

John Boccacino:

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

Sue Weber:

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

My freshman year I lived at Washington Arms

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.

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 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

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

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 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, first 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 ~~advice~~, 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~~ 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 are there 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 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 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 start that academic journey. What kind of interactions have you had with parents when it comes to 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 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, but it is so powerful because no one forgets the people who move them in to Syracuse. You know what I mean? That's why. A T" jus thei

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 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 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: