

*Ashleigh: Today is May 15 2018 and I am interviewing Chris Eyo, who is a student at the University of Maryland. He will be interviewed by Ashleigh Coren and we are in Archives.*

*So Chris, tell us a bit about yourself*

Chris: A bit about myself. My name is Chris, I like sweet potatoes, I play the flute, I speak Spanish, I want to be a doctor, and it's really nice outside. I like when it's nice weather. I actually danced in the rain last night. It was a lot of fun. It was very rejuvenating because I had an exam at 8 o'clock and I had my thesis defense today. So when I walked out of the building last night, I walked out in the middle of a rainstorm and I went home and I went inside and I decided to go dance in the rain. So I put on a bathing suit, I got one of my friends and we just jumped around in the grass and it was a lot of fun. I just generally like to have fun, I'm very serious about school, but I think I'm at a level where I can be serious about school and I don't feel like I'm stepping on my own toes, so that leaves a little bit of breathing room and room to just enjoy myself and be adventurous. I've enjoyed school since I figured out how to balance those two.

*Ashleigh: So what brought you to University of Maryland?*

Chris: So I got a scholarship to come here and that made the decision a lot easier. My oldest sister is four years older than me, so I was starting college as she was starting grad school, and my younger sister, who is a year younger than me, was going to be in my position soon after I started college. I figured if I could graduate debt free and my sisters could go to school that would be fine with me. At first it felt like I was settling a little bit because I didn't plan to come to Maryland before the scholarship, but then once I came here and realized what the school had to offer and started taking advantage of it and realized there were other smart people here, I enjoyed it.

*Ashleigh: What is your definition of community?*

Chris: I feel part of a community when I can...I almost said something in Spanish because I think the phrase conveys it a lot better...but I feel a part of a community when I cease to feel reluctant to talk to people about issues that I'm having. For example, I live in the **Language House** on campus and I'm in the Spanish cluster. If I have something going on there are people in my cluster and in the language house that I know, even if it's 2 a.m., and I can sit down with them and we can just talk about it. And I think that in other spaces I don't feel that as much. I don't want to say that all the other spaces I'm part of are bad or I don't like them, I'm just saying in the language house that characteristic is the most salient. I like the language house a lot. I think it's a very healthy definition for a community. What's community without unity?

*Ashleigh: So what was your first contact with the UMD LGBTQ community and what was the nature of that contact?*

Chris: I'm trying to think back...I've got to go all the way back [laughs]. I didn't come out until college. Of course my freshman year I knew other LGBTQ people, but I actually came into

college in a heterosexual relationship. It was a very good relationship that ended at the beginning of my sophomore year of college. I had a really good friend in the spring of my freshman year who was a senior and he would take me to parties and just by hanging out with him is when I got the first exposure. And then after my relationship ended and I was...I don't want to say freer to explore, but just by virtue of not being in a relationship I had more freedom. Then I really started to explore my sexuality and explore what I like and what I don't like. I don't think there was a specific organization. I knew I had like the **Equity Center** and and **Office of Diversity and Inclusion**, et cetera, but I didn't know specific *things* that existed on campus. Then my junior year I moved into the language house and half the language house is LGBT, it's amazing. I think that's the first place that I was exposed to that many LGBT people in one space. I feel like I knew that many people before I lived there but they were all spread out in different areas on campus. When I went to the language house there was a gay person in my apartment and his boyfriend would come over all the time. There was another gay kid the floor beneath me, there was someone who was lesbian on the other side of the house, and then my second year of language house we had a trans woman move into our cluster. So it was always there and present which was fine. Then last semester, this was first semester of my senior year, I had [laughs] this isn't funny, but basically a racist homophobe moved into my apartment. The thing that was really jarring is that he is African American and he has dreadlocks and he was very big on how he knows what it's like to have stereotypes flung onto him. But then it was so confusing when he basically -- well not basically -- he did send an email to all 24 people in my cluster about ten weeks into the semester describing how uncomfortable he was living with me. It was so ornate, I wish I could whip out the thing right now. He said that he felt self-conscious after he took a shower, like he couldn't come back to the room. It's funny because when he said that I realized he really does put his whole school clothes on when he's still in the bathroom [laughs]. He also said he knows how a straight girl would feel living with a straight guy. He had other personality issues that didn't make me attracted to him, but even if he were nice I still wouldn't be romantically attracted to him. I tried to explain to him by virtue of there being a cloud in the sky doesn't mean it's going to rain; just because I'm living with you doesn't mean when you're coming back from the shower I'm wondering if I can sneak a peek. I think he really thinks that's how any LGBT person, not just gay people, work. I kind of went on a tangent, but my point is that it was so jarring that that's how he felt and expressed that to everyone. He said I ruined his experience at the language house. And he would still say that it was wrong for people to stereotype him, even though that's what he was doing. It was shocking because this isn't my 80-year-old white neighbor Jerry where I'd just say "go back to bed." This is my minority, millennial roommate [laughs]. So, needless to say he moved out of the language house and he's not there this semester and this semester has been fine.

But, the point of me telling you that is that I hadn't come out to my parents at that point and that experience made me feel like I should tell them, so I called them. He sent this email around 11:30 at night on a Tuesday, so I didn't call them until the next day because they were probably asleep [laughs]. I called my older sister because I knew she'd be awake and I told her. I hadn't come out to her or my younger sister either. So it's really saddening how that was my coming out experience to my parents and my family. First of all, you like to think you'll be in person when you do that and I felt bad that I did it over the phone. Then when eventually I did get to call my parents they were driving. I knew where they were and it was probably 60 miles

from our house. So I felt bad that they were on the phone driving having to listen to this. I basically came out in the context of my roommate, so when I told them about the email and how he said he felt living with a gay person, my dad asked why he would say that because it's not even true. I felt so bad because I told him it was true. I didn't cry or anything but they just got silent. They were very supportive and everything was fine, I think they were just surprised and they were also sad that was happening to their child. My dad was so cute, when I told him he asked me when I found out, like I applied for like a job or something [laughs] and I was like oh my god.

But, yeah, my contact with the LGBT community was born through that and that's when I started being more vocal. If someone made a joke about something, that's when I started to say "hey, how would you feel if I told you that I am?" I was nominated to speak at commencement. I didn't get it, but I wrote my whole speech about that entire experience because I really wanted to let people know. I generally do pretty well in school and have my academic and professional life together but people don't really think about underneath. I look at any successful person, **Bill Gates** or **Stephen Hawking**, and it makes me wonder what's going on underneath all that success that we see. So my whole goal was to make everyone aware of that. After that is when I went to my first gay bar and I cried. It was a lot.

Sorry I'm going on a diatribe, [laughs] but that's when it all kind of started, the physical contact actually started. It's great, I like the way I am, and I'm graduating, [laughs] and I have a Fulbright [laughs] so it's all good.

*[13:04] Ashleigh: So this is actually related to what you've just been talking about. As a student who has been here for four years, have you witnessed or participated in any changes surrounding the LGBTQ community here?*

Chris: Not a lot of LGBTQ community but I've done stuff with mental health advocacy. I don't know if you know about the student that was barred from housing a couple weeks ago because she had a panic attack. It's a long story that I'm not even going to get into but if you wanted to read about it it's in the **Diamondback**. Essentially, a bipolar student had a panic attack and got cleared, but before she was even cleared the University sent her a letter saying that she had to pack her bags and see a psychiatrist who the university would provide for her. They then said if she moved back out of business hours she would have to find her own alternative. People tried to tell me that there's a policy, but I think that's B.S. So I reached out to the **Psychology department** and told them that we need to put something out because we can't sit in our classes and talk about mental health and make stupid buttons and then when mental health happens we're like, "so?" Long story short is, it wasn't embarrassing, but I met with our undergraduate chair and our department chair. In the course of meeting with them one of them sent me a follow-up article from the **Office of Residential Life**, which I had neglected to read and it was embarrassing because this is exactly what I was asking, because I wanted the department to put out a statement. So in terms of advocacy that's the kind of stuff that I've been involved with. But as far as specific LGBTQIAXYZ etc, I have not been directly involved. I don't want to say that because it's been four years so there must have been at least one thing that I did. No, I think other than my personal, day-to-day advocacy....But I've never, thankfully, in my

time, other than my experience, witnessed....Even my hardcore neurobiology PI for my thesis is Chilean and he's gay and I live with people. I've had gay professors.

*Ashleigh: Can you talk a little bit more about the organizations or groups that you belong to and why you decided to join? And were there other organizations that you wanted to join but decided not to?*

Chris: I like to think that my life is divided into a science domain, a spanish domain, and a music domain, so I'll just walk down the ladder, because that's usually the easiest way to organize it all. So science: I work in a neuroscience research lab and I tutor math and chemistry with an organization called **Wise Guy**. It's essentially an online database of a bunch of tutors that teach a bunch of different academic subjects and then if students hate us they can go on the website and type in Math 101. You can charge but I do it for free because I just like to do it. I started the summer after my freshman year. I've been doing mostly calculus and general and organic chemistry and I really like that a lot.

Moving to the music domain, I'm in the **Repertoire Orchestra** here. I've been doing that since my first semester, so it's been a lot of concerts, a lot of stuff. And I'm a music minor so I'm a member of the flute studio here and that's been a lot of fun. I just had my jury yesterday. And then lastly I work in **the performing arts center**, I spend about half my time there and I'm a venue coordinator. So if you've heard of house management, that's basically what I do. If we have a dance concert or something I'm in charge of making sure that front-of-house and backstage communicate effectively; I assign and manage all the ushers and give them their tasks for the events; and if a patron has a problem that an usher cannot handle, I'm the next person up that they come to. Overall I just make sure that events run smoothly and all the patrons are happy.

And then moving to the Spanish domain, I already mentioned that I live in the language house. I'm a Spanish minor and a lot of my extracurricular work with Spanish has been stuff outside of the classroom and the country. I took a course here that had a service learning component. We went to **Hollywood**, which is one of the boroughs in College Park, and we taught elementary school students language arts and basic math skills twice a week for about an hour. It was amazing. We helped them, we did interpretations for their PTA conferences. So that was the first experience where I really sat down and I was like, this is real. The parents were asking if their kids were behaving, and you think it's inconsequential, but some of these parents can't speak English and the teachers can't speak Spanish, so we facilitated that process, which was very intimidating at first because it was a big responsibility. But at the end of the day I would just have to translate "oh he's doing good, he's very smart and friendly," stuff like that, but it was still good experience nonetheless. I did an internship the summer after my freshman year in the **Dominican Republic**; I did consulting. It was the experience that helped me become more confident in my speaking abilities because no one that I was there with besides the other interns spoke English. All of the consulting work that I was doing was in Spanish. In my home stays no one spoke English. They knew "hello" and "how are you?" but living with them, the second I walked in the door it was only Spanish and I was there for 2

months. For the whole time it was 99% Spanish, so that was a lot. When I came back I wanted to go somewhere else so I did a winter trip during my sophomore year to **El Salvador**. I taught mathematics, which was really fun. It was at a library and most of the kids were in elementary school, some were in middle school or junior high, but 75% were 6-year-olds and 7-year-olds, which was really fun. The place that I taught, there weren't calculators or fancy computer programs, so I would just go outside and grab pebbles and show them 10 pebbles minus 5, we take away 5 and how many are left, stuff like that. You just do what you got to do and that works. So all of my Spanish experience kind of culminated that way and I decided to apply for a Fulbright at the beginning of my senior year and now here I am. I'm going to be going to **Colombia** next year teaching English.

So those are the things I decided to do and there are quite a few things I decided not to do. The first is the Fencing Club because that met way too frequently. It seemed cool but there were other things I was far more invested in. I didn't want to spread myself too thin. Looking back, I could have been a really good fencer right now. I wish I had done that. The second is the **American Medical Student Association (AMSA)**. For medical school applications there are silent rules about what admissions committees like to see, for example volunteer experiences, shadowing, leadership, exposure to medicine, academic experiences, your **MCAT** scores and GPA, recent experience. It's not said that you can't apply unless you have X, Y, and Z, -- just like to get into college no one says you have to do extracurriculars -- but it's just a known fact that that's what you do. So the American Medical Student Association. First of all I don't understand why it exists because none of us are medical students. They hold a lot of events and they provide a lot of support to students in the application process who need it. I think at this school there's very much a culture of "I have to be part of this organization because it's going to look good on my medical school application." I don't want to join it because I don't need that help. They're very good if you want shadowing experience, they keep a listserv of doctors for students who want medical experience, but I can call the hospital in my hometown and be proactive about finding those opportunities. I've shadowed surgeons and cardiologists and etc. all because I did that myself. I didn't need an organization to help me do that. I have friends who are a part of it, but for me I didn't need that extra leadership or that extra help. In addition to that, the pre-medical culture at this school...I'm trying to be eloquent but honest at the same time....Some kids vex me, I'll leave it at that. This particular organization tends to take a net and round up a certain archetype of students that I think includes some people who don't approach this process in the healthiest, most supportive way. What I mean by that is, there's nothing wrong with competition, but at the end of the day we want to be doctors, we want to help people. I don't want to be part of that because I'm worried it will suck away some of my fundamental values, so I try to avoid that as much as I can and just that culture of attitudes. Because I don't think that's what this is, I don't think that's what it should be, I don't think that's what it was founded on, and I don't think that's what it should aspire to be. AMSA, for me, there are more cons than there are pros and when I'm deciding what I want to join that's always something I think about.

I was briefly in an organization called **Public Health Without Borders** my freshman year for about a semester. I just realized that I think health is for me, but health can be clinical psychology, it can be social work, it can be environmental science, it can be public health, it can be medicine, it can be sociology, it can be all these things. I got into that club because of mental

health, that's what I do I'm a psychology major, but that club planted the seed in me that I could do medicine. It put me on that path. I think public health, like health access is for me. I also think I was just a freshman and I was lazy and didn't want to come to meetings. But I think I gained from it that health was outside of mental health. Those three pretty much.

*Ashleigh: So I want to switch gears a little bit. So my next question is in regards to LGBTQIA civil rights at UMD: what challenges do we still have and what things still need to get done?*

Chris: If it's OK with you I'm gonna go in a different direction. This school needs be quicker when minorities are marginalized and when things happen that are influenced by so many different cultural factors, be it race, sexual orientation, religion, mostly race, mental health status, et cetera. One of the things that really upset me about how the university handled this particular bipolar student is comparing how this case was handled versus how cases that have to do with race are handled. I know you haven't been here that long but you may know about **the noose incident in a fraternity house**. It was shocking to me that we needed a whole investigation to determine if this was a hate crime. Considering nooses were used to kill people because they were black...I mean, one plus one is two. That always seemed so obvious to me, not just because I'm black. I thought it would seem obvious to a lot of people. What just killed me is when this student, literally less than 24 hours passed, she gets cleared at the hospital and then before anyone can even drop a pen she's kicked out of her housing. Why are we so fast to jump on this kind of stuff? But then when **Lt. Collins** was murdered people were questioning whether his murderer was a white supremacist. I don't know. I need this school to be quicker about that kind of stuff and I need more accountability when they are quick. So I know that's not specifically LGBTQ students because thankfully in my experience here I've never been subjected to -- I mean with my roommate -- but I've never been subjected to administrative or institutionalized discrimination or marginalization, thankfully. And I've never run into an encounter with any of my friends who are LGBTQ. I think that this university does a really good job of putting up initiatives and making offices and spaces and creating those kinds of environments for minority students -- minority in any part of the cultural spectrum -- however I think when something happens we kind of hiccup a lot and I think we need to put our money where our mouth is a lot more because that's kind of annoying. So TL;DR, just more sharpness when something happens and more "this is wrong and this is what we're gonna do to fix it to make sure it doesn't happen again." Because students shouldn't be getting killed on our campus because they're black. No, that's horrible. And it's so frustrating because I like to do admitted student days and parents don't ask me about that kind of stuff but I feel dissonant when I stand up there and I say "oh my god I love this school." And I do love this school because it's afforded me so many great opportunities. I will never say that Maryland is a bad school because I think it's an amazing school, but it's not perfect and I'm not going to say that it's perfect. And I always feel bad at these days because I talk about all the good stuff and then parents ask me what I don't like about it and I come up with some half assed answer about how I don't like the diner food, something stupid like that. I don't know, I don't like that black students can get killed here, I don't like that we kick bipolar students out of their homes, but I can't say that at an admitted students day. That kind of stuff I think everyone should know about but also I would prefer it to not happen in the first place.

*Ashleigh: This is actually the final question. What would you want future UMD students to know about being LGBTQ on campus right now?*

Chris: So when I look back....I don't want to say the first two years were wasted but I wasn't out during those two years and I truly think about and wonder how my life would have been different if I were out. We talk about this idea of being trapped in the closet, but closets have doors and doors open. I think it's important for students to realize that if you opened that door when you were 16 that's fine and if you don't want to open it until you're 40 that's also fine. First and foremost no one should have to feel like, if you come here, just because it's so present, you don't have to feel like you have to involve yourself in that presence. It should be something you do on your own accord when you feel comfortable and you have people around you who are going to support you. I'm very hard headed, but if I didn't have my friends around me I certainly don't think that I would have handled it as well psychologically. So I think that's important. I think that they should also know that bad things happen everywhere and even though those events that I discussed are bad, I think that if this was University of Delaware or University of Nevada...it could have happened anywhere. White supremacy is not a College Park thing. I think it's important to realize that bad things happen at good schools, so I wouldn't be scared.

I mentioned before that LGBTQ students should only immerse themselves in that presence when they feel comfortable, however at the same time I do think it's important to be proactive. I'm not saying you should take the initiative and go find gay people or go find trans people, I don't think that that's right, but I would be lying if I said that I met this guy who is gay and he's told me he's gay and he's not out but I'd be lying if I said let's go to this ? bar. So being proactive that way can only be beneficial. Be open. Anyone, heterosexual as well, just be open to new experiences with new people in general. LGBTQ or not just being open to new experiences and being open to meeting new people with new backgrounds, that's a healthy way to live.

*Ashleigh: Anything else you'd like to talk about?*

Chris: No that's it, my throat is getting dry

*Ashleigh: Well thank you for taking the time to talk to me and for contributing to the university archives*

Chris: You're very welcome