

Aragon Interview Transcript

[00:03] *Ashleigh:* Today is April 12, 2018, and I am here with Maria Aragon, who is a student here at the University of Maryland. They are being interviewed by Ashleigh Coren, and we are in the LGBTQ Equity Office, or Equity Center, excuse me. So to start off, tell me a bit about yourself.

[00:25] *Maria:* So I am a first year transfer student, this is my first year at UMD. Um, I'm an English and film major, with a certificate in Latin American studies student. Um, I really like writing, that's why I decided to start my own group with the **Equity Center** called **Reading Rainbow**. So it's a reading, writing, film, kind of group for students and I kind of made it so that the queer community on campus can have a space where they can express creativity and kind of have the education that they really wouldn't have otherwise. I think a lot of students don't really get exposed to queer literature, queer movies, queer culture that much, and so this is just a space for that essentially.

[1:22] *Ashleigh:* Can you talk a little more about the foundation of this group, and sort of when it happened and how it came about?

[1:29] *Maria:* So, I, again, this is my first year here. So I transferred here in August, and I sort of went to the **English department** and I was like I'd really like to start a queer book club, and they were more than supportive in helping me create that and giving me kind of like a path on how to do that, how to get **SGA** recognized, um, and how to get money from the English department. Then, I actually like sent an email to my film class one day saying 'oh I would really love to see you guys come to a meeting, and it turned out that my professor was really interested in that, and also wanted the film studies department to be, you know, sponsoring this kind of club, and what we do. And so it kind of became an English and film department kind of thing, and then I finally sort of met the people here at the **Equity Center**, and they were more than helpful in guiding me with sort of like the material I want to read, what kind of audience I was going for, what my meetings would look like, and what, the more support I can get. And honestly it's been great from there, I've just, I've had my meetings here at the **Equity Center** every week, I've had people come, which is great, cause this is like the first semester that I actually did this. And it's really awesome to have the support from all these different organizations on campus.

[2:57] *Ashleigh:* So you mentioned that you are a transfer student, correct?

[3:00] *Maria:* Yes.

[3:01] *Ashleigh:* So what brought you to the University of Maryland?

[3:04] *Maria:* Well, my brother actually went here, so it sort of runs in the family. When I first, I'm from **Montgomery County, Maryland**, and when I first was applying to colleges, I was like oh I

don't wanna go to University of Maryland, that's where my brother went, I wanna go away, I wanna go to New York, and I had like the dream that every artsy senior kinda has, about living their best life in New York. And then, you know, just the reality of life happened.

[3:32] *Maria*: I ended up in a school, in a small private school in Virginia, called **Marymount University**, and I had a good experience there but I did, I took one gender and sexuality class, and we had to do the **Vagina Monologues**, which was really great, a great experience for me, but we received a lot of backlash from the administration, because half the administration was actually like, clergy people, so it was like the priest and the archbishop and all that and it was the first year they were having the **Vagina Monologues**, and they took us off, they didn't allow us to have the theater, they didn't allow us to publicize it, and it was just like, it was really frustrating, to see that our, we weren't even a student organization we were just a class, and we weren't allowed to have that freedom of expression. And that to me was like the final, kinda say like, well maybe I should branch out and go to a larger institution that hopefully is more diverse in thought, and gives students a little more freedom to do what they believe in, you know I immediately got that vibe from University of Maryland, and now I'm here

[4:50] *Ashleigh*: So what is your definition of community?

[4:52] *Maria*: Community to me is something that is rooted in diversity. I think it's acceptance of diversity, but not only acceptance, but pure love for how different we all are, and how much we can contribute together, instead of making it something that's divisive. Um, so community to me is just a group of people who uplift each other, and help one another in hard times, and somewhere where we know we can count on each other.

[5:28] *Ashleigh*: So what was your first contact with the UMD LGBTQ community, and, sort of, what was the nature of that contact?

[5:35] *Maria*: Well I had first gone to a **training that the Equity Center did on pronouns**, and that was really helpful to me, cause it was actually like a lot of different staff on campus, like **Reslife, Stamp**, um, some teachers and departments came, just to learn about pronouns. And that to me felt like kind of like an affirmation of like, people actually care about the LGBTQ community, but it wasn't until I got chosen to go to **Creating Change Conference**, through **MICA**. They gave me the opportunity to go to a national LGBTQ task force conference here in DC, and that, I mean that gave me the whole community in like 3 days, which was awesome. But I also got to be much more closer to actual students who identified as LGBTQ here at UMD who weren't even, like, some of them were part of **Pride Alliance**, but others were just regular students, and that to me felt like the first time where I actually made contact with people from my community.

[6:45] *Ashleigh*: So you haven't been here for very long, but have you sort of witnessed any challenges in regards to supporting the LGBTQ community here on campus, or have participated in anything in respect to this community at the University of Maryland?

