

John Boccacino:

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

Nolan Singh:

A big part of Orange Seeds is mentorship. It's a great way to get involved, meet new people, give back to the community, but also grow, really, personally and professionally. And I kind of didn't know what I was getting myself into. It was a really jam-packed year full of a lot of personal development, giving back to the community, volunteering at different organizations, nonprofits around the area, we call them Service Saturdays. And you just really immerse yourself in the needs of the community.

Ryan Edwards:

The overall goal of the Syracuse University Volunteer Organization is to basically connect people with places within the university and within the Syracuse area that need any sort of volunteers to complete any community service. At any given point, any SU student can come to our office and they can just give us their interest and we can put together a huge information packet of different opportunities on and off campus for them to volunteer with that.

John Boccacino:

With more than 250 recognized student organizations on the Syracuse University campus, our students have ample choices when it comes to finding a student organization that aligns best with their interests. On this episode of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast, we are going to meet two of our talented student leaders who are passionate about their student organizations and more importantly, they love giving back to the campus community and the central New York community. I will start off with Ryan Edwards, who is a senior computer science major in the College of Engineering and Computer Science. Ryan is dedicated to service through his work with the Syracuse University Volunteer Organization and also with the Mary Ann Shaw Center for Public and Community Service among his many activities.

And joining Ryan is sophomore Nolan Singh, a political science major in the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs. Nolan is the public relations chair for Orange Seeds, a leadership empowerment program for first year and transfer students. And Nolan is also a first year seminar peer leader. Together on this episode, Ryan and Nolan are going to explore why they became involved as student leaders, share a little bit about their organizations, explain why students on campus should become more involved, and also discuss the impact of our ongoing student organization challenge. Ryan and Nolan, thanks for joining me on the podcast today.

Nolan Singh:

Very happy to be here.

Ryan Edwards:

Yeah, thank you so much for having us.

John Boccacino:

I want to give you both a chance to tell us a little bit about yourself. So Ryan, give us a little background on yourself and what drew you to the university in the first place.

Ryan Edwards:

I am from Southern New Jersey about 30 to 35 minutes away from Philadelphia. And originally what drew me to Syracuse was my freshman year math teacher went here and he just always talked about how it was a school that just inspired him and inspired him to just become a hard-working person and really just changed the trajectory of his life. And lo and behold, four years later I was like, I think I'm going to apply. And here we are.

John Boccacino:

And Nolan, what drew you to Syracuse?

Nolan Singh:

So my college admissions process was kind of all over the place. I didn't really know what I was looking for in a school. I'm from Orange County, California, so it's kind of a very different environment from back home. But ever since my sophomore year of high school, I knew that I kind of wanted to go far, experience something new. So when I was applying to Syracuse and [inaudible 00:03:40], I was talking to a lot of people about the resources it has to offer a lot of the connections that you make post-graduation and just how it's very easy to find kind of your community on campus. And that's kind of what Orange Seeds is to me, as well as other things I'm involved in. And so yeah, I'm very happy that I ended up here.

John Boccacino:

There seems to be a common thread for students who want to get involved. There's a drive to make this place better both on campus and in the community. Ryan, what was your thought process? When did you realize, you know what, I want to be become involved? I want to give back as a student leader.

Ryan Edwards:

That process and, I guess, development of my own thoughts started long before college. I am an Eagle Scout and I have just always kind of had a passion for just helping others. And I think as soon as I committed to Syracuse, I actually met someone who worked for the Shaw Center. And believe it or not, it was one of the first people I had texted that came here and she was like, oh, do we have positions open? Would you like to start and interview and maybe see how you like it? And I just fell in love with the fact that people were just so willing to help me immerse myself in the community. And it was just a fantastic opportunity.

John Boccacino:

We recently celebrated 30 years of the Shaw Center really being our hub of giving back to our community. In fact, we had Claire Secoli on an episode in April talking about a initiative, Ryan, that I'm sure you're very familiar with, the Sleep in Heavenly Peace bed building event that our SU volunteer organization has been involved with. And it seems like the seeds are everywhere when it comes to service. And a good segue to Nolan with the orange seeds and your service, what was your linchpin moment that got you involved in giving back?

Nolan Singh:

A big part of Orange Seeds is mentorship. My mentor Noah, he's currently a junior and he was actually the one who pitched Orange Seeds to me. I was in the Brockway dining hall as a freshman and I just passed by their table. He was telling me it's a great way to get involved, meet new people, give back to the community, but also grow really personally and professionally. Jack Whithee, our old co-director, was also there and he was the one telling me about all the LinkedIn opportunities and resume building that they, Orange Seeds, as a program has to offer. And that's really what drew me in at first.

And I kind of didn't know what I was getting myself into. It was a really jam-packed year full of a lot of personal development, giving back to the community, volunteering at different organizations, nonprofits around the area, we call them Service Saturdays. And you just really immerse yourself in the needs of the community and kind of take yourself out of the bubble. That's like the SU campus. I'm very, very grateful that I was able to get involved so early as a freshman. And it's something that I'm still involved in. Obviously I'm on executive board this year, so it really means a lot to me.

John Boccacino:

It's interesting because now both of you have mentioned a tie to a past podcast guest, Jack Whithee was on talking about the power of the Goon Squad giving back, so we really know how to pick them here on the podcast when it comes to our involved and engaged student leaders. And I want to give you both a chance, give us a little more background. I'll start with you, Ryan. Exactly the goals of the Syracuse University Volunteer Organization.

Ryan Edwards:

I'd say the overall goal of the Syracuse University Volunteer Organization is to basically connect people with places within the university and within the Syracuse area that need any sort of volunteers to complete any community service. And we do that. So at any given point, any SU student can come to our office and they can just give us their interest and we can put together a huge information packet of different opportunities on and off campus for them to volunteer with that. But our biggest event with the volunteer organization is our bed building, which is partnered with Sleep in Heavenly Peace. This is going to be our third year doing it. We have a goal for a hundred beds compared to last year doing 88 and the year before doing SU's lucky number, 44. It takes pretty much the entire school year to plan and it's fantastic.

John Boccacino:

So it seems like Ryan, with your organization, you guys try to remove the barriers that might present themselves for students who want to get involved. How important was it to make it as easy as possible for students who do want to give back?

Ryan Edwards:

It's so important. I think, especially like you said, there are just certain barriers where people just don't really know where to get information. Especially being a freshman coming into Syracuse, this is a huge school and a huge community and there's so many different things all going on at once. So we definitely want to always make sure that we are just communicating out into the university that we are available and are a resource that is very fruitful within the university and outside of the campus.

John Boccacino:

And Nolan, you were also involved from the get-go. I know you got involved your first year here on campus and Orange Seeds seems like it's a really good match for your talents as well. Pull back the curtain on Orange Seeds and exactly how this group relies on community engagement and service learning experiences.

Nolan Singh:

There are four pillars that kind of make up what Orange Seeds is about. Mentorship, campus engagement, professional development, and community service, and they all kind of tie in together. So in the fall we typically partner with a bunch of different nonprofit organizations in the Syracuse area and we call these Service Saturdays. So we go out into the community, get our hands dirty, doing anything from making

sandwiches and distributing them to unhoused people. And that was a one that was really, really impactful for me because you actually get to see how grateful and how much it means to them and simple things that we take for granted, like a loaf of bread or just warm clothes. And that really just builds the foundation for our fall semester. And this is entirely done through Orange Seeds campus engagement. On the other hand, we're really looking for ways for our seeds, which is our freshman class, our freshmen or transfer students, to get involved because we know that coming to Syracuse, a lot of kids come from out-of-state, different backgrounds, different upbringings, and really just helping them find their niche community, what they're interested in. So Orange Seeds is exactly that, just kind of a stepping stone to other organizations on campus.

We also have a heavy involvement with our mem-board, so that's past Seeds who have been in the program, who still want to act as mentors, and we have a wide network of people from different majors, schools, programs. That's a really, really vital resource that I still use as a sophomore. And on the other hand, in the spring, the seeds will use all of the skills that they built partnering with different organizations, collaborating, planning events, and that is kind of turned into their big project in the spring called The Big Event, which is their largest community service day. All student run and we send a bunch of volunteers out into the community to do the work that we've been doing. So it's a lot of fun.

John Boccacino:

I like, Nolan, the metaphor I'm getting with Orange Seeds because the goal with the group name, you're planting these seeds of service where students will go out and prove they can make a difference no matter how big or small.

Nolan Singh:

Yeah, yeah, absolutely. I would say that the seeds each year who are chosen to be a part of the program, it's a very, very diverse group of people, but also in personalities. We have a lot of different types of leaders and the whole part of what we do is we try to get you to figure out what kind of leader you are. Are you someone who can take the reins and make a spreadsheet, get it all filled out, or are you someone who just sits back at first, likes to be assigned a job and really just find out what your strengths are? So there's a ton of different opportunities, ways to get involved, in our organization. I definitely have seen myself grow so much in just my freshman year and now holding a leadership position, I'm so excited to see what the current seeds of this year are going to do.

John Boccacino:

Ryan, when it comes to, Nolan mentioned it, his growth, how volunteering has fueled his development, what are some ways you have seen yourself growing holistically and as a student leader through service?

Ryan Edwards:

The opportunity to be able to just go into the Syracuse City School district and other communities in Syracuse, it has just brought a whole new perspective that gives you another level of patience and understanding just with people in general. I can't tell you how many times where I've just looked back on situations of my younger self and my adolescence where just conversations with other people, even disagreements and all that kind of stuff. And I think, I'm like, wow, maybe if I just would've thought this a little bit this way and through certain experiences in the Syracuse community that have taught me that have just overall just added a surplus of growth and maturity and just excellence to your character.

John Boccacino:

And how about you Nolan, when it comes to ways you've seen yourself growing and advancing as a person through service?

Nolan Singh:

Yeah, so when I first joined Orange Seeds last year, I really didn't know what it is and we all kind of joke among the club that there's so much to our organization that it's kind of hard to explain to people when they ask you at first. And so I, little by little, kind of just noticed that I was pushing myself more to really care about the work that we were doing and that it started to feel like I would get excited to go volunteer in the morning on a Saturday. The work that we do is so meaningful that it really changes your perspective, like Ryan said, on how you view the community and how you view your campus and just Syracuse as a city.

And I think second semester of last year, as a freshman, I really saw growth in new ways when I had a leadership position for the big event and that's when I really got very involved and very excited to help the community alongside all of my peers. That's kind of just the basis of what our mission statement is, which is learn, grow, lead. So I still feel like this year I'm constantly still learning, growing and leading in any way that I can.

John Boccacino:

Nolan, just how big of an event is the big event? I know it's our largest university-run community service project. What kind of scope and magnitude can you describe for the impact?

Nolan Singh:

Yeah, so last year, I want to say that we sent over 150 volunteers besides Orange Seeds. So these are non-Orange Seeds affiliated students, whether it's our friends, whether it's people, we just spread the word about. A big part of our marketing strategies is tabling. And so that was a really cool experience for us as the seed class to get experience tabling, whether it was around campus in Shine, spreading the word about the big event, what it means. We targeted a lot of Whitman honors students who need those service hours, who are willing to get involved. But we had a lot of people who just wanted to give back, which is exactly what we're looking for as well. And I want to say we partnered with around 10 organizations last year. It was a lot of the nonprofits that we had worked with in the fall. So like I said, it kind of builds those relationships, those connections with our organization and theirs so that we can work with them in the spring and the work that we do is so, so meaningful.

John Boccacino:

I want to tie it back to a little thing that we were mentioning earlier about the Student organization challenge. I love this concept. We have one in the fall, around Orange Central, our homecoming weekend, and then we have one during the spring on Giving Day. And your two organizations, not to humblebrag, but you were the winners of those respective competitions. Orange Seeds was victorious during Giving Day, the 24 hours to support Syracuse University and the Syracuse University volunteer organization was number one during Orange Central and the Student Organization Challenge. I want to start with you, Ryan, explain to our audience what exactly goes into the student organization challenge.

