

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations podcast. I'm John Boccacino, senior internal  
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but it was our hope through all of the events and having a celebration aspect of some events and while having like some serious and in depth stations about anti-Asian bias in this country.

We could do both simultaneously, and I think that's a really powerful facet of both of our identities and this heritage month that SU is giving us of highlight different facets of the Asian American experience at SU, and then how far we have to come as well.

John Boccacino:

I love the theme, reclaiming our identities. You could say that applies to every single member of our Syracuse University campus as we are struggling to come to terms with who we are and what life is all about as we, hopefully, emerge from the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic. For you, tell us a little bit about your background, your identity, and maybe how you found your identity here at Syracuse.

Merci Sugai:

there will always be a part of me that won't present fully as European or white or Italian or anyway because of just the nature of genetics.

I think growing up, I never really felt like I could fit into one space, which, for some reason, I felt like I had to. Then, at the same time, when I got to college and was able to interact with a lot of people who were going through a similar dilemma of some sorts, I could find my place as a biracial individual, interacting with a lot of students who were multiracial or biracial and thinking about the ways that we could claim our own spaces. Even if it didn't look like fitting in exactly with one ethnicity or the other ethnicity or one group of people or the other group of people, I think there's something pretty powerful about having multiple identities that you can claim and you can feel strongly towards. I still feel an affinity towards both sides, I guess, if you want to call it that, of my identity, but being able to be confident in that took a long time, most of my adolescence and young adulthood, but I feel confident, at age 24, I've fully understood where I'm sitting and where I'm positioned as someone who is biracial.

John Boccacino:

I feel like our students, just based on our brief conversation, are very forced to have your perspective because you get to work with our students as a graduate assistant in the office of student activities, passing on these life experiences. What are some of the best words of advice you can give when it comes to counseling our students as to how to find their identities and how to really find out who they are on campus?

Merci Sugai:

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I'm really fortunate that I got connected with Omagh just because transparently, there's not a ton of spaces for staff and students who identify within a certain population to interact other than in the intercultural collective. I think having the opportunity to be part of a planning committee and to co-chair that planning committee gave me the opportunity to interact with a lot of people who I probably wouldn't have got the chance to interact with just candidly here at SU without that formal committee meeting. I think the fact that Omagh pilots a lot of those heritage month planning committees and tries to get a lot of people from a lot of different offices and departments involved, I think is a great step in the right direction to make sure that students especially feel like they know exactly what staff members they can turn you in times of need and faculty members, and also can create a community with each other from a lot of different organizations on campus.

We had representation from Greek organizations, from student orgs, or just, honestly, random students who weren't affiliated with either and wanted to join. I think having that community and creating that community through heritage month planning committees is something that I've really enjoyed that Omagh does and I hope that they continue to find a wide variety of staff and students and faculty who fit into that particular identity of whatever month they're planning. I'm thankful that Omagh takes the initiative to set up planning committees that are based around identity so that it feels like there's a community that I honestly probably wouldn't have found without it.

And then, similarly, with the intercultural collective, being able to work with Hyejun and Omagh gave me a lot of exposure to other staff in the intercultural collective and other offices there. So I'm very thankful that they exist in that space and are able to help students even very casually and informally when I pop by the office, I can still have conversations with a lot of different professional staff members and graduate assistants who work in different offices in the intercultural collective.

John Boccacino:

What advice could you possibly give, as far as to people who aren't of a Japanese or an Asian American cultural background to become an ally? What advice would you offer to them?

Merci Sugai:

I would recommend taking small steps in your everyday life to become more educated, whether that means following an AAPI creator on Instagram or whatever social media you use, just to see the lived experiences in the day to day, happenings and advocacy that a lot of creators advertise. I think that's a powerful tool because if you're already scrolling on Instagram every day, you might as well pass a few posts that are educational and can teach you a little bit. And while that seems kind of silly, I think that's a really easy way to incorporate it into things that you're already doing.

I also think that if you're a university student or staff or faculty member, attending lectures or educational sessions or programs that are put on by the university, a lot of times, if you're a student, they use your student fees to put them on, so take advantage of those learning opportunities and try to find ways that the university is trying to educate the campus community, especially those who don't identify within a particular population.

And then, obviously, just taking time to be empathetic to people in your life that might identify within the AAPI community and actually having a full conversation with them and giving them opportunity to explain their identities, how they feel about their identities and how they feel in a predominantly white space like SU.

John Boccacino:

You've got your bachelor's degree in human development and family studies from Colorado State University before coming to Syracuse to study higher education









John Boccacino:

I want to back up a little bit, Hyejun, and get into more of your personal story here of Syracuse University. You're a dual major in Newhouse and the iSchool. What are you currently studying and why did you choose to come to Syracuse?

Hyejun Yoo:

Yeah. At Newhouse, I'm studying advertising and the emphasis for advertising, because there's different emphasises, I'm doing digital advertising.

Thanks for checking out the latest installment of the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. My name is John Boccacino, signing off for the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast.