

[00:02] *Ashleigh: Today is April 19 2018 and I am interviewing Clarissa Corey-Bey who is a student here at the University of Maryland and they are being interviewed by Ashleigh Coren and we are in the LGBTQ Equity Center*

[00:14] *Ashleigh: Alright let's start, uh, tell me a bit about yourself*

[00:19] Clarissa: Well, my name is Clarissa Corey-Bey. Right now I'm 21 years old. I'm gonna be 22 in September. I'm a Virgo [laughs]. That's always pertinent to me to share when I say my birthday. I do think it says some things about my personality. I am a tall, big black person, I am gender non-conforming, I have a passion and zest for life and my education. I'm a native of **Prince George's County** where this institution is located, although it doesn't really reflect the culture of this place where I'm so proud to be from. So yeah that's a bit about me.

[1:04] *Ashleigh: Alright, so what brought you to the University of Maryland?*

[1:07] Clarissa: University of Maryland is kind of my back yard, in a sense. I've been around this University my entire life. I used to go to spy camp here when I was a kid. I remember before they moved **The Dairy** into **Stamp** because we used to walk over there and get ice cream. My parents would bring me to **Maryland Day**. University of Maryland has always been a part of my life in a strange way. And coming here seemed like an obvious choice now but at the time I was applying to a lot of schools and I had discerned for myself that I was queer in some sense of the word and that meant a lot of things. I also came from Catholic school and I was very involved high school and also very smart. I'm still smart, but I performed very well academically. So I was trying to think of options of where to go and everyone always tells you apply to Maryland: you can get in-state tuition, it's a good school, you'll be fine. Some of my other choices were other schools that were far away. I didn't want to go somewhere so close to home. But after a time I realized that this would be a good fit for me to stay close to my home, close to a space that I know very well. I also felt like I could be happy here and find community here as far as my sexual orientation which I knew at the time and my gender identity which I was still coming to know more at the time.

[2:28] *Ashleigh: So what is your definition of community?*

[2:52] Clarissa: I would want to acknowledge that community is what we say or assume when people share things that they have. So, if I'm speaking to another person who's black then I'm in community with them. If there are other people who are on the LGBTQ spectrum then I'm in community with them. I go to school here with a lot of other Terps so we're in a community of Terrapins, because we share that status. But I think that disregards the very intentional work that goes into community and that's about not only having affinity with people, but fostering connections and relationships that honor who you are as a person and the process of growth that you're in. So I think community is a word that relies on affinity a lot which I think is definitely important to community, I don't find myself in community with people who I wouldn't say I have affinity with very often. A lot of time I would say folks leave it to that and that is where

community fails a lot, I think, is when we disregard the intentional work of sharing space and engaging in care with folks.

[4:07] *Ashleigh: So what was your first contact with the LGBT community here at the University of Maryland and what was the nature of that contact?*

[4:13] Clarissa: I had a friend who went here and they are a queer student. We went to the same high school and we were very close. They knew me before I even knew I was queer and it was really funny. They're someone who very much knows the process I've gone through of coming to accept myself. I like went through my phases of thinking, "well god says this." I've gone through a lot of deep emotional tension and trauma around coming to know my identity. They were here and very involved in the community and I remember when I first came here for accepted students day I was afraid to even go talk to the LGBTQ table. But even seeing that there was a table there, that there was a student there who was giving resources, understood that this was a presence on this campus and a space that existed and my friend introduced me to the people who worked the table and they brought me to **the equity center**. I was even afraid to go into the **equity center** because I didn't want someone to see me or take my picture -- like that would happen on this campus -- but that was my fear at the time. I thought, Maryland has a equity center and this is a space with a whole bunch of gay books and rainbow flags and pride stuff all around and a bowl of condoms on the desk. Just even seeing that there was a space like that was very impactful for me.

[5:54] *Ashleigh: So are there any other organizations or groups that you belong to on campus? And why did you decide to join?*

[6:00] Clarissa: When I first came here I joined a queer fraternal organization called **Theta Pi Sigma** and I won't say I that regret my time there but I definitely think that I ended up in that space because I was looking for community. I was looking for people who were LGBTQ identified who I shared things with and to have sort of a source of support and fulfillment, to have those kinds of care established. So, I ended up joining this group which is not *really* University recognized, but it is affiliated with our University because it is made up of students who go here. This is the University of Maryland chapter of the organization. The lack of institutional support, especially from older staff or faculty or student members is definitely something that at the time the space suffered from. The gaps in service or the gap in community that queer students experience here, they attempt to remedy the situation while also experiencing the effects of it and that's not always effective. So there was definitely a toxic space at times, it wasn't always a welcoming space, and it was a lot for a lack of guidance. Just a lot of young people together in a space that is very hard to be in with a lot of challenges. All of us coming together, while in the processes of growing as people without having any guide or influence. Theta Pi Sigma is definitely one of the first spaces that I was in on campus that was for queer people explicitly. I tried **the equity center small groups** first, which is kind of one of the most visible, but I just could not get past how aggressively white the space was. I would say one thing that **the equity center** and other more visible queer marketed things on campus, they do sometimes have faces, as far as they have a person of color in the space. Initially there was

that front-desk person working there and they were a black person, so I felt comfortable talking to that person about what was going on. But going to the University affiliated programming was a very culturally trying experience, to first of all feel like I had to leave my blackness behind and feel it that wasn't something that was really valued or recognized in the space. It was just another space to fight in. It wasn't a space that was actually fostering being able to get past just the affinity of gayness, but also work through some other things. Yeah those were my first involvements in spaces on campus.

[9:11] *Ashleigh: Has activism been part of your story here at the University of Maryland?*

[9:14] Clarissa: Absolutely. I was selected to go to the **Creating Change Conference** in Philadelphia two years ago and I also was chosen again to go to D.C. and represent University of Maryland. In general like I've always been doing activism work. I would say my work was kind of was catalyzed by **the unjust murder of Trayvon Martin** and that was definitely a flash-point across the nation and a flash-point for me Freshman year, to have white people on the same floor as me in my dorm say things like "oh, well, you know he deserved it, he shouldn't have been doing that." To have to realize there are people out here who really think like that. Like growing up in **P.G. County** where it's primarily an area of affluent black folks, we share a lot of things with each other, so to have people that I was sharing a space with...realizing that the things that I've read about, that I've heard about...experience them first-hand sort of catalyzed me and pushed me to say that I want things to be better, so here's what I'm going to do.

I would say that connects to creating change for me because that space sort of allowed me to realize that a lot of what being active is as a queer person, is a basis of just survival. Not even just survival, but excelling. So being an out, visibly like associated queer person who's black, who's big, who's gender non-conforming, and to be on campus and be in spaces, that's a form of being active. In that way I serve as a connector to a lot of people in our community. A lot of people know me, I've been on the posters for **pride month**, I've connected people to organizations, I've given talks and done community building workshops, I've worked with **Pride Alliance**, all without a real affiliation. But people here know me, and I feel like that is my greatest activeness in service to the community: coming to a place of being solid in who I am and being visible in who I am, and having that be something that can help other people in similar spaces.

[11:39] *Ashleigh: So you've been here for a while as a student, have you witnessed or noticed any changes in culture?*

[11:46] Clarissa: Kind of, yes. I would say that since **Donald Trump** has been elected to office there is this very palpable sense of tension on this campus. More than there was before. But there always has been and I'm not sure if it was just a lack of awareness. I feel like as I've spent more time being a student here I've become more grounded in this campus, so as you become more grounded, you become more attuned to the legacies of this campus. I can never separate what it means to be a black person on this campus, which is still a very tenuous and problematic and tense relationship, so adding gender non-conforming to that, adding queerness to that...as the tone of campus, I can feel how a space changes when I enter it. I can feel how people