Ryan Edwards:

To prepare for the challenge, you have to apply and get your organization registered within the university itself. And then, with that, it just becomes, for us particularly a surplus of fundraising and communicating and just trying to get our message out there. We do this by, I know Nolan mentioned this too, tabling at events. We are constantly tabling at several different prospective student events, admitted student events, alumni events, all kinds of things just to engage ourselves and get our message out there, even just to solicit just even any amount of funds and just to kind of communicate and tell people this is what we do.

John Boccacino:

And it's really, as much as I'm sure you'd love to get a 10,000 or a \$20,000 donation, it's really all about participation, right?

Ryan Edwards:

Absolutely.

John Boccacino:

Just getting people to give what they can.

Ryan Edwards:

Absolutely. We say, even if you give \$5, that is more than enough. It's a seed, little play on words.

John Boccacino:

I like that. Playing off of our Orange Seeds colleague, Nolan here with Orange Seeds, who again happened to win during spring and Giving Day. Nolan, give our audience your perspective on the benefit, the impact of the Student Organization Challenge.

Nolan Singh:

It was really amazing to see just how many people were willing to support our organization and our cause and what we do. We didn't go into it necessarily with the goal, we're going to win, we're going to take the first place spot. Obviously it was amazing that we did, but the biggest thing was it wasn't the amount of money that we raised, it was the number of donors and really we were just sending it to all of our family, friends, hometown friends from back home, just being like, hey, can you support our organization? Even the smallest amount will do.

And it kind of brought us really together for the end of the year as a community to just reflect on the community service work we've done and also just kind of realize the impact that we've made on campus and off campus. And it was really, really impactful and fulfilling to see that it's worth it and that our club and our organization, people care about it. And we always joke it's not just a community service club because it is, but it's so much more than that. It's a family that we've built and the mentors, the experiences that we've had are all such positive growing experiences into become a leader.

John Boccacino:

I appreciate that sentiment, Nolan and Ryan, I want to give you a chance to maybe elaborate a little bit on yeah, the friendship, the whole camaraderie that comes. Just how close do you and your fellow students become through service?

Ryan Edwards:

Oh, so close. I can definitely say I have the role of Vice President of the Syracuse Volunteer Organization. My president, treasurer and secretary and I are honestly becoming very close to best friends at this moment. We are just in constant communication with each other and it honestly has been an amazing process working with each other and you just develop these relationships because you're just, again, constantly around these people and it just becomes second nature, just them just being around you and being with you and you just going through the highs and lows of just preparing for such huge events like this and it's so amazing to just be able to lean on each other when you need to.

Nolan Singh:

Yeah, I would agree. I feel like it really is its own discourse community. You have all this language and jargon that you use that's, I guess, special to only your club, and it really just opens up a whole new world of friendships. I'm living in a house next year with, I want to say, four of the other seeds from my year. So it's really amazing just to see that these friendships don't go away and they were built on something meaningful.

John Boccacino:

What are some of the tangible ways that both of your organizations took the winnings from the Student Organization Challenge and made a difference? Made an impact?

Nolan Singh:

I would say, well, as of right now, the way our organization is based, it's a very step-by-step process. So after we select our new seed class, we introduce service, we're just beginning to introduce the mentorship and it's really fun because they get to kind of go through the steps that we did last year. And so as of right now our funds just go to planning Service Saturdays. It really picks up more throughout as the year progresses. We just had a Chipotle fundraiser where a bunch of our seeds, past seeds, mem-boarders, E-boarders, went to go support our club at Chipotle. And so it really just kind of goes towards the next year, all of the service events, leading, planning things that we do.

John Boccacino:

And how about you, Ryan with SUVO? What are some ways you guys have taken the fundraised money and made a difference?

Ryan Edwards:

So obviously we are in charge of the bed building event, so a lot of that money goes towards just the materials and just being able to get enough wood and all kinds of different stuff, the drills and all that things. And with that, we also do... it's funny Nolan that you mentioned, the Chipotle fundraiser, we also do connections with some local grocery stores in the area and even local churches. So I think it's definitely, you can really kind of do a little bit of everything with [inaudible 00:24:57] and then how you want to get your resources.

