

[00:01] *Ashleigh*: Today is April 25, 2018 and I'm here with Michael Pensabene who is a student here at the University of Maryland and they are being interviewed by Ashleigh Coren and we are at Special Collections and University Archives. So Michael, tell us a bit about yourself.

[00:16] *Michael*: Ok, I am a second-semester senior here, I've been here all four years. I have he/him/his pronouns and I'm a **Hearing and Speech Sciences** major soon to be a graduate student in the **Speech Pathology program** here at Maryland as well. I've loved it here.

[00:39] *Ashleigh*: So what brought you to the University of Maryland?

[00:40] *Michael*: Good question! I visited here when I was a junior [in high school] and I loved the look of the campus. I didn't really know much else about it other than it was a huge university and I figured, ok I can do whatever I want here. I'm sure I can meet a bunch of different types of people here. It's not like my small town where everyone is white and upper middle class. I can actually kind of enter the world of human beings, which was exciting for me. And I really just thought the campus was beautiful and I could spread my wings here.

[01:09] *Ashleigh*: What is your definition of community?

[01:12] *Michael*: That's a tough question because community means a lot of different things to me depending on the community that I'm a part of. My family is a community that I'm a part of and they're huge and it's very very close knit. That could be generalized to the other communities I'm a part of. The LGBT community that I'm a part of is a lot larger and I don't see them like I see my family all the time and I know that they're in my community. But the LGBT community is something that I don't see but I can feel it in a way. That might sound corny but it's true. I know that I'm part of this larger being of people and it makes me feel like I'm in a place. I think before I found the LGBT community, I was always in it secretly, but when I came out, when I realized I was actually a part of this community and I felt like I was actually a part of this community and I felt like I could engage with it it was just very freeing to put myself somewhere where I belonged. So it's a place where you can belong.

[02:15] *Ashleigh*: Can you talk a little bit more about your first contact with the LGBT community here at University of Maryland? What was the nature of that contact?

[02:22] *Michael*: So I was very proactive in my contact with the community. I know that a lot of LGBTQ+ people on campus aren't as proactive as I have been and they haven't been able to find the resources that I found and the people that I found. But the way I started my involvement was actually through the **Scholars Program**. I co-founded a club through that which was basically centered around queer students in Scholars getting to share their opinions and talk about current events in the LGBTQ+ community. At the time I wasn't out so I was in it but I was an ally. So I founded this club and then next semester I took **LGBT 200**, the basic course. I loved that class and that was the beginning of my being in this community.

[03:31] *Ashleigh*: So what changes have you witnessed or participated in with respect to this community at University of Maryland?

[03:37] *Michael*: I've seen a lot of changes here, fortunately. Freshman year I have to admit I wasn't as much a part of the community as I would have liked to be. So what I heard about it was that it was scarce, not as inclusive as people had hoped. That was the reason we made this club because people needed an outlet and they couldn't find the resources. So that second semester of my freshman year I got to be on some panels. I was on this fish bowl panel with advisors from **ResLife**, **Scholars**, and **Honors**, so all these adults were sitting around a circle of freshman and sophomores who were giving their opinion on stuff and we got to express our concerns about campus and mostly it was pronoun usage in classes and professors not really knowing what that means and how detrimental that is to the LGBTQ+ community, queer and trans people, I mean cis and trans people alike. It was really important that they knew what pronouns were and that people didn't shy away from these conversations because I think a lot of the time when people don't really know or understand concepts in the queer community they tend to get defensive or back away from it. So being able to say you need to know about pronouns or talk about them or introduce yourself with your pronouns or put them in your email signature. Being able to say that was really cool. I liked that change a lot and now I've noticed it a lot more in other classes that aren't even LGBT related. I think I noticed it in an English class and I was so excited that a teacher said their pronouns in class. And that's kind of rare so I think that's a slow change that's happening. And I know that this month is pride month, which is exciting. This year it's a trans initiative. We've always had this LGBT movement with these rainbow turtles but this year specifically there's been a **transUMD** initiative and there's a trans flag colored turtle and it's kind of branching out. I know that trans issues aren't discussed because that gets a lot of people who don't really know the topic to be very unsettled so it's cool that our university is actually starting to talk about it and I feel like that's a huge step in the right direction.

