

John Boccacino:

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

Sue Weber:

When you joined a group like Goon Squad at a school the size of Syracuse, it immediately gave you a bunch of friends. And I still have those friends today.

Jack Withee:

We're kind of the first face of the Syracuse community that these students are being introduced with. They're not quite meeting the kids on their floor yet. We're quite literally greeting them at the door as they come into Syracuse. So it's really important that from the get-go that we set the tone that this is what your new home is going to be looking like, and this is how we be orange all together.

John Boccacino:

Well, it's hard to believe. But with summer flying by, we are near the start of the next academic year here at Syracuse University. And before we welcome thousands of new students to campus as part of Syracuse Welcome Week, we wanted to shine a light on one of the proud traditions that we have here at Syracuse University. And it's right up there with a reverence for the numbers 44 and great pizza at Varsity. It is the Goon Squad. Hard to believe, but this tradition on campus is celebrating its 80th anniversary. And on this week's episode of the podcast, I am thrilled. We are going to be bringing on an alum from the class of 1968 to talk about what the Goon Squad was like more than 60 years ago when she first came to campus. Sue Weber, we'll bring her on in a minute to talk about her experiences, and then later on in the podcast, we are going to have a current student talking about just why they are so passionately involved with giving back to incoming students as they transition and try to find a home here on the Syracuse University campus.

But I'd be remiss if I didn't start off with someone who knows quite a bit about the Goon Squad. She's a member of the class of 1968. Her name is Sue Weber, joining us here on the podcast. She graduated with an illustration degree from the School of Art. She met her husband at Syracuse University. Her orange ties run deep. Sue, thank you so much for joining us today.

Sue Weber:

You are welcome. I'm glad to be here.

John Boccacino:

I wish all of our current students knew just as much about the Goon Squad back then, what it was like, because now they picture people with the moving bins and they helped move you into your residence hall room, which is a great role on campus. But you guys had some traditions with the Goon Squad, so I'm really excited to kind of go back down memory lane. Before we start that journey, tell us a little bit about yourself and how you wound up at Syracuse.

Sue Weber:

I was an art major, and so I went to a very small private high school. There were 16 kids in my class and I took art lessons and loved my art teacher, and I wanted to go to a school where there were some art courses. So Syracuse was outstanding. All sorts of wonderful professors. The guy that made the Volkswagen logo, some really wonderful people were on the staff. So I saw Syracuse and loved it and decided to go there. And I was a freshman in 1964. To put that in perspective, JFK was killed my senior year when I was in high school, so entirely different time. And just to tell you what the campus was like, Route 81 wasn't even finished. Route 81 finished at Binghamton. You had to jump off 81 and get on Route 11 and drive the rest of the way to Syracuse on Route 11.

My freshman year I lived at Washington Arms and that dorm was used as a dining room for the Peace Corps at that point in time. So when we got there to check in at lunchtime, the Peace Corps was in the middle of lunch and these kids were all over the place and it was absolute chaos. But thank goodness for the Goon Squad because they just sort of put you under your arm. I was on the fifth floor, so jamming all my stuff in the elevator and taking it up the fifth floor with my mom and dad. The Goon Squad was wonderful and very helpful and answered a lot of questions and we were so happy that they were there. And I sort of thought then, well, this is cool. Maybe I can do this when I'm a sophomore. But other stuff that, the Goons fell under the Traditions umbrella.

And so the Traditions Commissions were responsible for a lot of stuff. At that point in time football was king. Syracuse had won the National Championship in 1959, so this is still just five years removed from that. There was no dome, it was still Archbold and there was placard cheering. So the Traditions Commissions with all charge of the placard cheering. When you were freshmen, you could get into the games free with your ID, and we all sat in a group and everybody was handed their placards as you went in and you pinned your little instructions on the back of the person in front of you, and then the Traditions guys would stand there with their microphones and tell you which colors to flip. Okay, we're going to do this. And everybody flipped the red and it was very cool. Very cool. A lot of work, but very cool.

