lia Margolis:

I'm very passionate about the activist social justice side of it. And so from that perspective, there's been, I think, denial of a lot of the struggles that the API community has been through in the US and of course people are paying more attention to it with the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of anti-Asian hate crimes. But I hope people see this exhibit and see a bit more into the stories and experiences people in the community as well as enjoy all of the fun activities that we have planned.

John Boccacino:

We are going to welcome on another proud student here from Syracuse University, Lia Margolis to talk about her background, her career as an architecture student here at Syracuse, and really why she

wanted to get involved in planning AAPI Heritage Month. Lia, thank you for making the time to join us today.

Lia Margolis:

Yeah, absolutely. It's great to be here. Thanks for reaching out.

John Boccacino:

Before we dive in, give our audience a little background on yourself. I mentioned you're in the School of Architecture and you'll be graduating coming up in May. Where are you from originally? What are you hoping to do with your architecture degree and what drew you to Syracuse?

Lia Margolis:

Yeah, so I'm originally from Glen Mills, PA. It's a very small town in the suburbs outside of Philly, and I've always been, I guess, a creative person. Growing up, I loved to paint and draw even, I remember sitting at the kitchen table with my mom and making paper houses that would stand up and stuff, coloring and drawing on them and stuff like that. And I always knew I wanted to do something creative, and I had a very realist person come into my life and was like, "You can't sell paintings on the street for a living." Which, obviously you can, but my six-year-old brain at that point was like, "Oh yeah, you're right. I can't do that. I have to think of something." So I don't know how architecture came up. I guess I was fascinated by buildings and architecture to begin with, and I just kept saying, "I'm going to be an architect. I'm going to be an architect." So then I took studio art classes full-time in high school and applied to Syracuse, a lot of other places, and just made it happen, I guess.

John Boccacino:

What was it about the School of Architecture here in particular that really attracted you and resonated with your passions for creativity?

Lia Margolis:

Yeah, so I mean, I looked at quite a number of places. I think it was eight in total. I always forget the exact number, but one thing about architecture in terms of the professional field, if you want to be licensed because you have to be licensed in order to start your own firm, to have your name on stuff more officially, you have to go to what's called an accredited school. So I'm getting what's called at Syracuse University, a Bachelor of Architecture versus a Bachelor of Science in Architecture or a Bachelor of Arts in Architecture. The accredited part is the Bachelor of Architecture or the Master of Architecture, and that allows you, right after school, to work towards getting enough hours, you need a certain amount of hours to sit for your licensing exams. Syracuse Architecture has a program like that. So I was really drawn to that.

The program also gave a pretty good variety of scheduling opportunities because a lot of architecture schools don't really allow you to take classes outside of architecture, and I really wanted the full breadth of the college experience and to be able to take other classes I found interesting. And also my favorite color was orange or orangey red for a long time. So I remember visiting and I talked to the admissions' person at Syracuse Architecture, and I was like, "Just curious what's the school color here?" And she was like, "Orange." And I was like, "Oh, that's great, because I'll be actually really excited to rep the school colors." I mean, that didn't influence my decision that much, but it also did, it made me excited.

John Boccacino:

Give our audience a little background on yourself to Lia. What is your cultural background?

Lia Margolis:

Yeah, so I was adopted at eight months old from Guangzhou China in a little city called [inaudible 00:21:15], but it's actually a district now. And yeah, I was adopted by two white American, Jewish American parents, love them very much. And I grew up with both Jewish American values and culture, religion. I had a bat mitzvah when I was 13, but I also grew up going to Chinese school, I think from when I was two or three. It was the same way you'd have Jewish day school or something like that, Hebrew school. So I had it on Saturdays until I was 12 and then, starting in middle school and high school, I had Chinese Mandarin every day. So a lot of the school, even the Chinese school I went to, they also had traditional Chinese dance classes, Chinese yo-yo classes, traditional brush painting classes. So I got a lot of the cultural understanding my whole life growing up. So that's definitely something I resonate with. I'm taking the last level of Mandarin that they offer here this semester. But yeah, that's my cultural background, I guess.

John Boccacino:

Given the fact that you've always had affinity towards both sides of your heritage, with us focusing here on the AAPI aspects of it, what does that culture, what does that heritage mean to you?

Lia Margolis:

It's a big part of who I am. It's very comforting. It's been, as I know, a lot of multicultural or BIPOC people will say, you're mixing and balancing different parts of yourself through accepting different parts and there's so many intersectionalities with being in America, having different cultural backgrounds. But when I say it's been comforting, my cultural heritage and background, it's because it's something I grew up with. Occasionally on Spotify, I'll turn on some Chinese instrumental music, which calms me down actually because it's something that I listened to growing up and stuff like that, so it's always been a part of me. But it's interesting because it's in a somewhat, I have a connection to old China just because I was taught by a lot of older Chinese people and taught all the nursery rhymes and things, so when I talk to Chinese international students, I'm like, "Oh, you know this old song?" And they're like, "Oh, my grandmother knows that." So it's always been an interesting connection I feel I have with a lot of cultural ties.

John Boccacino:

When you came to Syracuse from Pennsylvania, how were you able to settle into campus and find organizations or find that community that really reflected your cultural heritage?

Lia Margolis:

I didn't find anything that really resonated with my cultural heritage my freshman year super explicitly. I also just wasn't really looking for it, but I think it was sophomore year I became involved in the, this is a mouthful, but the National Organization of Minority Architecture Students Syracuse Chapter, NOMAS for short. That's a very long name, NOMAS Syracuse Chapter, and I was the secretary, and then I became the president of that org for over a year.

And then I was the senior advisor and I'm currently the API Heritage Month committee rep from NOMAS to the university. So that's how I got on the committee, and I found that. So NOMAS, I think, although

it's not explicitly Asian, Asian American centered, it's about BIPOC, Black, indigenous people of color, cultures, et cetera. It was very welcoming for me and it was a way for me to connect with a lot of other multicultural people. And then, I'm also part of just a member of Asian Students in America or ASA, and that's been really fun. There's a big little program, and over the past two years I "picked up" three little, so little sister, little brother, little sibling, et cetera. And that's been really fun because we've stayed really close and I really enjoy having them as friends and mentoring them and that's led me to a lot of the Asian American community on campus too.

John Boccacino:

And you mentioned the tie then from NOMAS SU to get involved with AAPI Heritage Month, which of course kicks off on March 31st. What has your role been in planning the festivities?

Lia Margolis:

Yeah, so I also want to touch on, so last year for the last AAPI of 2022, I guess it was, I wasn't directly on the committee, but I knew about the committee and my roommate was on the committee and she was planning last year's anti-Asian hate crime exhibit, which was to showcase more of the important activist, political side of some of the Asian American Pacific Islander experience. And she ended up creating this really amazing lotus piece for the exhibit, where everyone placed in candles on the head, victims' names from different hate crimes on it. It was a very peaceful but somber exhibit, but because I'm an architecture student and it was a physical lotus installation, she asked me for help and I ended up just tag-teaming it with her and creating it. So that was my little introduction, I guess, into being part of the committee.

And then this year, I was fully on board with the committee just talking about picking out the themes, talking about what we wanted the overall month to feel like, what the specific activities we wanted to have that were through the overall school, because there's the Office of Multicultural Affairs or OMA, the official Syracuse AAPI events and then there's other organizations on campus that have themed events that are promoted through the SU calendar. So we were mostly coordinating the official Syracuse ones, but also tapping into all of the other ones as well. So it's just been a lot of meetings, prep and talking and then when the anti-Asian hate crime exhibit for this year came up, I decided to spearhead it because I had an idea and I'm still working on it. And yeah, it's going to be coming out and I'm really proud and I hope it has an impact. So that's been my little project within the committee as well.

John Boccacino:

Like the past Heritage Month celebrations we've featured here on the podcast. This is open to every member of the campus community. Even though it's showing off the pride, the cultural diversity, and the contributions of Asian-American and Pacific Islanders, it's really a chance for all of us to come together to celebrate, to learn, and to be educated about the culture of our Asian American and Pacific Islander students, faculty and staff here on campus. What would you hope, if someone comes out from the general campus community and checks out some of the events, what are some big takeaways you would want them to get from the theme and from the programming that's being planned this year?

Lia Margolis:

I think definitely, I mean, this is a very vague, overarching thought, but obviously more awareness, I think. I'm very passionate about the activist, social justice side of it and so from that perspective, there's been a lot of, I think, denial of a lot of the struggles that the API community has been through in the US. And of course, people are paying more attention to it with the COVID-19 pandemic and the rise of anti-



Asian hate crimes. But I think that I hope people see this exhibit and see a bit more into the stories and experiences people in the community as well as enjoy all of the fun activities that we have planned. But I think for me, that deeper understanding is something I hope that people take away. And as you were saying, allies are as important to the cause as those in it because, if it's just one group standing alone, it won't have as much impact. So I hope even if you don't consider yourself API, you check out a few events, come out for the fun, for the education, for the food, for the culture, whatever.

John Boccacino:

And again, there's a plethora of events running, starting off with a kickoff on March 31st, there's lunchtime lectures, there's an alumni speaker, there's the Mental Health Awareness Workshop. It really runs the gamut from what people can expect to see and experience. Is there a highlight? Is there something that you are really, really proud of above and beyond when it comes to having planned and organized what's taking place this month?

Lia Margolis:

Because I planned it or I'm participating in it, I mean, the two highlights that selfishly I could give are the kickoff, where you see the anti-Asian hate crime exhibit. And I hope that people see that, so it's going to be projected on the Schine atrium, that's where the kickoff's going to be in that lower area, but there's also going to be a physical poster of it that will be on display as well. So I'm not sure exactly how long it'll be up, but hopefully people will stop by and look.

And let's see, I'm also going to be singing at the kickoff, so hopefully that'll be exciting for people. And also Asian Night from the org ASA, Asian Students in America. It's basically a talent show, but it's just really fun. It's not very uptight or anything, but it's just a fun way to see what your peers or people in the community have been up to. So I'll be singing in that as well. So those are things that I'm personally excited for, but I'm also super excited to meet Hua Hsu in person, the commemorative speaker and I'm also really excited, as you mentioned, for the mental health talk because mental health is something that is very personal and important to me.

John Boccacino:

It's something that everyone should be focusing on taking care of but I'm glad that there's resources that are being made available and education efforts being made to spread the word on addressing those mental health issues. You're a multi threat, Lia. I mean, between the singing work, between being a talented architect, between planning the display, the anti AAPI hate and discrimination. There's so much great stuff that you're bringing to our celebrations coming up here on campus. I hope that this has been a good opportunity for you to share some insights with our audience here. You're doing great work, and I hope you have nothing but the best of luck and success with everything you endeavor moving forward.

Lia Margolis:

Yeah. Thank you so much for having me. It's been great to talk to 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.