

John Boccacino:

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

Erykah Pasha:

Syracuse just always seemed like it was going to be the place for me to go, and I think since going here, I think it was the right choice for me. Going to this university has given me those resources and opportunities to really bring back to the community in some way, in ways that a lot of times feels very isolated to the Syracuse University campus. And I've tried to do that with my involvement in organizations that are based in work with people in Syracuse. But I think, yeah, really just giving me resources related to research and academia, writing, things like that, networking, all of that, and letting me bring that back to my own engagement with the community here within the city of Syracuse.

John Boccacino:

On today's episode of the 'Cuse Conversations podcast, we are thrilled to welcome on Erykah Pasha, a rising junior who is studying political science and sociology in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. Erykah works in the intercultural collective here on campus. She's also a decorated scholar, a Kessler Scholars program participant, and also a McNair Scholar, and she has a great summer opportunity that we'll be discussing, at the University of Michigan. Really, it's an awesome story of someone who wants to make a difference, who wants to make the world a better place with her research, and we are thrilled to welcome on. Erykah Pasha to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. Erykah, how you holding up these days?

Erykah Pasha:

Pretty well since the semester's been wrapping up. It's been nice some time to chill out. But yeah, I'm doing pretty well. Thank you.

John Boccacino:

You're quite the busy student volunteer here on campus and we'll get into your experiences here at Syracuse. But I want to start off with that news I mentioned about this awesome public affairs opportunity coming up this summer. I know it's with the Big Blue at Michigan, not here at Syracuse, but it's part of a cool partnership that we've got. Can you tell our audience a little bit about what you'll be doing at Michigan and how that project is so near and dear to your heart?

Erykah Pasha:

So I am super excited about it. So I'm going to be a research assistant at the University of Michigan through this summer research opportunity program and we call it SROP. So through that program, I get paired up with a faculty mentor and I've been paired up with the professor Lydia Kelow-Bennett, and I'm super excited to work with her. I'm helping her out on her book proposal that's on Black women in popular media today. And so with that, I'll be helping out with the literature review, bibliography, lot of reading, a lot of writing, but I'm super excited for it because it's all types of things I'm interested in. She does a lot of work in Black queer theory, Black feminist theory, and it's going to tie a lot into that into the book. So I'm super excited to read and write more on that.

John Boccacino:

I know you mentioned a little bit about what her research, what Lydia's research is all about, and again, she's an assistant professor of Afro-American and African Studies at the University of Michigan. And she's got this book that's coming out, like you mentioned, on Black Women in Popular Culture. Why is that a topic that really resonates with you?

Erykah Pasha:

I am a Black woman, so first and foremost, there's that personal piece, but also, I think when you look at a lot of media today or just things in general that you see, a lot of it comes from and is inspired by and influenced in a big way by Black women. And I think simultaneously, the contributions and influences from Black women are disregarded a lot of times. So I think a book like this and just studies on this topic in general are super important to acknowledge and really give flowers to that entire group of people that a lot of times is so disregarded.

John Boccacino:

Recently, the Ed Sheeran/Marvin Gaye lawsuit got some attention because people were alleging that Ed Sheeran, the pop singer, had ripped off the amazingly talented Marvin Gaye and one of his singer's background music, and that made its name and the pop culture landscape with the lawsuit recently coming to a head. Is that one of the biggest issues that you notice when it comes to this issue of Black women in pop culture, maybe not getting proper credit, proper ownership for works that they've produced or been responsible for?

Erykah Pasha:

I think that's a major piece of it. I think, yeah, definitely. I think it can also manifest in ways in which Black women's concerns about things are disregarded. So it could be not getting credit, and then when a Black woman tries to bring that up or I don't know, address it in some way, they're seen as angry or they're seen as irrational or it's disregarded in a multitude of ways. But yeah, I think that's definitely a big piece of it, saying that those concerns aren't valid in some sort of way. Yeah.

John Boccacino:

What do we need to do? And I'm not trying to put this all on you. I mean, you're a very talented student, but it's not your sole responsibility to change the world, but through this experience, what do you hope to learn and how do you hope to maybe make some change in this realm?

Erykah Pasha:

Yeah, great question. I think first and foremost, something that you just kind of said is, always be open to learning. As you said, I'm a student. I don't know everything. I have my personal experience and the stuff that I've learned so far to go off of, but I'm so open to knowing that I still don't know everything and I still mess up a lot of times. So really being open to learn from people that you trust, not simply everybody, but being open to learning and knowing that you'll be wrong sometimes and then showing up and trying to enact that with other people. So when you learn that a certain phrase or something isn't the best to use and you hear somebody else use it, maybe let them know. It can be small things like that. It doesn't have to be huge groundbreaking things, but those little things can add up to make huge groundbreaking differences.

John Boccacino:

I love that approach. I think a lot of times when it comes to making change, we get so overwhelmed over the magnitude, and I'm just one person, but you hit it on the head, small steps lead to bigger changes down the road. Is this something that you... Have you always been passionate about righting wrongs about making sure that you can do your part to make this world a better place?

Erykah Pasha:

I think so. Always, in a way. Though it's probably looked different throughout my time in school and just in general. I think now with the research that I've been able to do and readings I've been able to engage with, I think it's given me a little bit more hope because there is so many little things you can do. Even if I can't donate millions to an organization or something, there's so many little things you can do, and I have hope in that way, and I think I always have had in some way, it can be really easy to dip into a kind of nihilism, but I think there's just so many opportunities to make small enough differences to people that can end up being really big for them. And yeah, I just try to keep that in mind when I think about changing things.

John Boccacino:

It's really a refreshing perspective, and I know as we're sitting here, it's a complicated world that we're living in. There's a lot of challenges. There's systematic oppressions that are taking place for certain segments of the population and educating and just letting people know that we really are all in this battle together, is a really important narrative to hammer home. I was reading on your LinkedIn profile earlier about how you've got this knowledge that you want to help voices who have been systematically suppressed in your community to be heard, to have their voices heard in the big scheme of things. Do you remember, was there a seminal moment for you growing up in Syracuse that opened your eyes to this being an issue?

Erykah Pasha:

I suppose with the relationship between Syracuse and then the university here, I think coming here was a bit of an eyeopener for me. I think especially when I came here, everything was still online. It was the middle of COVID, so there was that. But I think the disconnect between Syracuse residents and then Syracuse University students is huge, of course. And I felt that when coming here and a lot of the discussions and things felt very disconnected from not only the struggles of people here living in the city, but also just with people living in cities like Syracuse, everywhere. So I think that was a big piece of it. The demographics on the university are very different than in the city, so I think I always had some type of knowledge, I guess, of marginalized people and the struggles that they were going through. But I think coming here really quantified that for me, realizing how different life could be and was for a lot of people that go here from the people that live here, if that makes sense.

John Boccacino:

With that perspective of growing up in this city, what did you hope to accomplish by coming to Syracuse to then make your community a better place?

Erykah Pasha:

Great question. I think Syracuse just always seemed like it was going to be the place for me to go. And I think since going here, I think it was the right choice for me because you do have... I don't know, going to high school here, you don't really know what it's like being on Syracuse University campus. It's very different. It's a stark difference. So I think going to this university has given me those resources and

opportunities to really bring back to the community in some way, in ways that a lot of times feels very isolated to the Syracuse University campus. And I've tried to do that with my involvement in organizations that are based in work with people in Syracuse. But I think yeah, really just giving me resources related to research and academia, writing, things like that, networking, all of that, and letting me bring that back to my own engagement with the community here within the city of Syracuse.

John Boccacino:

I love the fact, and it's interesting when you ask students why they choose Syracuse, and a lot of times, we get a large population from California or from New York City, but you weren't looking to go anywhere, but stay here at home and go to school and earn your degrees at Syracuse and at Maxwell. What was it about Maxwell in particular that really just called out to you?

Erykah Pasha:

In high school, I really started getting into, not politics I'll say, but I started becoming more politically aware of the things around me and the things, federally and statewide. So I think with my knowledge that I was probably going to end up at Syracuse, I think that was just the natural path. I don't think I was super aware of Maxwell's reputation or how prestigious the school itself was. I think I'm super lucky that it was. But yeah, upon going here, Maxwell's provided me a bunch of opportunities that I've definitely benefited from and I'm super thankful for, and I try to use the privilege of being able to attend here to bring back to my people here in the city.

John Boccacino:

I know you've got a year still to go on your degree, but if you had to kind of reflect, how have you grown as a person, as a vocal leader and someone who can be an agent of change because of your time here on campus?

Erykah Pasha:

With the continuously learning and trying to take advantage of the resources that are provided to me here, I think it's really allowed me to build up my confidence in speaking out on things that maybe I'll probably get pushback for or maybe people won't agree with, whatever that is. But I think really, once again, just providing those resources to me and classes and the knowledge of other programs to apply to things like that, I think just having those resources there and allowing me to benefit from them has really allowed me to build a confidence in being able to speak openly, even if you stutter or your voice shakes or whatever, knowing that voice still matters and what you still have to say, matters. So I think just building that confidence really.

John Boccacino:

I can't imagine you would get to be a Kessler Scholar and a McNair Scholar without both having the great academic background and a good personality for someone who really, again, wants to make the world a better place. Tell our audience how you got introduced to both of those scholarship programs with both the Kessler Scholars and becoming a McNair Scholar too.

Erykah Pasha:

Yeah, definitely. So Kessler actually, they select you upon you coming into Syracuse. So I was selected coming into my freshman year, and that's how I got into that. It was great hearing about that, coming

into school here. But I will say I've gotten further engaged into the program. I'm also on the Kessler Student Advisory Board, and with that, there's a separate application with that interview and all of that. So I went through that whole process and got into it that way. So that's as far as Kessler. McNair, I found out... How did I found out about them? I think I was recommended by the director at Kessler honestly.

Kessler's been amazing. They've provided me so many resources and once again, really building that confidence, letting me know that I do have a place here on campus. And with that, they recommended me to McNair actually. So yeah, I did my application there, my interview there. And that's really helped me immensely in research, obviously. But I think really having confidence in expanding your own interest, whether that's in research or just your career or academics, anything. I think McNair has done a great job at building you up to focus on what you want out of life in a way. And yeah, McNair has been amazing for that as well.

John Boccacino:

Now, I know we mentioned earlier you come into Syracuse and you've got an idea of what you want to accomplish and how you want to mold yourself. How has that vision for your future kind of changed and evolved during your first three years on campus?

Erykah Pasha:

It's changed so much actually. I came in initially my freshman year, dead set on being a lawyer. That was what I wanted to be so bad. I came in on the pre-law track and then actually, after going to my Maxwell in DC program, I realized that's not at all what I wanted to do. And that's when I went back to my people at Kessler and they were like, "Maybe look out these other things." And then McNair happened, and now the thing in Michigan's happening. So it's really evolved a lot and I think really engaging with the resources and programs here, it's let me really explore and evolve in that way. So I think definitely a lot has changed, but I think my overall goal really hasn't. I still want to help people. I want to help people that historically and systemically haven't been able to or have been stopped from being helped. And I think I've just found a different way for doing that for myself.

John Boccacino:

I love hearing the why behind our students and their successes. And you mentioned coming in as on a pre-law track and you were so predetermined to be a lawyer, which is one way to affect change for sure. But you've found a great way to give back and make your community a better place. With regards to your degrees here at Maxwell, put on your prognosticator's hat. What do you see yourself doing when you graduate and what do you see yourself doing five, 10 years down the road?

Erykah Pasha:

Yeah, so upon getting those degrees, crazy to think about that it's so close to that happening, but definitely looking at grad school programs, University of Michigan would be great, but I think I really like research, continuing that in some way, whether it's continuing on the academia route, becoming a professor or going industry. I really like research and I really still engaging with my community, what I do here with an organization called Layla's Got You that works with Black women in Syracuse. Still engaging in that way too. So I think for me, it's not really a one set way, but making sure that it all connects back to my community, however I can best help them in ways that I'm also good at. So yeah.

John Boccacino:

How did you get introduced to Layla's Got You, and what does that organization really do to make a big difference here in Syracuse?

Erykah Pasha:

Yeah, so actually I got introduced from my friend, Niara, who's also from here and also goes to Syracuse University. She was involved with Layla's Got You, and she recommended me and I heard about it. I was like, "Oh my God, this is amazing. I would love to be involved in this." And from there, it's been history, but Layla's Got You focuses on Black and Brown women in Syracuse and really getting the word out on reproductive and sex issues here in Syracuse, but not only that, just engaging with Black and Brown women here. So we've been doing some focus groups with some people on HIV and birth control. We're working on that now. We've also been working on the lead crisis here in Syracuse, specifically getting kids ages zero to five, tested for that. We've been working on a participatory budgeting process that also, and we do a bunch of other things. We did a speed dating thing for Valentine's Day, and again, we want to really engage with the community here in Syracuse and look out for our people in a bunch of different ways. So yeah, that's Layla's Got You.