John Boccacino:

One of the constants with the Goon Squad, no matter how much has changed back when you were a freshman, it was still centered on welcoming and creating that fostering environment where students felt welcomed and admitted to campus. So what were your interactions with the Goon Squad members as a freshman, and tell us a little bit about some of the cool mandatory gear that you were given beginning your first year.

Sue Weber:

Well, as a freshman, this was my beanie. In 1964, this is what we had to wear. And when the upperclassmen, and we did it, I don't know why we were so obedient, but we did what we were told. The upperclassmen say, tip it fresh, and you had to go like this. And if you didn't, then they would ask you to sing the alma mater or would ask the guys to do push-ups or sing the national anthem. I don't know, it was all crazy stuff. But we did it and it was fun. You had to wear it for a week, that whole freshman week that you were there, everybody wore their beanie. It was kind of fun. You could see who the freshmen were.

And this is my Goon Squad hat. It's my button right in front. Here's my name button and everything got a button. So we just saved our buttons. We had buttons from everything, and the little straw hat was sold by this little lady on Marshall Street, so this is a real straw skimmer. They were not cheap, and we bought them from this little Abbey on Marshall Street and everybody decorated them in the way that they wanted to, but they were very cool and everybody wore these and we could tell right away who the Goons were. They looked good on guys as well as the girls, so we liked,-

John Boccacino:

That's a nice looking hat, and I love how well-maintained both your beanie and your Goon Squad hat are. How would you describe what those keepsakes mean to you?

Sue Weber:

Oh my gosh. Well, I have a button that says, let's back Ike. You know how old these things are. So yeah, my kids think they're really wonderful. I have two daughters and they're both in their 50s and I have two grandsons that are both in their mid-20s. They all think it's wonderful, so I don't know, I'll probably donate it to one of them someday. But yeah, it was really a fun, fun way. Like I said, I went to a very small school and when you joined a group like Goon Squad at a school the size of Syracuse, it

immediately gave you a bunch of friends. And I still have those friends today. They were very, very fun people and a reason to get together on campus. But like I said, my parents appreciated it also. So it was a great, great icebreaker in the beginning and something that I still think is very, very fun. I can't believe it's still, it's going to be 80 years old and it's still going on.

John Boccacino:

You mentioned this valuable tradition of the Goon Squad. How would you describe the reverence? Did the people on campus back then, especially with the beanies, with the straw hats, like how well recognized were the Goon Squads and what was their reputation on campus?

Sue Weber:

Well, you have to understand, there were no cell phones. There was no internet, there were no computers. Everything was by word of mouth. The big messenger on campus was The Daily Orange. There were stacks of that every morning at your dining hall or in your classrooms. Everybody read the DO and got all of their information from the paper. That's really the main communicator on campus. So when something like, it was time to apply to be a Goon, it was in the DO, and you had to fill out a hard application. Like I said, there was no email. You couldn't just quickly fill out application. You had to fill it out longhand on a hard copy and deliver it in person. And then there was a follow-up interview and you had to go, I mean, you literally had to dress up and look nice and go and have your interview in person.

Sue Weber:

I mean, you literally had to dress up and look nice and go and have your interview in person. Couldn't do a Zoom. So it was a whole unique opportunity. But the campus did stuff then. For homecoming, they had floats and parades and everybody got into making banners and hung them outside their dorms and their houses. And after the games, there were always bands in front of the houses. And so there was, I think, I don't know, it was just, like I said, this word of mouth thing was a whole lot different than it is now.

John Boccacino:

It's such an adjustment I find to go... I remember my freshman year, the Goon Squad again played such an invaluable role in helping my mom and I, a single mother, move me into Sadler 3. And you had that with Washington Arms, with your experiences. So how did you want to then pay it forward? Was it love at first sight with the Goon Squad and you said, you know what? When it's my turn, I want to give back.

Sue Weber:

Absolutely. Absolutely. I just know how overwhelmed I was coming from a small school in a small town into this big, huge university, and I know how that made me feel. And I wanted the class behind me to feel the same way. I wanted them to feel welcome and know that this was a good choice for them. But when you have to make that effort to do something in person, apply for something in person, or do a hard in person, you literally have to pick up the telephone and make the call. You just can't send something. You really think two and three and four times. But when you make that effort physically, it's really much more meaningful, I think.

John Boccacino:

Once you became a Goon Squad member, what were some of the ways that you and your fellow Goonies were able to form connections? How would you go out of your way to provide that welcoming environment?

Sue Weber:

If you wanted to see somebody, you literally had to go to their dorm and knock on the door. You'd have to make an appointment or a date with somebody to see somebody. You couldn't just text them and say, "Meet me on M Street." You'd have to do it physically. So it was, yeah, you have to get a group of people together. You'd have to make the effort. So a lot different than it is today, for sure.

John Boccacino:

And when we look back at the lasting legacy, what would you, being both a recipient of the Goon Squad's help and a Goon Squad member, how would you describe the lasting impact and legacy of the Goon Squad here on campus?

Sue Weber:

That's a testament to how important it is and how people feel about it. It leaves a lasting memory. It's something that made you feel good and something that makes you feel good you want to keep. So I think it's one of those true things. It's completely non-political. It's just a wonderful thing to introduce people to a big campus that can be very overwhelming and you don't forget that.

John Boccacino:

And you mentioned, I love the visual of Archibold Stadium. Syracuse wins the National Championship in 59 and the Cotton Bowl. Football was indeed king on campus, and you have your placards at the games to signify this cheer or you're doing this when the team is in this situation. That goes to the school spirit and the pride and enthusiasm that was really prevalent on campus. How did you adjust and fit in when it came to how much of a school spirit person were you?

Sue Weber:

Oh, huge. My mom and dad went to Penn State, so it was a rivalry. And we used to beat Penn State. I mean, we had Floyd Little and Larry Csonka. And yeah, it was phenomenal. But there was no dome. Like I said, it was big old open stadium, old Archibald, concrete seats. They were cold when it rained and snowed, hot when the sun was out. It was a whole different environment. Football was really it. It was a big deal. So when there was a game on Saturday, everybody went. Everybody, we all made, like I said, banners that hung outside of our dorms and it was a big deal, but campus was very different. There was one library, it was Carnegie was the only one. Bird was not there. That was Winchell, which is a small dorm. And the art gallery was there.

There was one new house on the other corner where the other new house is now. There was a corner store. You could get food and bus tickets or whatever. There was no Hinds Hall. The administration building was Tolley. There was no physics building. There was no Ernie Davis. There was no BBB. Haven was brand new, and Lawrinson was brand new. So it was a totally different feel to the campus than it is now. And the kids would always wear... We all wear skirts. Guys would wear khakis and Oxford cloth shirts. So a totally different attitude on campus.

John Boccacino:

I can't imagine the surreal feeling of seeing how much things have changed since you were a student. But one thing that hasn't changed is the affinity for our school and the lifelong friendships. I'd like you to go into a little bit of detail about just what a strong place Syracuse University has played in your life because of those lifelong friendships that you formed.

Sue Weber:

Well, I also met my husband there, so he was a basketball player. So our affection for Syracuse is very, very deep. And our kids grew up with that. Our friends that we made are still friends today. Eric has his whole basketball fraternity. All of those guys still are very, very close. So it's something that just stays with you. Syracuse has always been a part of our life and probably always will.

John Boccacino:

Well, I know we're sitting here getting ready for Syracuse welcome week. Given the fact that you were both a student and accomplished Goon Squad leader, what advice would you offer up maybe to an incoming student about their Syracuse journey that maybe you wish you had known when you were starting off?

Sue Weber:

Syracuse does so much more now than when I was a freshman. I love how they have all those tables around the quad and people can sign up for clubs and just taste the water, so to speak. When we registered for classes, we had to register in the men's gym. And like I said, there were no computers. You literally had an envelope full of cards, and you had to take them from one class location and drop your card off.

And I think now, oh my gosh, you can avail yourself to so many things. And I guess my biggest advice is try it. If you don't like it, you don't have to do it, but just try it. There's so much out there that you can take advantage of and do. Enjoy it all. It's such a wonderful time in your life, and you only have one chance to do it. And like I said, you just have to... It's like a tasting hors'oeuvres tray here. Just try it all out and see what tastes good and you just don't know unless you try it. So it's a great school, has wonderful opportunities, so many different kinds of kids. It's just fabulous opportunity waiting to happen.

John Boccacino:

It's really been a fun stroll down memory lane. Talking with Sue Weber, the class of 1968, a legendary member of the Goon Squad, along with all of her past alums who played a key role in this crucial tradition here on campus. Sue, thank you for making the time. We appreciate you sharing your stories.

Sue Weber:

You're welcome. Glad to do it.

John Boccacino:

I am so thrilled you heard from Sue Weber in the first half of this podcast. Now we're going to bring on a current member of the Goon Squad. He's Jack Withee, a junior who is currently studying inclusive elementary and special education in the School of Education, and he's also a firm believer in the powerful role the Goon Squad plays here on campus. Jack, thanks for taking the time to join us.

Jack Withee:

So happy to be here, John.

John Boccacino:

Give our audience a little bit of perspective on yourself, why you wanted to come to Syracuse and what really stood out about being a member of the Goon Squad.

Jack Withee:

I am an elementary and special education major. I'm really passionate about making education more equitable and sustainable for students of all different identities. And that was a really big reason that I was drawn to Syracuse. I really fell in love with the program that we have here and how focused it is around the identities that students in the classrooms have. And I was really drawn by the different opportunities we have in our placements, getting into the classroom as early as your first semester freshman year, and carrying throughout the entire four year process.

Even starting this semester, I'm going to be in the classroom full days, Tuesday through Friday, which is kind of unheard of at other schools. So you get lots of hands-on experience in my program, and there's also super cool opportunity to do my student teaching in New York City senior year, fall semester. So I think that's a really cool opportunity that I didn't see anywhere else that I was looking.

My favorite experiences with the Goon Squad in particular, I can remember being a first year student and being so excited to get onto campus, feel like I have the rest of my life in front of my eyes. I'm so ready to start over fresh start, become the person who I always wanted to be. But that first day is the most nerve racking experience of anyone's life. No one really talks about it that much. Kind of like all the nerves, like, "Oh my God, where am I? Who are these people? Who am I? I don't know."

But I have vivid memories of the girl who moved me in. Her name's Erin. I can't remember her last name, but I just remember her moving me in and her looking me in the eyes and telling me that I was going to be okay. And that is something that I've really carried with me throughout my whole four years. Just hearing that short phrase, it truly made me believe it. And I kind of just took a breath and was like, okay, I'm ready to spread my wings. I can do this. And that's something that I carry with me with every freshman that I move in. I'm moving freshmen in my old dorm and I make sure to tell every single one of them that they're going to be okay.

John Boccacino:

People can do research on their residence hall. You know who your roommate's going to be ahead of time. You've probably had some conversations, you know about your academic program. So we set you up for success ahead of time. But then as much preparation as there is nothing replicates physically waiting in line to move into your first year residence hall. For you, besides providing a welcoming warm face and a smile and a helping hand, how do you try to make that welcoming environment for the students and their family members?

Jack Withee:

I think that it's so important just to be the calm eye of the storm. I can remember specifically, like you were kind of saying, you can do all the research, you can do all the planning you want, but it's not going to go perfect no matter how hard you try. Even if it's some absurd experience. I can remember my freshman year, it was a whole thing where we almost ran out of gas while we were waiting in line. There was a line of cars around the block and we literally almost ran out of gas driving all the way from New Hampshire and we were like, "Hey, so if we ran out of gas, can someone help us push our car up to the doorbell?" You know what I mean?

It's one of those, how could you expect that that was going to happen? Something is going to go wrong. Tensions are high. And it's just so fun to be that source of calm. You know what, I know that you might not know what's going on, but I do and I'm here to help you. You know what I mean?

John Boccacino:

And when did you have that aha moment of wanting to give back and saying, "You know what? I benefited so much from my help from the Goon Squad who moved me in. I want to give back to future generations."

Jack Withee:

It honestly was, I spoke about that girl Erin who helped me out my freshman year. Just being able to see her on campus and kind of checking in with myself and seeing how much I had grown in between each instance I saw her on campus was so incredible to me. And to think that she kind of jump started that growth in me by kind of putting me firm on my feet and giving me a level playing ground to play with. So that's definitely, like when I was checking in with myself at the end of freshman year, "What would Erin think about me now?" If she could see that scary little boy who she saw on the first day of school, what would she think now? And just that's what really made me want to pay it forward and pay my dues, so to speak.

John Boccacino:

Now, do you have a phrase that you will rely on to help out a nervous student or a parent, or what's your approach to the Goon Squad mentality?

Jack Withee:

My approach is that everything is figure-outable. That's kind of my life motto. And oftentimes in high crisis moments, tensions are high. Moms and dads are dropping off their babies. Oh my God, what's going on? You are going to get through this. It is going to be a tough day, but there's nothing that we can't solve together. It's so true. It is funny. I've talked about me having all the answers. Sometimes we're messing up too. I can remember I was moving in this girl last year and then we were trying to go to her room and I somehow lost her. I had a bin with all of her belongings in it, and I was like, "Oh. So she got in that elevator and I actually don't know where she's going. Oh, okay." But you know what I mean, the day moved on and she ended up finding me and it was okay.

John Boccacino:

Give us a little insight into the preparation that goes into welcome as a Goon Squad member. What types of meetings do you all have? What types of communication goes into it and what's the strategy when it comes to, again, seamlessly moving in these five to 6,000 new and first year students?

Jack Withee:

So we go into school a couple of days early before all the freshmen start moving in, and they really grill us on how the day's going to go. Just because the more prepared that we are as the goon squad, the more prepared we are to help people who are coming in without any of that information. So essentially we learn all the different systems that we're going to be using to move people in as well as just overall how the day's going to work.

And they also give us some tips and tricks to make sure that we're making the environment the most welcoming it can be, and making sure that we're passing on the inclusive attitude that Syracuse hopes to provide their students with. Because we're kind of the first face of the Syracuse community that these students are being introduced with. You know what I mean? They're not quite meeting the kids on their floor yet. We're quite literally greeting them at the door as they come into Syracuse. So it's really important that from the gate we set the tone that this is what your new home is going to be looking like, and this is how we be orange all together.

John Boccacino:

I love that. And really it does take a village. We always talk with welcome. It takes a village to get the students feeling comfortable and settled in. And obviously the parents play a role in that too, and the family members, because like you said, they're the ones who are dropping their babies off for college to start that academic journey. What kind of interactions have you had with parents when it comes to that comfort and that transition?

Jack Withee:

Honestly, I have had, because I think last year I did Goon Squad a couple days. I've had a whole range of different experiences from freshmen. I've had to hug the crying mom. I've had to joke with the parents over here like, oh my God, aren't they being so dramatic? It is going to be okay. It's so interesting to see all the different dynamics that unfold on move-in day. But it's also so beautiful to see all of these family units coming together to set their child up for success as they take on their new journey. But yeah, it's a fun time, dude, it's so funny. You get some good stories from moving in families on Goon Squad Day.

John Boccacino:

We love our traditions here on campus, and the Goon Squad is one of our oldest and most well respected traditions. Before I ask you the historical question, I want you in your own-

John Boccacino:

Before I ask you the historical question, I want you in your own being a current student Goon Squad volunteer, just describe the presence that the Goon Squad has on campus and then the strong role that the Goon Squad plays here at Syracuse.

Jack Withee:



So I would definitely say the presence that Goon Squad has on campus, it's one of those things where obviously it's something that only really happens at the beginning of the year. It's not something that meets consistently throughout the year. You only move into college once, but it is so powerful because no one forgets the people who move them in to Syracuse. You know what I mean? That sticks with you. And just this overall spirit of helping each other out when you need that really kind of leads through to the campus community. It really is an honor to help out my fellow freshmen, just this school has provided me with so many opportunities to be the person that I've always wanted to become and I am just so grateful for who this school has allowed me to be throughout the different things I've been involved with and just being able to set people up to have the same experience that I had. It truly is a blessing.

