Interview Transcription

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“Information Behaviors Among LGBTQ Students at Single-Sex HBCUs”

A Research Project by
Justin de la Cruz and Amy Winfrey,
Librarians, AUC Woodruff Library

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M: So, my first question is can you please do your Spelman intro but not say your name for anonymity purposes and share with us your identity?

P: Um okay I’m a sophomore English major, Creative Writing minor, from New Orleans, Louisiana. And um I’m a transgender student on this campus and I identify as queer.

M: Beautiful, awesome, thank you so much and what perceptions of Spelman did you have prior to enrolling?

P: Um, I didn’t have a lot perceptions. I honestly did not think I would be going to Spelman, I was supposed to go to Howard. And I didn’t go to Spel-Bound or anything, but I just thought that because it was a liberal arts college it would just be a very artsy, creative, free-spirited type of place going in.

M: Of course, and have your perceptions on Spelman changed since you first enrolled?

P: Um definitely, um Spelman definitely does not—despite being a liberal arts college—focuses a lot on its STEM majors. And it's not nearly as LGBTQ inclusive as they make it sound.

M: No, it is not. And did you do any research on the LGBTQIA+ community at Spelman before you made the decision to attend?

P: Um I did. I definitely looked at student orgs because I definitely wanted there to be a pretty strong LGBTQ organization on campus before I enrolled. So I just, you know, Googled, found Afrekete and was like okay this looks legit. Um so yeah I definitely did that.
M: Perfect. And did you share what you found with other students like other people in your class or other queer individuals who you knew were coming in?

P: Uh yeah definitely, like when I met people during New Student Orientation we would like talk and you know you’re in that like weird friend stage, and I’d be like, “Hey, I’m going to this Afrekete [meeting], their first meeting of the year. I’m queer, you wanna come with me?” And they’d be like, “Oh yeah, sure!” So I got a lot of my friends into Afrekete freshman year.

M: Perfect! And so how did you meet others in the LGBTQIA+ community at Spelman, in the AUC, or outside of it?

P: Um I think that last year um Morehouse’s safe space was way more prevalent than it is this year mostly because they are changing leadership a lot this year but um there would just be a lot of—Afrekete did a lot of functions, they partner with a lot of people and they would also tell us like stuff that Clark was doing, because they hadn’t yet had a queer org. And then this year Clark did have a queer org—it’s Empty Closet—um so but once you become—once you join a queer org, you’ll meet lots of queer people who just come up to you like, “Hey, I saw you at the RSO [Registered Student Organizations] fair, I saw you at this thing, can you tell me about Afrekete? Like I’m queer.” And also, Spelman is a very small place, so you pretty much find all the gays.

M: Of course, and um did you meet people right away, would you say, or do you think it took a bit?

P: Um I’d say that I met people right away, but making friendships with those people took longer. Only because I feel like I came into college very much confident in my sexuality and my gender identity, and I feel like when you come to college for the first time, that’s really when you start to kind of figure out those things. So I became friends with a lot of upperclassmen who just had already said “I’m here, I’m queer, I don’t care.” Versus um the other people in my class who like didn’t know if they felt comfortable being out on this campus because of the stigma around it. And I just knew that I didn’t want to hide that part of my identity and I didn’t want to be around people that made me feel like I had to hide it. Um so I would say that those good meaningful friendships definitely came later.

M: Definitely. And um how do you connect socially with um people in the LGBTQIA+ community and do you think it’s different if they are in the AUC versus outside the AUC.

P: I think it’s similar in the way that social media kind of rules everything, so um connecting with people—like right now we are trying to do something where we are trying to get trans rights on this campus, and social media like Twitter is like a big thing that we’ve been using, just getting as many people to retweet us as we can and making dialogue with people. Um but I think in the AUC it’s easier because everything is kind of in walking distance. Um so if there’s any queer event happening at Morehouse, you just like walk a few blocks and you just get there. Um
but I’d say that like meetings, like formalized meetings are a really good way to get people together. Like queer orgs when they have meetings, even if they are just social meetings, that’s really how you get a lot of people. Because people like flyers, people like to look like there’s an actual event going on. But also there’s just times where um people will just put—like GroupMes are a big thing for all colleges—but people will just literally put in the Afrekefte group chat like, “Who wants to hang out today?” and like six other people are just like, “Alright, let’s go.”