John Boccacino:

See, that's the type of hands-on... There's many types of research as you know, but that hands-on impactful research, there's no replication for that. And I can hear the joy in your voice too as you talk about just the difference that you get to make by working for an organization, like Layla's Got You. Kudos to you for finding that opportunity.

Erykah Pasha:

Yeah, thank you. I'm really glad that it found me, honestly.

John Boccacino:

I want to segue to another great group that you're involved with here on campus. There's two of them in particular housed in shine. It's the Intercultural Collective and the LGBTQ Resource Center. I want to start off with the Intercultural Collective. Give our audience a little background on why that was a project and a place that really again reached out to you.

Erykah Pasha:

Yeah, so I think I'd love the Intercultural Collective. If anybody has an opportunity to stop by, definitely do. But I think from me being accepted into the Kessler's program, upon entering here, Kessler's House in the Intercultural Collective, so that's where I was initially introduced to the space, and it really just feels welcoming and like a little haven on campus, for me personally. I like how I can go in there and see people like me, hear struggles of people that are similar to my own. And I really just appreciate the effort to help people through a bunch of different struggles that people could be going through, but also that community aspect. It really feels like family when you're there.

John Boccacino:

And before we go to the LGBTQ Resource Center again too, I want to piggyback off of that community question. And you mentioned when you started here on campus was right at the height of this Global pandemic, socialization was at a minimum, it was all through computer screens and Zooms, and you really didn't get a chance to have that in-person community. Just how big of a role did having a place like

the Intercultural Collective and the LGBTQ Resource Center play in making you feel more connected to our campus?

Erykah Pasha:

Oh, they were huge, especially during my freshman year when a majority of my classes were over Zoom and a majority of everything was over Zoom. And then coming into our weekly Kessler meetings, it felt like that was my time as a student here on campus. So it was so huge. That's where some of my first connections with people here on campus was. It was huge. And for it to be that space of people who were going through similar things as I was, it definitely made a huge difference in me feeling like a part of this campus community.

John Boccacino:

That sense of belonging is so important and that sense of isolation can be so overwhelming when we're going through, I mean, the typical college experience isn't supposed to be through classes on Zoom or being remote learning, so I'm so glad you got a chance to replicate and find that sense of home and make the university feel like a second home for you. And as we're sitting here, June is LGBTQ month, we're going to be celebrating, and there's also October has LGBTQ plus History month, which are great programs run under Jorge Castillo's watch in the LGBTQ Resource Center. Can you describe a little bit just how great of a resource that's been for you, having people like Jorge, you're a student assistant, so obviously you work in this center too. What makes this place so special?

Erykah Pasha:

Yeah, so I think... Yeah, I love the LGBTQ Resource Center also. I think a lot of the programs we try to put together, definitely watch out for those. They engage with the queer community here on campus in different ways. We have affinity groups. We have every fall, we have the HalloQueen Ball, and then we have Queer Prom. And really just things to engage with the queer community here on campus and let LGBTQ people here know that there is a place for you to feel safe and heard and seen, where you're okay. And you really do feel a sense of that when you step into the space. And I think that's been instrumental to me, and I know to plenty of other people that have engaged in our work and resources that we provide.

John Boccacino:

And what is your source of discovery when it came to the Resource Center? How did you come across it and how has that played a role in your personal journey?

Erykah Pasha:

Yeah, so I think once again, Kessler, I was in there.

John Boccacino:

It all comes back to Kessler. I love that.

Erykah Pasha:

It all comes back to Kessler. So definitely, I would go in for my one-on-one meetings and look over because the LGBTQ Resource Center shares a space with Kessler and Oma. So I'd look over and I'd be like, "Oh, what's that over there?" And then I think I was just looking for jobs on Handshake one day,

and I saw that they had opening and I was like, "Oh my God, perfect opportunity." So yeah, I ended up there. I think that was once again, something that found me, I really think, and I'm super glad I did. But yeah, I've been locked in, ever since.

John Boccacino:

I want to ask this question carefully and gingerly because everyone's story is different, but did you find yourself... Was it hard, was it tough finding acceptance from community, finding acceptance in high school with who you were before you came to Syracuse? And then, have you had success in finding that belonging of who you really are? Have you been able to really be who you are here on campus?