[6:00] *Ashleigh*: So what organizations or groups do you belong to and why did you decide to join?

[6:05] *Michael*: I founded that club. It was called **Cambridge Community Queers and Allies**, we shortened it to **Queer Talks**. Founding that was really important to my queer journey and coming out. I felt really empowered by that and that gave me the platform to branch out into the outer campus and not just in that Scholars community. I went to some **MICA** talks and I liked that a lot and then I got involved with the **Lavender Leadership Honor Society**. I'm now the president of that. It's an honor society for queer people and it's the only one on campus so I felt so good about joining this and being able to be a member and then become the president. I've been the president for two years now so that's been incredibly rewarding. I've also gotten to see all these other programs happen and these organizations that are kind of underneath the umbrella of UMD through it and that's been amazing. There's **Bisexual of Maryland**...I won't list them all but just being able to see my friends taking part and I've visited those too and it's been great. But the ones that I've been a part of like Queer Talks and Lavender Leadership and there was another one but I'm forgetting. But yeah, they've been great and just being able to talk

about these issues. I think the reason that I like them so much is because they're the only place where I can talk about certain things. Queer Talks was all about current events and current issues and being able to understand terms in the community that most people wouldn't know. If you just said "oh I'm pansexual" a lot of people don't know what that means. Being able to talk those things through with people that are like-minded and won't judge you for them or take offense or be on the defensive about it. Unfortunately it's rare because these topics are taboo to some people, not to me, not anymore anyway. I think those spaces have been crucial for me being part of the LGBT community on campus and that's why I was drawn to them.

[08:05] *Ashleigh*: Have you noticed that a lot of these spaces that have come up are mostly created by people who are a part of those spaces? For instance, do you see support for people who are not a part of the community developing safe spaces for the LGBT community?

[08:25] *Michael*: Like allies?

[08:26] *Ashleigh*: Yes.

[08:27] *Michael*: I have, for example I was in the **Speakers Bureau** which is where LGBTQ+ and allied students will go into classes and educate people about terms, like in **UNIV 100** classes. A lot of people in that class were allies and the reason that they were in that class was to start the charge of getting people in the know and getting straight people and other people who don't know terms to know stuff. The reason that they were a part of this, yes it was because they were allies and they appreciated the LGBTQ+ community and actually understood us. I'm not trying to differentiate cis and trans and straight and gay people, but the reason that they were so involved was also because they had a connection and that took the form of someone's brother or someone's cousin or best friend. I think that it's so important, at least from what I've observed, I haven't noticed an ally who doesn't feel some kind of deep connection with a person in the community. I think it's important that they do it. I mean there's queer people everywhere so it's not unlikely that they would be connected. But I haven't seen an ally just starting a queer group just because they're an ally. They seem to always have a connection which I think is really important.

[09:51] *Ashleigh*: This is a bit related, but in regards to civil rights at UMD, particularly for the LGBTQ community, what challenges do we still have and what things still need to get done?

[10:03] *Michael*: This is could be a long one. So, civil rights at UMD I can talk about not just the LGBTQ community. It's really problematic I think. But specifically with the queer community here I think it's not something that is talked about enough. I know that president Loh brings out his nice statements every now and then when things occurs on campus and there are silences and walk-outs every now and then. Those feel very powerful, being a part of that is great, but I feel like a lot more needs to be done administratively to make a change. For example, I worked for ResLife for two years and I had an RA who seemed be very jovial and welcoming and inclusive. Within days of being in the residence hall when I first started working, he asked me out. Not on a date, I thought it was a date, but it turned out that he was trying to convert me to Christianity

because he knew that I was gay. Yeah, because I was clearly gay. He told me I could find god and that he knew a lot of friends that have same-sex attraction but they're working to fix it. Yeah. And it was very interesting that an RA, someone who is meant to be this inclusive being and someone you can feel very safe with, you're living in a space with this person. And immediately I was shut off to this person and they told me I was suffering from SSA which is same-sex attraction. I was *suffering* from same-sex attraction, I wasn't just living my life.