John Boccacino:

And I know there's no... Everyone's different. There's not one type of person you're looking for, but how would you describe the traits that are necessary to really be an effective and a successful Goon Squad member?

Jack Withee:

It is very interesting because it is so important to have a well-rounded squad. There's no real right answer to that, especially because it's so interesting to see how different members of our squad can help out these different families in different ways. I can remember last year I was paired with this kid who was really quiet. He was really low-key super chill, which is a little bit different than my style. I'm pretty energetic. My elementary school teacher comes out in me when I'm greeting these parents, and it is like I was able to learn from him that sometimes the families needed a presence more like him than they needed me.

I would notice that sometimes these families would almost get riled up by me. It was kind of like, "Oh, oh, you're a little... We're already overwhelmed. We don't need someone doing cartwheels in front of us." You know what I mean? And just learning to take a step back and truly prioritize what the families need from you is really cool. So it's so important to have all different personalities on the team, and it's like, "Hey, some people need the cartwheels." You know what I mean? It helps when the tears start flowing. I'm always there with a good joke. You know what I mean? But yeah, it's super cool to have a really well-rounded squad on your... That's the most important part having a successful day.

John Boccacino:

What did you know about the history and maybe some of the past traditions that Goon Squad members embraced from, say the '50s, the '60s, the '70s, those generations before you?

Jack Withee:

So the biggest thing that I've heard about the Goon Squad is, I don't know all the history behind it, but the thing with the beanie where they wear the beanies, but it's something about that beanie. I just think that's so silly and fun. I really wish that we still did that, embrace this tradition of what Syracuse is. So hey, maybe when we're at those meetings, I'll raise my hand in the back of the room, be like, "You know what? Where's my beanie? Let's bring the beanie back. Let's bring the beanie back," because I really do, I think that that was a really fun tradition.

John Boccacino:

And I want to kind of extrapolate a little bit with this next question, because you talked about the important impact that Erin, your Goon Squad member had on you as far as wanting to give back and embrace the leadership role. Just how do you think Goon Squad membership solidifies a student's leadership capabilities?

Jack Withee:

It kind of takes away the fear that comes from embracing a new environment. Oftentimes that can be really scary. Everyone's afraid of what they don't know, and that's kind of the whole point, is that there's this whole new environment that you know nothing about leaving what's familiar for you. We have people coming from all around the country, all around the world, and just kind of being able to spend time with someone who actually knows what they're doing. I feel like it really gives the students a little bit more confidence and a lot more footing so that they feel grounded, even if it's just for that short 30 minute window that you're interacting with each other. I've noticed that oftentimes the students that I leave in their room when we're done unpacking their stuff is not the same student that I met as they were opening the car door for the first time.

John Boccacino:

How about for you personally? How was being in the Goon Squad serve to catapult you into a leader on campus?

Jack Withee:

Yeah, it is really funny. I've talked about how... And it's funny because this Erin girl that I've been speaking about, she probably has no idea who I am. She moved so many people into my dorm freshman year that she might have, "This kid looks familiar, but who are you?" But she had such a huge impact on my freshman year, and it's funny because I've noticed that I definitely had a similar effect on some people. I had kids who would come up to me in the middle of the year and they'd be like, "Oh my God, Jack, what's going on? You moved me in." And I'm kind of like, "Oh, hi." You know what I mean? And it's just so interesting to know that you're a role model for people who you don't even realize you're a role model to. So just walking around in your day-to-day interactions with people, and just know that people are watching you when you don't even realize it, and people just try and emulate the person that you are on campus.

John Boccacino:

Well, it's really been a pleasure. This podcast has been insightful to both bring on an older alum who was a Goon Squad member back in the '60s, and Jack Withee, who will be once again helping out the new students moving into campus during Syracuse Welcome week. New student move in takes place August 19th to the 21st with Syracuse welcome week scheduled for August 22nd to the 25th. Jack, thanks for making the time. Keep up the great work and keep solving those problems for our students and their families.

Jack Withee:

All right. Sounds good. Thank you, John.

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.