[7:06] *Maria*: I will say that our LGBTQ community is very **intersectional**, in terms of, you know, our sexuality and our gender expression is a part of our identity but it isn't all of that. And so there are students here who may identify as LGBT, and are outcasted because they're **undocumented**. Or, they're LGBT, and they're outcasted because they're in **STEM** and they don't really have an LGBT community there, and likewise. And so it kind of adds onto another layer of what are the institutional issues here at the University of Maryland right? What are we upholding? Cause the university can say that **they are top in the nation of being tolerant** or being supportive of LGBT communities. But if they're also not supporting other communities, in race, disability, or political issues, then they're not helping our community, cause our community is about intersectionality, it's about uplifting each other, um, in divisive times, it's about everything that makes us who we are. It's not just your sexuality, so for example, **Pride Alliance** a couple days ago did a **Justice for Palestine event**, and they received a lot of threats from a lot of other student organizations on campus, and I believe that LGBTQ people of color face more backlash than any other community, because they're the ones who not only have to face the issues of their sexuality, but also the issues of their race, of, you know, their class status, of what that means here at the institution, whether they're actually valued or not, and their voices are being heard. So that to me is a big issue.

[9:07] *Ashleigh*: So what other organizations or groups do you belong to on campus, and why did you decide to join these groups?

[9:17] *Maria*: I'm technically a part of **Pride Alliance**, and the reason why I joined it, well, was because, mainly because, a lot of my friends are in there, and it's a lot of people I can be comfortable with, and have really fruitful conversations. Um, so I am a part of the **True Colors of Maryland student group**, and what I really like about them is that, you know, we get to talk about our sexuality, but we also get to talk about how our sexuality is, you know, not talked about in our own communities. So like in the Latinx community, you know, being gay, being transgender, being genderqueer, it's a complete taboo. You don't talk about it. And so, it's nice to have those spaces. To have just conversations and support.

[10:12] *Maria*: I'm also a part of the **Art History Club**, and that's just fun to me because they do a lot of different activities with, just displaying different views on art, and they do a lot of community service, which is like two of my favorite things.

[10:35] *Ashleigh*: So were there organizations that you thought about joining, but decided not to, and why?

[10:41] *Maria*: Yeah, so originally my club was supposed to be a part of the English undergrad association, but when I tried to plan an event with them, they kind of threw away all of my ideas away and decided that they were gonna just micromanage the entire event, even though it was an event for LGBTQ women writers, and all of them are straight. So it just felt like I was being shut out of the process, I was being silenced, I wasn't allowed to have my say, and that to me felt very patronizing, as if I didn't get to have a voice in the event, I mean that's the whole point of co-sponsoring, is that you're bouncing off ideas, not just completely shutting someone else's

down. And it hurt a little more that it was a straight white woman, I will say. Um, yeah. That's my biggest one.

[11:40] *Ashleigh*: This is related, so in regards to LGBTQ civil rights on campus, what challenges do we still have, and what things, are the things that still need to get done?

[11:50] *Maria*: I mean definitely pronouns has to be a bigger thing, I have yet to meet a teacher, or I mean a professor, who has asked me my pronouns. I have yet to meet a teacher who teaches gender and sexuality or feminism issues, and explicitly says like 'I may not be a part of this community but' just you know that little content warning is very important because if you're not part of the community you're not gonna have the first hand experience of what it's like, so if you're teaching something about that, then you need to acknowledge that and make that clear from day 1. In my opinion. Um, something else is just the blatant erasure of like trans people on campus, I mean there is no spaces for them, I mean there's no spaces for them. There's no spaces for them to be who they are. I mean the **Equity Center** does a great job, but the **Equity Center** is not getting that much funding, and the school gets a lot of money and we have to ask where is that money going, is that going back to the students or is that going back to the people who have the big titles? So that to me is the biggest one, we need to, if we're going to support the LGBTQ community, and say that we're a school that is very progressive, then we need to show that with financial receipts. They need to see the support with numbers, not just saying something.

[13:23] *Ashleigh*: So in a few years you'll graduate, and you'll be off to do wonderful things. What do you want future UMD students to understand about being LGBTQ on campus right now?

[13:33] *Maria*: I would say that, you know, it's not easy, you're not gonna find people who are just openly out, and are completely proud about it, like the movies are, it's not like that at all. You're gonna find yourself in a wave of straight people and say well, where is someone like me? And just know that the **Equity Center** is here for you, the people here are amazing. And remember to self care, like we're in a big institution that does not really care about us, they say they do but they don't show it. So care for yourself however you can, and make sure your voice is being heard. It may be scary, but if you have opinions that differ, like, a professor's or something, don't be afraid to express it, like your voice matters, it's not, you're not small just because you're just a student, you have an opinion and its worthy.

[14:32] *Ashleigh*: So I'm actually gonna ask you a couple supplemental questions if that's alright?

[14:36] *Maria*: Yes.