That was really tough and there was a lot of other stuff that year where my sexuality was just tokenized and made the butt of a joke in so many different instances. This RA also didn't believe in transgender people. He thought being trans wasn't real and didn't believe in people who weren't cis. So that was a thing where I had to educate this person, but to an extent they still weren't receiving the knowledge. I went to the head of ResLife about this and she asked me what she could do and beyond hiring people that actually respect all human beings, I didn't know what else to say. There was an incident where this RA, there have actually been several RAs doing this, but this RA posted an article on their facebook that described gay men specifically as being pedophiles and into bestiality, saying that being gay was against the bible and everything you should live for and all these horrible things on his public Facebook where he had residents that were following him. Some residents even liked this post. It got some traction which was really horrible. So I talked to the resident director of this hall that I lived in and she basically kind of shut me down and said "should we give this RA a slap on the wrist?" and I told her, if he had posted a white supremacist article about how Muslim people should leave our country this would be a different conversation that we're having. She said verbatim: you think that race and religion issues should be the same as LGBTQ issues and taken the same way. And I said yes and I didn't know what else to say.

That's my personal experience but it was one of the most shocking things I had ever encountered. I was freshly out and I didn't really know how to handle the situation so I kind of just took what she said and got up and left. So, in summation just to clear up that whole story I think that Resident Life is specifically where a lot of things could be different. I know that they've been great to some people. Like I know that some people who are trans have gotten room accommodations for being trans and mixed gender housing has been great. I just think that those people who are working in those places need to be educated on everyone that could be living there. It's not enough just to censor yourself and not post things on facebook or not say certain things. You need to have that human decency to understand your residents and people as a whole, not just fake it til you make it. So that was something that I've definitely encountered that I think the University can improve on. I think the classes here are great and I think the LGBTQ+ curriculum is amazing. I would love more of it, obviously, but for now I'm really impressed with what they've done. I think they're talking about moving it from Women's Studies to their own studies which I think would be great. That's important. And I also know that African American Studies is under that as well which I think should also be its own thing. Those are my personal experiences with how UMD has been with the queer community and I think they can definitely do better

[15:15] *Ashleigh*: Can you talk a little bit more about, it sounds like you're doing a lot of the work yourself in terms of educating people and making other people feel safe. Can you talk about the impact having to play that role has had on your life?

[15:30] *Michael*: Absolutely. I will say that the Speakers Bureau is great for teaching people and I was a part of that but other people have also taught. I say that and that's the only thing I think where other people are being able to teach about the LGBTQ+ community. Other than that there's not really a vehicle where everyone can learn just terms and everything. So me personally having to teach people has been in some instances very freeing and a bit exciting. Like when I was learning terms I was excited to share them and be like, well people don't use the term homosexual anymore and things are changing. So that was great. But I think when it becomes exhaustive and you have to keep reminding people, these are what pronouns are, please understand them. Having to remind people what terms mean is very exhausting. It's also not my job to educate people, so when I feel like doing it that's great, but I feel like I need to constantly say gay people are cool, gay people deserve rights, whatever. I don't think I need to keep doing that. Especially with those certain people. Like my RA, I think I was forced to only because I kept seeing him and I lived in that same building. But that was a special instance. I think getting to teaching people can be a gift when you want to and I think it's very exciting when I get to talk with professors who I really enjoy and who are very accepting and willing to learn. That's great, but when there are people who need to be educated but aren't willing to get that knowledge that has been a huge struggle and it's so exhausting. It's unfortunate to have to do that in a collegiate setting, like you would think that people would already know or at least in their UNIV 100 classes or whatever be taught something about the queer community. It's just sometimes disappointing to have to teach people when you think they should already know.

[17:26] *Ashleigh*: I want to switch gears a little bit. Would you mind talking about your major and why you chose it?

[17:31] *Michael*: Surely! Hearing and Speech Sciences. I chose that because I came in undecided and I knew I wanted to be a teacher or help people in some way and I really could not land on anything. A lot of people in my family are speech pathologists and I had seen this major and I wanted to feel it out. I took one linguistics class and realized it was incredible. I would get to help people and also I love language. I love talking and communicating and in my family language is everything, so being able to help people with that sounded perfect.

[18:03] *Ashleigh*: What do you see yourself doing?