John Boccacino:

And it's cool too, the way that they frame the Student Organization Challenge because yes, you're technically competing with other student orgs, but really there's no loser. So it's one of the best competitions out there because everyone's going to benefit, everyone's going to get, whether it's publicity or awareness or get some funding for their student org as well. When you were trying to get in front of, say, the alumni during the Friday of Orange Central, when you were volunteering and trying to spread the word about your organization, what kind of message were you trying to hammer home about why they should get involved and give back?

Ryan Edwards:

I kind of just conveyed the message that I kind of harped on before in saying that, certain people just consider a bed not to be a privilege to have. Before I had started this, I didn't recognize that it was something so sacred to certain people. And I just think it is just so remarkable the fact that we are able to just provide that and just showcase that. We usually sometimes even have pictures up of children getting their beds and being so excited. And we show that this is a privilege that we're able to do this and it is hard work and it takes a lot, a vigorous amount of planning and strategizing. And so I think when we're

out at these events just trying to communicate, we just share what it honestly is. This is a privilege and we want to be able to just share this privilege with more people.

John Boccacino:

And Nolan, you guys only had one day with Giving Day to win your version of the challenge. So how did you kind of hammer home that message too?

Nolan Singh:

People had seen the work that we had done with the big event, with the winter fundraiser. It was really cool to see how supported we were by the Syracuse community and just, I think we did a good job showcasing and recapping the specific nonprofits we had worked with. And I'm sure having the big event happen and getting people who weren't involved in our organization involved and volunteering really struck a lot of people and just helped us kind of promote what we do, our mission statement of helping and giving back to the community.

John Boccacino:

You two are passionate about giving back through service. Why should our students want to partner with organizations in the community?

Nolan Singh:

You feel so fulfilled when you give back to the community. I know when I came here, joining a community service club wasn't necessarily my top pick or my top interest at first. You come to this college, you want to join something exciting. And a lot of people, I feel like, don't get that excited about community service at first. But the more you immerse yourself in it, the more you realize this is not only impactful, this is not only making a difference, it's fun, it's building a community. You're getting outside, meeting diverse people, listening to not only their struggles but just their stories of their life. And I think that is something that I can take away from the Service Saturdays.

John Boccacino:

And how about you, Ryan? What's your pitch as to why students should get even more involved?

Ryan Edwards:

SU is a bubble. This campus is. As a student here, you have everything you need on campus. And I always just encourage students when I'm talking to them to go out and see what the community is like and see how you can enact change and create something positive. Why would you not want to go immerse yourself in the community that is so welcoming to us?

John Boccacino:

It's been eye-opening to kind of pull back the curtain on this Student organization challenge, which again is running through the end of October. If you search Student Organization Challenge Syracuse University, you will find there is a current interactive leaderboard. As of right now, the Women's Ultimate Club gift fund is leading the challenge so far. This will run through October 31st. There is a ton of funding that is available. You can support any one of these incredibly passionate student leadership groups. I encourage all of our people who are listening to the podcast to get involved.

And again, another cool aspect is Forever Orange Friday, during Orange Central on Friday, October 17th, you can get involved, give back through Orange Central Homecoming to the student org that really resonates with your interests. I want to thank our guests today for coming on this student centric and empowering episode of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'll start our farewells with Ryan Edwards, who is really a passionate leader with the Syracuse University Volunteer Organization. Ryan, keep up the great work and thank you for your time today.

Ryan Edwards:

Thank you so much for having me. It was a pleasure.

John Boccacino:

You interacted very well with Nolan Singh, who again is from Orange Seeds, a great leader, great organization here on campus. I love the statement of what Orange Seeds does. It really is an empowering program. Making our first year and transfer students not only feel welcome, but that they can bloom and blossom into the leaders that they want to be. Nolan, thank you for sharing your insights.

Nolan Singh:

Yeah, thank you so much for having me. And I always love any opportunity to talk about service or Orange Seeds, so 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.