Erykah Pasha:

I think high school me, and me now, is very different, but generally, I don't think it was so much that I had a hard time finding community in high school, but there wasn't a very huge dead set queer community for me in high school. So I think, wasn't so much not being able to find community, but the community I had was very different and related to different things. So I think since being here on campus, there is a pretty carved out queer community. So that community just relates to different things still. So I think it's just been finding that different community and still having the community of people in high school and people here in Syracuse, but really just expanding what that community is for me and what community can be for me, I think, is where the Resource Center has come in.

John Boccacino:

And just to kind of expand upon that a little bit, because I love the sentiment you just expressed there, just how has the Resource Center helped you when it comes to feeling as comfortable as you need to be in your skin with who you are and what you bring to this campus?

Erykah Pasha:

I think a big thing about working with the resource center and what I've done so far is they really encourage you to bring what you're interested in, into the Resource Center. So I was interested in the Vogue and the Ball community. So I helped connect some of the ballroom community here in Syracuse and implementing the HalloQueen Ball and our Vogue workshop that we do each semester. So I think things like that, it's been really, once again, letting me expand on things that interest me. And I've been super lucky that those things have related to the queer community and LGBTQ people and that it's been so openly encouraged for me to engage in those things, in those ways that interest me and work for me and work for people here in Syracuse too and work for people on campus. So I think it's really just been that encouragement aspect.

John Boccacino:

It seems like you really have a great support system here and you've had a great support system in high school and growing up too, but having that really here on campus, it helps to make you thrive. It helps to make you feel like you can reach your full potential. And it's unfortunate with LGBTQ month being in June, our students really aren't on campus, but we do a celebration for the history month coming up in October. What does Pride Month mean to you? If you had to put your finger on the impact and the meaning, what does Pride Month signify?

Erykah Pasha:



I think with that, it's super important to note that Pride and the celebration all came from an uprising coming from Stonewall, and that's the year after that was the first Pride Parade. I think that's super important to acknowledge, that really, a lot of this does come from struggle and it comes from fighting back, and I think that sentiment needs to be acknowledged and carried on in our celebration of Pride Month. But I also think there is that celebration piece really acknowledging who we are as people, who we can be, who we want to be, who we feel we are, and acknowledging that that's great and okay and deserves to be celebrated in all the ways that it can show up, whether it's your gender identity or sexual identity really being you and open to expressing that and knowing that or feeling safe that you won't face retribution or some type of backlash from that. Being open and being free and also knowing that we still have a lot to fight for to be able to do that today.

John Boccacino:

It's amazing. We have made great strides, but there's still so much more work and progress to go and not to editorialize, but everyone should feel comfortable being in their own skin, being who they are, being what they are, that makes them happy. And it's so great to hear that you've been able to, thanks to a great, again, amount of resources here on campus, really thrive and flourish at Syracuse University. I know you've still got a year left to go, but has anything stood out to you as far as the most memorable piece of advice that you've received on campus as far as that's played a critical role in your development?

Erykah Pasha:

I think once again, bringing it back to Kessler, my meetings there have really helped me a lot. And I think something that our past director, Huey Hsiao, always mentioned to me: Don't be scared to explore different things. When I came in at Syracuse, I was dead set on being a lawyer. Huey let me know to not be afraid to explore other clubs or groups on campus that didn't pertain to law. I did that, and I ended up finding other things that really interested me. We have all of these resources and programs that you can take part in on campus. It's important to really take advantage of that and don't be scared to step outside of the box.

John Boccacino:

It's refreshing. It's a great attitude and really, it's going to serve you well, no matter what endeavor you happen to pursue in the future. I know you're really studious and given to research and being a great researcher here on campus, but what kind of things do you do for fun? What are some of your hobbies that you've enjoyed here on campus?

Erykah Pasha:

Yeah, I think I've been getting into drawing a little bit. I'm not great, but I like doing it. It's fun. I also like reading, once again, taking advantage of that library we have in the Intercultural Collective. You can come and borrow books for free. But taking advantage of those resources too. I also like hiking in my free time. Yeah, listening to music, regular everyday things. Yeah.

John Boccacino:

Well, it's really been an impactful conversation. We are so thrilled that Erykah Pasha has joined us here as we've kind of done a deep dive into who she is as a researcher, her identity, how the Intercultural collective and the LGBTQ Resource Center have played a pivotal role in her development here on campus. Erykah, I know you're going to accomplish great things once you graduate, but soak it up for

your final year here on campus. Make the most of all your experiences and best of luck in Michigan too. That's such a great groundbreaking experience for you to get to go out there and pursue this research.

Erykah Pasha:

Thank you so much.

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.