[18:05] *Michael*: Well, I'm going to grad school for this, for speech pathology specifically, so I will be giving speech therapy to different populations. The population I'm most interested in right now would be the transgender community and working with transgender voice therapy. It's typically with trans women working to feminize their voice a little more and make their voices match the way they feel and who they are. I think that being able to do that work and see people that I know and a community that I identify with in some way and helping them would be the best thing ever.

[18:46] *Ashleigh*: Would you mind talking a little bit about your social life here at University of Maryland? How has being out affected your social life here?

[18:54] *Michael*: Not as much. In a good way. I came out second semester of my freshman year and to be honest it made my social life expand in the best way. When I wasn't out I was much more reserved, much faker to be honest. I wasn't really myself and I made friends with people initially just to make friends, because that's what you do when you're a freshman. You talk to everyone, you make all the friends that you can so when you don't like people you can get rid of them and it's fine. But when I came out I kind of found out who my friends were. I didn't actually end up losing many people and if I did I didn't even feel it, it was just dead weight. But coming out helped me find out the people who actually respected me for me and not just my straightness or lack thereof. I got to find people in the community through being gay and searching for those opportunities. So yeah, my social life blew up in a really good way. Coming out to people and them saying, "ok so...and?" That sounds terrible but that's just the best reaction now that I could think of when people are like "mhm, I heard you you're dating a guy. Stop saying it." It's just the best. Yeah. I have a lot of friends.

[20:12] *Ashleigh*: You talked briefly about this, but has activism been a part of your story here as a student?

[20:18] *Michael*: I would like to think so, but definitely not as much as I wish it was. I think that activism on campus, especially for the queer community is not very large. A lot of the activism is pushed to D.C. or elsewhere. I think activism on campus is in a different direction, which is very impertinent. But my activism has extended only in educating others. I think that grassroots, kind of one-on-one is where I thrive, but definitely not on a larger scale.

[20:52] *Ashleigh*: This is actually the final question. What would you want future UMD students to understand about being LGBTQ+ on campus right now?

[21:00] *Michael*: We are accepting. I know there are always people that won't be, but it's not hard to find the people that will accept you, especially in this place that is huge and so liberal. Don't be afraid. This campus has given me everything in terms of coming out and being myself and letting me explore all these options with the community. Just finding a bunch of like-minded, cool queer people -- or not like minded, that's even better. I think people need to understand just as this campus is accepting there are still those drawbacks and those moments where [snaps] professors won't know pronouns or, I'm not going to generalize to frat people but I've been screamed names on the street for having my hair dyed or holding my boyfriend's hand. Those things still happen but this place is kind of a bubble for acceptance and it's great, and then stepping off campus is a different story. But UMD is getting better, it really is. It's on it's way. It's not where it needs to be, but it's I think it's consciously working to get there. So I think that's really important.

[22:28] *Ashleigh*: Is there anything else you'd like to talk about? Anything memorable? Anything shocking?

[22:33] *Michael*: Well, a lot of shocking things....Memorable....Well, I have a lot of personal stories obviously, but let me think. I think for me it was very coincidental that a lot of my advisors and professors that I had run into when I was a freshman were in the queer community and that really helped me. Seeing these professional people living their lives, which sounds so strange, but these professional queer people being gay but also having these high, professional, amazing jobs and living their lives was so important. It made me feel like I can still be this career professional in a professional setting and people won't think about the fact that I'm gay all the time. Because that's all I thought about at the time.

This campus has just been so....A mixed bag, mostly positive. But being screamed names on the street and in the north campus community for having my hair dyed was definitely a moment of just pure...I didn't know people still said those things or screamed from cars anymore. At **Bentley's** one night me and my boyfriend were heckled by some people, who could have been townies, but we had to leave because it was that bad.

I say all the bad things because that's what comes up but this campus has really been, at least for me, great. I say this with a grain of salt because I'm a white, cisgendered male, so being gay isn't hard for me as much as it is for other people. And I wouldn't say UMD really favors cis, white men who are gay in the community because I think the LGBTQ+ community here is very diverse. I can't talk on other experiences, but I have been very fortunate.

[24:30] *Ashleigh*: Well thank you so much Michael, for taking the time to speak with me this afternoon, and also thank you for your contribution to University Archives.