respond to me on the level of senior staff, because they need a token, they need a black, queer, trans person on the task force to talk about what's gonna be better on campus. I see how staff treat me and treat faculty members who look like me. I've only had like three or four black professors here, in my whole time at this university. When I go pull up the tools of how people are being paid, how much less the people who actually help me, who are disproportionately black people, disproportionately queer black people, queer people of color, how they are paid dramatically less than senior administrators and staff who don't care about us at all. And I've had violent experiences with **campus police** before, stopping me because they thought I was a dude. They thought I was a man at first and then, seeing my government ID and saying, you're a female, you can go on about your business. Or not being visibly recognized as a college student on this campus sometimes if I'm wearing sweatpants cause I'm coming from the gym, now I'm not a student anymore even though I definitely I think I look like a twenty-something. I'm young, I'm supposed to be around here, there's no reason for you to be stopping *me*, I'm not the person you're looking for. But all those experiences I don't even know if I could call that a shift in tone, I think that's just my awareness of it. Because even amongst other queer black students who have come and gone, we know to tell people you need to be wary of these spaces, you need to get connected to these people. And I think it's always been that way. So, I'm not sure if that answers your question adequately.

[14:45] *Ashleigh: So I'm gonna switch gears a little bit, Clarissa. Would you mind talking a little bit more about your major and what you've chosen to study?*

[14:52] Clarissa: Now I'm an **English** major. I started out as a **Jazz Bass Performance major** and **the School of Music** is not a very supportive community, I would say. I got a full-tuition scholarship to be a music major here and it really propelled me to choose Maryland because I would be able to do something I never thought I would be able to do, to study music, something I love and invest so much of myself in. I'm still a musician, I never gave up that even though I left the major. But I would say a lot of people going into **music performance majors** have a certain background. To start, a lot of them are not black people. A lot of people have been raised around musicians their whole life. A lot of them have been playing since they were little tiny kids and that's not my experience. I picked up my instrument in the seventh grade in a public school music program. I played in the **D.C. public youth orchestra**. I just never imagined that studying music could be a possibility for me. So, going into that space and already being of a marginalized background, I needed help. I needed someone to sit down and explain to me more what that undertaking meant and looked like. I needed help with music theory because I had never taken in before and a lot of my classmates who had gone to school in **Montgomery County**, they had options for them to take those classes. I did not have access to that, so I didn't know what I was getting myself into and I definitely struggled. Not having black people around does make it harder sometimes to ask for help because I didn't know if it would be, "you're just that black kid who doesn't want to try, or you're lazy or you're not smart, you're not good enough -- why are you here, you don't belong here." Those are the passive messages that I've consumed and taken onto myself, so it's hard to extricate myself from that. I feel like it is the responsibility of the school to see and help their students with that. And there's also just a lack of flexibility and understanding in the music department as well. Maybe because

it's a smaller school perhaps, but if you do not pass a course you have to wait an entire year to take the course again. I had a full tuition scholarship but the majority of people do not have access to something like that. For them, as far as what that means for your loans, as far as who's paying for your schooling, that's an unfeasible setback. I say that it's a problem because there's other students who look exactly like me -- black, assigned female at birth -- who had to stay back a whole year. I was in class with them as a freshman because she also had some of the same experiences I had. A third person, someone else who came here from my high school got the same scholarship as me. I've been able to talk to her and help her and tutor her because I don't want her to have the same experiences. I know who to tell her, like go to him for tutoring because he will help you and he will listen to you. But going through that at the time I just eventually allowed those experiences and that feeling of isolation to push me out of the music department. Yeah that was sad. Now I'm an English major.

[18;25] *Ashleigh: So let's you talk about little bit more about that. Why English?*

[18:28] Clarissa: Because English is something I knew I could do. English is something I knew that I could get done and get out of here. The English department is marginally more diverse. **The English Department**...I mean other things I would say about music is they get to sort of feign an unawareness of current events because its very entrenched in traditionalism and history and the past, and the very specific reading of those things that by design of the institutional space that we're in leaves out the voices of people who look like me. You can sit in a class about jazz and say, well this is about black *and* white people and not be critical of the relationship and the spaces that gave us **jazz music** in order to include whoever is there. I mean, you have to be critical of that, and I feel like to be better, to be marginally better, the nature of English requires the department to do a little bit more. And are they successful at doing that? Not always, not as much as they should be. There's not enough required classes to study literature that's not by white men, to study literature that's not by white people. There's not enough teachers who are black and brown in the English department. A lot of the courses that are cross-listed for the **English Department** -- I took and **African American Studies** course that was cross-listed with English and my professor was a white man. In his class, he had a slide referring to **Frederick Douglass** as as a slave, and that...If you're a white teacher in a black class you need to name that power dynamic and say here's why I'm here, here's why I feel like I have the right to be here, and here's what this is all about, and I'm not gonna ever try to teach you your blackness. So I had to ask him, this person was an enslaved human being, likely enslaved by your ancestors, so where do you get off calling them a slave? He was never a slave, he's a person. Only to be like "oh I didn't really think about it." How am I gonna sit in a class with you if you didn't really think about it? And all of this is just always compounded by being a queer, trans person. It's just compounded. Reading works by trans people? Nah, we don't really do that. Being critical of how we consume gender identity in texts? No, not really. But slightly better, you know? In order to really be a strong department they have to at least feign an openness to people coming in and saying "I am challenging this, I am reading more into this, I am bringing this experience to the table." And even the facade of that has been a much more productive space for me to work in because if I have the fight in me and I'm not just tired because of the forces that be that determine my life in relationship to things, I can challenge and

say that, you know, the way that you approach this text is inappropriate or I want to argue for this. This is the text that I am bringing in for my research paper. I can fight a little bit more and it's technically cosigned by the nature of the department. Although like I said it's definitely inherently flawed, I would say. But it's been better and I've been more productive in the space of being an English major and still have been able to be very successful in music and continue to pursue that study on my own and in my own spaces and still be a musician.

[22:21] *Ashleigh: Do you have any other suggestions for staff, faculty, or the administration in terms of supporting the LGBTQ community here at the University of Maryland?*

[22:32] Clarissa: Oh, that's such a big question. This university has a lot of work to do and the thing that's good about us students is marginalized student groups are starting to work together more because a lot of our issues are interconnected. That's where the university kind of has a problem: is it approaches the situation in a piecemeal way. They establish some things for LGBTQ students without critically examining the intersections of what it means to be...first of all, LGBT you can break into two parts. There's people who struggle around their sexuality and there's people who struggle around their gender identity, and there's people who struggle around both -- or I won't even say struggle -- who have things that are pertinent and very salient for them around both of those things. So, even just interrogating that more and saying, ok, we have specific resources for trans students and here's what they are and here's how we institutionally support that. Maryland likes to throw things together and say, "this is for LGBT people," without being like, this is for people who have things that are salient for them around their sexuality, this is for people who have things that are salient around their gender identity, this is for people -- really and truly -- who have things that are important for both. And if you're not doing things that are important for both, then don't say that you are! Don't say that you are. Just abandon the charade that you are. Because that is confusing and that ends up sacrificing students and forcing us to be in positions to do the work for you. If you want to do things for the LGBTQ community -- and I tell students that means white -- if you want to help, give specific resources to black student spaces that are directed at LGBTQ black people, directed at LGBTQ folks of color. Make an office for it. Pay somebody a salary and don't just leave that work to just be done, if it happens or if it doesn't happen, because that is the system that is functioning under now. This university is getting so much off of exploitation of individuals like myself. I do the one-to-one work of connecting people to the spaces, that they've done. I have my own internal archive of information that I connect students to because it will save their lives. I've been connected to networks of faculty and staff who will save us and help us. But the institution is not assisting people with that work, it's not paying people for that work, it's not valuing them for that, and that is their loss because a lot of the LGBTQ students -- marginalized students of color -- are doing the most important work of getting this campus to its mission. If you want to talk about being fearless, what's being fearless is showing up on a campus after **a black man has been murdered here**, by a white supremacist. What's fearless is if **Terps for Trump** are chalking messages that say deport **DREAMers** -- when this university says that it stand with **DREAMers**, -- showing up to class if you're a **DREAMer**. You know, being one of the students out there washing the chalk away and getting your picture taken by the **Diamondback** and then getting that picked up by conservative media. That's what happened to me and my twitter got

flooded by people saying all kinds of shit about me. And that hurt me. The institutional response was: some students took to the sidewalk today to engage in fearless debate. It's just like, you can't do that. I'm calling bullshit, like, I'm calling it. You can't do that, you cannot do that and still claim to be about what you are. And at the end of the day, all of the students that I know, we're bearing the brunt of it, we really are. At minimum, to answer your questions, the University could talk to us about what we need to do and not just talk to us in the way where they just give you some lunch and and no value the work that we do. Pay us. Give us money. Yes, pay your student who give you advice and literally policy directives that you can think about within the context of your positions, to make happen. Like, we can do that for you, you just have to use your resources in a way that facilitates that.

[27:13] *Ashleigh: One final question. What would you want future students to know about what it's like to be LGBTQ at the University of Maryland in 2018? So looking back, what would you want them to know?*

[27:29] Clarissa: Maybe things appear to be better but don't you for one second believe that they are just because things are different now. In a way I will acquiesce, I will say that things are safer. People don't worry about certain things in the same way that they did, but the stress and pain of it, a lot of the times is just the same. People will still call you a faggot, people will still ask you why you're in the bathroom, for whatever reason. Your teachers don't give a shit about you sometimes. And it is because you're black, it is because you're gay, it is because you're trans, it is because when they built this institution, and as they operate this institution now, you're still not the student that they're thinking about, and your experiences are still not the ones that they're made to work with. That is still what it means to be a black LGBTQ person on this campus and I don't imagine it's changed much from the past but what I will say is that looking at the past, looking at myself presently, I am leaving this institution and I will be leaving with my degree next semester, is that we are some of the most resilient people on this planet and in this community because with everything set against us and with the lack of institutional support, we make things happen on this campus and we graduate. We go on and we help other people, we teach other students and we live. Like, we get our pictures on pride month posters, we're out here and we will continue to be and we always have been and that will never change. That will never change. In the future, in the past, even with different words, there's always been people like us and that is important to always remember that you carry those people with you. That they are alive and thriving and succeeding and that you can. And I'll be bold and say that you will. Yes.

[29:42] *Ashleigh: Alright, so we've reached the end of the interview. Is there anything else you'd like to talk about or add?*

[29:51] Clarissa: The University just needs to be held accountable. That's the largest thread in what I want to say is that the University of Maryland has a certain image that needs to be challenged, that needs to be upset, challenged by the lived experiences of students who say this is not what I expected and I am bearing the brunt of the fuckery at this University. I'm sorry was I? I don't know if I wasn't supposed to say that...word. But that's what it is, I don't know how

you can say that we're an LGBTQ focused campus or we care about our students and not care about black LGBTQ students. I don't know how we can say that we support **dreamers** and then have no support for them, I don't know how we can say we support our indigenous students and still not name that we're on stolen **Piscataway** land. I don't know how we can say we care about students and still not pay them the state minimum wage. How Maryland, how?! What are you talking about?! Be accountable! And you know what? People will give you credit if you are honest, if you say, yes we are a neo-liberal institution and this is the foundation of what we're doing. And yes, at a point people argue they exploit it, and we don't want that to happen or we can't do anything to change that, this is built into the foundation of this university, but we will try. I've had an administrator say that to me and that was the most productive conversation, I felt so validated by that. It's ok to be honest. That was my final thought. Be accountable and be honest and I would leave it at that.

[31:37] *Ashleigh: Well thank you for your time and thank you for your contribution to University Archives.*