

John Boccacino:

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

Lorna Rose:

It's connection to something that I didn't even realize I had as strongly as I did, until the unfortunate passing of my big sister in 2020. It wasn't until I went to her funeral and I saw all of these women around that looked like me, that looked like older versions of me or older versions of my sister, women I have not seen since I was a little girl, because I was raised by my Italian dad, I was raised by my white family. So, my whole life I was taught, "You're Italian. You're Italian. You're Italian." It wasn't until 2020 that I really got a stark look at, "Oh no, no. I am so much more than just Italian."

Lorna Rose:

Being there with my sister's kids and just realizing they just lost their closest connection to their Native heritage, as one of their aunties, it's my job, it's my obligation, it's my responsibility to step up and I needed to get reconnected with my heritage. Once I did, it was almost like a visceral transformation. My body just felt so much more comfortable. I started to overcome a lot of the mental health issues I've been battling, just building and growing my connection and my awareness of my connection to who I am as a Native woman and to reconnecting with my family and getting back into that community that I'd been removed from so long, being raised away from it. It was really life-changing.

John Boccacino:

All throughout the month of November, the Syracuse University campus community is coming together to amplify Indigenous innovation, celebrate Native communities, and educate people surrounding the contemporary issues that Native Americans and Native communities face here in this country. Our guest on this week's episode of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast, she's proud of her Native heritage and her culture, and she's got a great story to share with our podcast audience about resiliency, overcoming adversity, creating a rewarding career path, and of course, being forever orange. She is Lorna Rose and she earned her Bachelor's degree in social work from Falk College and her Master's degree in communications from Newhouse. Lorna is a proud Native American woman who currently owns her own communications consulting company, and it's great to have you here, Lorna, on the podcast. How are you holding up these days?

Lorna Rose:

Oh, I'm great. Thank you so much for having me. I'm very, very honored to be joining you.

John Boccacino:

I prefaced this conversation with the fact that we didn't want you to feel tokenized by talking about Native heritage, but I have seen you're a passionate Syracuse fan, a two-time degree holder. You're active on social media, and I've seen you really exemplifying that Native spirit on social. So it seemed like a logical fit for me to reach out and have you on the podcast.

Lorna Rose:

No, and I'm very glad that you did. I preface every question I answer, every interview that I do, with my voice is just my voice. My perspective is my perspective. If you've spoken to one Indigenous person,

you've spoken to one Indigenous person. But that being said, there is this special connection to the culture and to the traditions and to the ancestral medicine that is the power of being Native. So any opportunity that somebody is willing to give me to talk about what that means and hopefully sharing those words will resonate with other people in the ways that they need to, I'm always ready to take that opportunity. I'm always happy to talk. That's never a problem.

John Boccacino:

Since we are tying this podcast in with Native Heritage Month, give our audience a little bit of background on your cultural heritage and your cultural background.

Lorna Rose:

Sure. So I am a Cayuga Native. Cayuga is one of the members, one of the six members of the Haudenosaunee. Anybody who goes to Syracuse, they'll surely have noticed the purple flag hanging in the rafters of the Dome. That is the Haudenosaunee flag or the Iroquois flag is probably the more recognizable name, but Cayuga is one of the tribal members of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. It translates to "people of the great swamp," which makes perfect sense because I'm a water baby. My siblings and I, their kids, my nieces and nephews, you put us anywhere near water pool, a bathtub, a kiddie pool, a pond that's not too questionable looking, we will go for hours. So we are the people of the great swamp, the Cayuga.

John Boccacino:

What does that Native heritage... How can you summarize what that means to you and the special role it plays in your life?

Lorna Rose:

It's connection. The easiest, simplest way, most concise way I can describe what that means to me is it's connection. It's connection to something that I didn't even realize I had as strongly as I did, until the unfortunate passing of my big sister in 2020. It wasn't until I went to her funeral and I saw all of these women around that look like me, that look like older versions of me or older versions of my sister, women I have not seen since I was a little girl, because I was raised by my Italian dad. I was raised by my white family. My whole life I was taught, you're Italian, you're Italian, you're Italian. It wasn't until 2020 that I really got a stark look at oh no, no, I am so much more than just Italian.

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John Boccacino:

It really seems like you went through a cultural awakening, if you will, by having gone... I love the symmetry and I hate to... Condolences of course, for the passing of your sister.

Lorna Rose:

Thank you.