[14:38] *Ashleigh*: So has activism been a part of your story here at University of Maryland, and what has that experience been like? You mentioned there was an event not too long ago.

[14:48] *Maria*: Yeah, I mean it wasn't something I had really planned, I never really planned to be an activist, but for me, my club **Reading Rainbow** has really shown me how activism can work through art, and words, and I really like to spread that around, because I think all of these events that are very bold and say something that like make a statement against the campus is very necessary, but it can be very taxing, and tolling to have to deal with the backlash of that, so just small steps, although they may seem like it's not enough, you are making progress. And it's hard at UMD, it's hard to be an activist when you're surrounded by people who just seem like they just don't care, but there's a group of people who care, you just have to find them, you just have to put yourself out there, but they're there.

[15:43] *Ashleigh*: So what impact has being out had on your social or professional life here at the University of Maryland?

[15:51] *Maria*: You know, I thought it would make things easier, but for some reason it just keeps bringing me more hurt. For some reason, I just feel like people don't take me seriously when I say that I identify as genderqueer, or they don't understand it and don't want to understand it, they, you know, being pansexual is really hard when people, when I have a male identified boyfriend, and people will lump me as a straight person, and it's very, it's hurtful, it's taxing on my mental health, and it's not easy, I think I underestimate how much it, like, actually has an impact on my mental health, and it's something I think we don't really talk about enough.

[16:45] *Ashleigh*: Well, it seems like you are very passionate about what it is that you're studying here at the university. Could you talk a little bit more about that, and sort of the major that you are either thinking about, or have declared, and sort of why did you choose it?

[16:56] *Maria*: So I was, I knew I wanted to do film for a fact, because I think that marginalized voices need to be seen on screen, because that has a huge impact on how people think, but I knew I also wanted to be a writer. And so juggling those two is very fun in my opinion cause they're often very intersectional. But in the English department, there isn't enough requirements for having LGBT writers or people of color writers, there's only one requirement that you need to do, and it's not hard. Yet there's 4 requirements of white people writing pre 1800, and it's just, it's annoying, and, but that's why I chose Latin American studies, because it reflects my culture, and my heritage, and I get to do really cool research on queer lives in Latin America. And now, I finally feel like all of the different like study paths I'm on finally make sense, but I wish I didn't have to take 2 majors and a certificate so I can be learning what I'm learning, you know. It's, the film studies does not have enough LGBTQ studies implemented in it, or Latin American studies into it, and the same goes for English. So it's just, it's really tiring, for me, to have to do all of this. But it is something that I'm passionate about, because I do wanna strengthen my writing, so I can get a voice to be out there.

[18:42] *Ashleigh*: So I have one final question. You mentioned earlier that you're local, so you're from Maryland, **Montgomery County**, you talked a little about it earlier. Could you talk a little bit more about someone who's from the state, and who is here, and the experience that you're

having, being someone who is both a part of this community, because you're from here, but not necessarily a part of the community at the same time. Does that make sense?

[19:02] *Maria*: Yeah, so I only recently came out when I got to college. And so I was in the closet for most of my time growing up, and something about **Montgomery County** just never made me feel like it was safe enough to do that. First of all because it's very suburban, it's very family centered, and by family I mean like the whole nuclear family, the man, woman, 2 kids and that's it. And the dog and the Porsche. But that's Montgomery County, so I never thought I, I always thought that this was what I had to be, this is what I need to aspire for, I need a house, I need a husband, I need 2 kids and I need a dog. That's always what I thought I needed, because that's all I was surrounded by. And luckily, I grew up with a best friend from first grade to, we're best friends now, and he came out in middle school, and that to me was huge, because I finally made a friend who was like me, and we became best friends in terms of like, we knew who we are, and how we were different from other people, but we were able to affirm to each other that it's okay. And I only got to expand that when I came to Maryland, which is amazing for me, and a new experience that I never got to have, growing up in Maryland, so it's nice to be in College Park and to be a part of this huge campus, even there are their problems, I can be so, I am so grateful for the community I've made.

[20:40] *Ashleigh*: Do you have any last comments about your experience at the University of Maryland that you'd like to share?

[20:48] *Maria*: I mean I just hope that future students don't have to deal with the backlash that we have to deal with often, and I hope that there's only more opportunities for the LGBT studies certificate to actually grow into an actual major, I hope that the **Equity Center** gets more money, I hope they get more funding to be able to hold more space, you know more comfort for the LGBTQ community on campus, and I hope that the climate just changes in general. You know, I think something that we often forget that the idea of being queer is to be against all societal norms, and the biggest one is the institutionalized capitalism. And that's something that University of Maryland has, it's a huge institution that makes money, it's not just a school. So being queer is being a part of the resistance. And I hope that resistance just grows over time.

[21:53] *Ashleigh*: Well thank you so much Maria, thank you for taking the time to speak with me this afternoon, and contributing to the University Archives, your story will now be a part of the legacy of the University of Maryland. So thank you.