John Boccacino:

But you've got this moment where there's a loss of a life, and yet it leads to this resurgence, this reawakening in you, the importance of your Native culture. How did you go about immersing yourself in that culture? What did you do to become reacclimated and reacquainted with your Native roots?

Lorna Rose:

Luckily, this started to happen during the pandemic, when we didn't have much of an opportunity to do anything but sit on our computers and learn things and research things. Having the blessing of the beautiful neurodivergent brain, having ADHD, it was no problem for my brain to slip right into research mode. I'm a lifelong student. I have three degrees and I would get more if it weren't so fiscally irresponsible to do so. But I just dove into the rabbit hole of learning and researching and I tried looking up how do I get my enrollment information and come to find out, I have my grandfather's band number who was a dual resident of the United States and a specific territory in Canada. So I really got to deep dive into where I come from, where the people that... I've always known I'm Cayuga, but what does that really mean? Who are the Cayuga? What language do they speak? I started researching just how to say different things and what the language is like. I almost had that imposter syndrome.

Lorna Rose:

I just suddenly realized I'm part of this culture and now I'm going to learn how to say a few phrases. But that's where it starts. That's where education starts. The beautiful thing about community and culture, I heard this quote, "Community is not just about who you claim. It's about who claims you." knowing that I could send Facebook requests to all of my aunts and my cousins that I'd been separated from and culturally disconnected from for so long, and they were there to greet me and welcome me with open arms, it truly felt like, no, this needed to happen. This really needed to happen for me. My soul really needed that reconnection.

John Boccacino:

We talked earlier in the opening about what the university is doing for Native Heritage Month. Being a representative of one of the Native tribes here, the Cayuga, talking on the podcast with us, what would you want our audience to know about some of those contemporary issues that Native people are facing, that are critical to their development?

Lorna Rose:

I think one of the biggest issues is just the murdered and missing Indigenous women, girls and two-spirit people. That's an extremely important cause that not enough people are paying attention to. When I was a title holder in the Miss America Organization, back in the day, there were an article or two written about it in the Daily Orange. I was Miss Finger Lakes 2009. So I was a representative in multiple ways on multiple stages for this region, my home region, my ancestral land and my platform issue, the social justice issue that I spoke about and advocated about during my year of service, was domestic violence and sexual assault.

Lorna Rose:

It was true then, and it's still true now. One in four college women will be sexually assaulted. Now think of how very few Indigenous women we have amongst us in our communities. The representation is 1 to 2% maybe, and how very rampant Indigenous women get murdered and go missing, it's highly disproportionate to the amount of us that are still here. So that's something that's extremely important. I'm very lucky. I'm very lucky to have survived some of the domestic and intimate partner and sexual acts of violence that have been committed against me. I'm very lucky to have survived them. So many of my Indigenous cousins and sisters and moms and aunties aren't.

John Boccacino:

How cathartic was it for you to turn your endeavors, your experiences into something that could be for good to affect change, when it came to your work on the beauty pageant circuit?

Lorna Rose:

It was more than just cathartic. It's necessary. It's necessary for my soul. For whatever reason, the universe chose me. I truly believe my purpose in life is to serve others. The only way I can do that, to take my own experiences and find a way to alchemize them, find a way to turn them into a driving force for something different and something better. That was why I got my social work degree from Syracuse University in the first place. My internship, my senior year field placement was at Vera House. It was through Vera House and I had actually begun volunteering for Vera House as Ms. Finger Lakes before I got to my senior year. So this was something that I was never going to let... If it was going to be a part of my story, it was going to be a part of my story in the way that I chose for it to be a part of my story.

Lorna Rose:

So it's necessary. I have to be able give back to others. I have to be able to serve others. Part of that means I have to be able to serve myself. I have to serve myself in the ways that honor who I am that honor my mind, my body, my spirit and the Miss America Organization has been monumental in my growth as a person, as a professional. I was MCing the 25th annual Miss Finger Lakes pageant in Corning, New York. For the first time, which is to no fault of the pageant, it was just for the first time somebody thought of it and it happened to be me this year, we gave a land acknowledgement prior to the opening of the pageant and I got to give it. I modeled it after the one that Syracuse University gives before major events. So it's just a way to tie it all in and bring it all full circle. It's using my voice in these spaces and showing up in the ways that I need to in these different places. This is how I thrive as a Native woman. This is my medicine.

John Boccacino:

Before we close the book on the part of the podcast that focuses on Native Heritage Month, I do want to ask you one more question about that. I think it's common whenever an institution or a community celebrates a heritage month, there's a tendency to refer to it as a history month. But I've always enjoyed your social posts pointing out that we need to refer to it as heritage, not history. Why is that such a point of pride for you, to go out there and correct people on the importance of referring to it as heritage, not history?

Lorna Rose:

Because we are still here. We are not history. Despite all of the attempts to not be the case, we are still here. There is a line in the final episode of the FX series, streaming on Hulu, Reservation Dogs. "What do you think they came for first when they tried to get rid of us? Community." Because if you get rid of

that, you can get rid of the individual. Community is still thriving and we are still here. It's unfortunate that it has to be through resilience.

Lorna Rose:

I always say resilience is not a compliment because it simply means you just won't die. The truth is no, we won't. We just won't, because we're here for a reason. Native men and women and two spirit people, Native people, we're here for a reason. We have the power of the earth in our bodies, in our blood, in our veins, and as long as we are here, we're going to continue to make as much of a difference as we can because that's just who we are as people. So continuing to refer to months like this, dedication months, remembrance months, memorial months, educational opportunities as heritage and not history, it's to make sure people remember that, no, we are in fact still here.

John Boccacino:

I want to make a segue into something that might be a little difficult to talk about, but it's really pertinent to your story for our audience here. If you don't know, Lorna bleeds orange. She loves our football, our basketball, all of our sports teams, rabid Syracuse fan. You're also someone who went through a lot of struggles yourself. You were talking to me off-air about some of the mental health issues you were going through, recently in the last year. To the point that you're comfortable disclosing and sharing with our audience, can you talk a little bit about some of those mental health issues and what role the Syracuse University community played in pulling you out from the depths of depression?

Lorna Rose:

No, absolutely. Thank you for giving me the opportunity and the space to talk about this. It is heavy stuff. It's very difficult to consume this kind of content, even in passing, scrolling down your social media feed. So to everybody listening, I preface this part of our episode with a thank you for tuning in and holding the space and listening. At the very beginning of 2022, I was taking my third and final attempt at the Texas Bar exam. Shortly after that happened, I got a phone call from someone in my family regarding one of my nephews and one of my nieces, two of my sister's youngest kiddos. The scariest situation, is always one of my worst nightmares, having grown up family that I did, substance abuse and mental health abuse was very rampant in my family. When I got this phone call, those fight or flight... But flight wasn't an option.

Lorna Rose:

Well, the flight was from Texas back up to New York to solve the problem as best I could, and catalyst for just a landslide of everything else that could possibly go wrong, began to go wrong. As somebody who had always managed to overcome and to find a way, when I suddenly found myself in a position that I could not seem to find solutions for these problems, I didn't know what to do, never been solutionless. I had always managed to get out of something or get over something or get through something, but suddenly I didn't have the resources to do what I needed to do. It was a blow to my spirit I was unprepared for. It affected me in ways that I don't think I could have ever anticipated. So when it happened, I fell apart harder than I ever realized I was capable of falling apart, because I never fell apart, because I was so strong.

Lorna Rose:

So I was at my darkest moments, and this is how dark, John, this part's important. I still don't know, I don't know who won NCAA March Madness tournament game last year or the year before. I don't

know... I didn't even know that Bengals went to the Super Bowl. Somebody said that and I was like, you're joking, what are you talking about? I didn't even know that that happened. It was so dark. I couldn't even watch sports. I couldn't even enjoy sports. I tell you, that is the scariest place I have ever been. This is a person who spoke out about domestic and sexual assault, based on personal experiences. When I tell you that was the darkest place I'd ever been, it was terrifying. I truly didn't think I was going to survive. I didn't think there was a way out at that point. All of a sudden, the Syracuse fan base started pouring in help and support through a GoFundMe.

Lorna Rose:

All of these \$44 donations started coming in and hadn't created an Amazon wishlist of basic items, cleaning supplies, a mattress to sleep on, because I was homeless at one point. Everybody purchased everything off the Amazon wishlist. So I ended up in Rochester, New York with my nephew for about five months. With everybody's help and support, I was able to get this studio apartment cleaned up, properly situated for a 19-year-old and an adult. I just tried to set up the next chapter. Set up the next chapter, close that one. I never would've even thought the next chapter was possible without the Syracuse community. This is the story I will always tell whenever people say social media ruins everything, because I'm like, no, it does not. Not everything. It's how you use it. It depends on how you use it and when you use it this way, when you use it for crowdfunding and just community care, whatever that looks like, this is one of the most beautiful things about social media, is people can find community in places that they would've never been able to access.

John Boccacino:

I think it's really, and you mentioned being a social media expert. You're a great follow on X, you're always putting out entertaining content and you do happen to own this communications consulting company. Connect the dots for us. How did you pull... Once you pulled yourself, with the help of the Syracuse community and the social media network that you have, you pull yourself out of this depression and you get back on your feet. How did you come about with the idea for the company and how did you launch it from that point?

Lorna Rose:

It all started in 2014. I got on a plane. In 2014, I went on vacation and I sat next to a woman named Brenda on the plane. Her and her fiance at the time were on their way to the Dominican Republic, to elope. I was just on my way for vacation. By the time the plane landed, she had asked me and my boyfriend at the time to be in their wedding as their maid of honor and best man at their resort. We stayed in touch on social media, of course, and it was back in at the end of April, I reached out to Brenda on Facebook and I said, listen, I am having the hardest time finding a job.

Lorna Rose:

I've put out over 200 applications between Indeed, LinkedIn, ZipRecruiter, I don't know what to do, but I have to do something. I have to get this going. We had a short chat and she asked me, she said, "What do you want your ideal workday to look like?" I said, "Wow, that's... Okay. That's not typically the way you are asked this question. But okay, what do I want my typical workday to look like? Well, hoodies are a big priority for me, so perhaps not a strict dress code if I can help it." I just, through speaking with her, she goes, "Well, that's why you're having such a hard time updating your resume. You don't want to work for somebody else. You don't want to work for a company or a corporation. You need flexibility to do what you do best."

Lorna Rose:

So it was with her guidance, she's an intuitive development coach, and I just knew she would get me. I just knew she would get me, because she got me from the moment we sat next to each other on a plane. That's why I reached out to her for help. She had an extremely successful career in corporate for over 20 years. So I just thought she'd be an incredible resource. But no, she said, "You need to get back in touch with your authentic self." she knew the situation. My living situation was not ideal in Rochester. She's like, you know what? Why don't you just come stay with us out in Columbus? We have plenty of space. Bring Otto and Mila, my dogs. She said, "Bring the dogs."

Lorna Rose:

We'll get you a fresh, a soft launchpad, a soft landing pad for you to launch from next. So I've been in Columbus ever since May, and it was through Brenda's helping guidance that she said, "Why don't you establish consulting..." She said, "Stop freelancing." She said, "This is what you do. You are a communication strategist. You don't need to call yourself a freelancer. This is what you can do full-time." So she helped me just go through the steps, set it up officially as an LLC, registered in the state of Ohio. When it came to thinking of a name, I always liked that resilient... The s in resilience sounds like a z and R-E-Z, res, it's a big cultural staple of the Native community because we're relegated to reservations. I thought, wow, Res Communications, because it's not just about being resilient, it's about... It's going from resilient to resolute, not just having to fight for yourself, but knowing that in your communications and when you show up and how you represent yourself, you have conviction in that. You're resolute in that, because that's the kind of voice that I have. That's how I communicate.

John Boccacino:

Was it as simple of a slam dunk for you deciding where to go for school? It must've been a no-brainer, right? That Syracuse was going to be where you wanted to study.

Lorna Rose:

I grew up in Rochester, New York. I grew up a Syracuse fan. I remember exactly where I was when we won the National Championship. There was an ice storm in Rochester that week, so we were stuck, in April... We were stuck in a hotel, and that was where I watched, and all the electricity in that hotel restaurant with everybody watching was just amazing. So I always knew I wanted to end up at Syracuse, even before I was a hundred percent sure that I would do social work as an undergraduate degree, or that...

Lorna Rose:

I did not initially decide to pursue communications. In between my Master's and my Bachelor's at Syracuse, I did get my law degree at New England Law Boston. I did think at one point I wanted to be a lawyer, but I would much rather the freedom and flexibility outside of such a heavily regulated industry, to be able to serve people with my gifts, my gifts of communication, to be able to serve people and work with people in the ways that honor me the most. I just don't think being restricted and confined by the legal industry is where I'm meant to end up.

John Boccacino:

Do you ever take a moment to give yourself the levity of taking stock of just how far you came? Or is it a little bit too dicey to kind of look back and acknowledge all the pitfalls you had to endure?

Lorna Rose:

It's a lot easier to give myself credit now than it used to be. As I mentioned earlier, I have ADHD and I'm on the spectrum. I have dyslexia, I have dyscalculia. I have a lot of divergencies and neurological differences in my brain than many other people. A lot of these things I did not learn about until adulthood. Being born to drug and alcohol addicted parents certainly set me up a little further behind the line of scrimmage than most other people to begin with. Then trauma rewires the brain. So the last year and a... I would say, since my sister died, there's been a lot of recalibrating going on neurologically for me, so suffer from imposter syndrome, very, very strongly, which probably sounds crazy, but it's true. It is true. So, for me, it was always... First semester at Syracuse, I got four A's and an A minus.

Lorna Rose:

There was no credit to be given there. It was, that A minus should never have happened, do better. That was just kind of always... That was always how I was taught by my dad was, you did great, but you can do better. You can always do better. So that's kind of how I've always regarded myself and treated myself, which is fine because it clearly... I was always my biggest motivator and my biggest pusher, but I was also very critical of myself. Having come out of what I just went through, if you can survive living out of a car with two chihuahuas, you deserve all of the credit. So I give it to myself now. I am not going to wait until I am considering whether or not I have other options of moving forward or not anymore, because I'm never going to get back to that place.

Lorna Rose:

Part of taking care of myself, so that I can serve others, is making sure that I give myself the emotional support that I'm owed for the things that I go through. I can't just serve other people. The pantry eventually runs dry if you don't replenish it. So going through all of that really did teach me how to take a step back, give myself the grace that I need when I need it, how to give myself the credit that I deserve for surviving everything that I've gone through, and reminding myself when things do get tough, because they do get tough, but it's so much easier to remind myself now, listen, remember what we just went through? We got this. We are okay. It's going to be okay. We're not going to go through that again. We're definitely capable of handling whatever's on the other side of this fear and apprehension we're experiencing right now.

John Boccacino:

I want to keep harping on the community, the importance of community, the importance of the Syracuse family, and in a lighthearted way, Syracuse Athletics is one of the biggest ties that binds any of us who have orange in our blood. What exactly does it mean for you to be such a passionate fan of our sports teams of Syracuse Athletics?

Lorna Rose:

It's everything. It is my life. I have this tattoo, first four notes of the Syracuse Fight song on my wrist. I got that from the marching band director in 2016. That tattoo won me an all expenses paid trip for two to the 2017 college football championship game in Tampa by AT&T. No joke. I saw a tweet that was like, who's the biggest fan of their college football team? I was like, I am. I have our marching band tattoo. I didn't even know that was a contest. I didn't know what was going on until I got a DM a few weeks later. I brought my chihuahua to a football game. He loved it. I have brought him to Doggy Day at the Dome for a Syracuse women's basketball game, and we had court side seats, which were amazing. Went to the 2016 Final Four game in Houston, absolutely crashed the student section.



Lorna Rose:

I'm uncomfortable saying it now. The statute of limitations must have passed at this point. I crashed the student section and got to meet Joe Biden there as well. But I remember when we were up in the stands and we were waiting for them to flip the court over from the Oklahoma and Villanova game, I remember becoming so overwhelmed with emotion, and my body just felt so alive, and I almost got tears in my eyes. I remember thinking, my wedding day will not be this exciting.

Lorna Rose:

There's no feeling like that. It is the community, because community, whether I'm at the Dome, whether I'm home at Syracuse, and I always attribute to being home as that feeling that I have, that aliveness is due to being back on my ancestral lands, right? That's a big part of it as well. But I travel... I've traveled to so many away games for Syracuse, whether it was football or basketball, and the sense of community when you're surrounded by orange, there's literally nothing like it. So it is everything to me. It is the family that I am choosing for myself, because I did not get to choose the ones I'm related to.

John Boccacino:

It's been empowering too, and I hope our audience feels the same way of hearing Lorna talk about her story. It's not easy to open up at all about a low point in life, depression, feeling overwhelmed, mental health issues. We tend to sweep those under the rug. But I think we're getting more adapt at paying attention to our mental wellness and our mental wellbeing. Hopefully if people listen to the episode and they're going through some struggles of their own, reach out for help. The Syracuse community, the family... Orange runs deep. We are a family for life, and we're always here to help each other out. I want to wish you nothing but the best moving forward with Res Communications, with your Syracuse Athletics fandom. It's been a pleasure having you on to tell your story. Lorna, thank you for making the time to join us today.

Lorna Rose:

Oh, thank you so much. I look forward to the episode and everything... All the work you do with the alumni is amazing, John. So it's been my honor to be included in this series that you're producing. 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.