M: Awesome, yeah, good stuff. And so you touched on this a little bit in what you just said but do you think social media played a factor in meeting LGBTQIA+ communities and what platforms do you are the most helpful?

P: I think for me personally I don’t use a lot of social media cause I don’t like what it does. But well I don’t like—there’s a lot about social media that just—I just don’t use it. And I’m very bad at technology, but I think that um like other people—like I’ll talk to my friends and they’ll be like, “Oh yeah, I saw that this person was on Afrekefte’s E-Board, so right before I came to SpelBound I like sent them a message and introduced myself, so like I already kinda knew people on campus.” So I think that social media allows you to meet people before face to face, which is really important because you kinda already wanna come to this place that you’re going to for the first time like kind of knowing people. Um and then it just helps a lot with like spreading the word and raising awareness in ways that, like—I feel like no one really checks their college email, especially at Spelman, because we get so many emails a day, versus people just like going on Twitter when they’re like in the caf [cafeteria], it’s like way easier to reach people.

M: And so um do you think social media impacts maybe not your experience personally but the general experience for LGBTQIA+ AUC members?

P: I think it does, I think it impacts me too. Because even if I don’t have it, like people are dropping screenshots of tweets in the group chat, or people are like, “Look at this homophobic thing somebody said on Instagram.” Um so I think that social media does impact our LGBTQ students in the AUC, um especially because this year we’ve had a lot of queer orgs start and then kind of fizzle out because it is very hard to keep a registered student organization across all three campuses. So I think that social media really helps us kind of unify, because it’s really easy to get like lost in the Spelman bubble, like the only thing that exists is what’s in these gates, but I think social media, because we’re also just really busy, it’s way easier to be like, “Hey can I retweet this to show solidarity with you?” versus, “Oh, I don’t have time to go to this meeting for it.” So I think that helps a lot.

M: Definitely. And if you were on social media, would you feel the need to be open about or share your sexuality and identity on social media? Or do you think that people do feel the need to?
P: Um I think that it’s not necessarily that people feel the need to, I think it’s just like why wouldn’t you? Because it is such a key part of your personality, and there’s no reason really to hide it. The social media I do have, I am very open and like, “Hey, I’m trans, hey I’m gay, like I’m queer.” Like just it is what it is. And I think it’s important to do that for the people who maybe don’t feel comfortable or don’t feel confident enough to be like, “Oh yeah I’m queer I’m trans, like I don’t care what you say.” So I feel like you have to lead by example. So if you’re comfortable doing it on social media, like you don’t even really know how many people see the things that you post, so you could be helping somebody and not even realizing it. And I think that’s really important to do, if you can do it.

M: Of course, and what ways do you think are the best to identify yourselves as part of the community?

P: Um I just think, you know, putting things in your bio—it helps normalize things. Like I’m a proponent of people putting things like their pronouns in their bio, because it just takes it out of trans people’s responsibility to be like, “Hey, these are my pronouns,” if everyone is doing it. So I think doing that and just, I feel like, if you’re not an activist, I would question why. And if your politics are not queer-centered and you identify as a queer individual, I would also question why. So I think um being open on social media about that and just kind of all of the things that you’re producing that show who you are, if that doesn’t have something to do with your queer identity or the impressions that you’re seeing or that are impacted by you, I would really wonder like what the goal of social media is really.

M: Of course, and okay so how do you find out about extracurricular activities?

P: Um Spelman when they send all those emails sometimes I’ll look at them, um but mostly like my friends who are just more on social media or more in tune. They’ll be like—they’ll drop it in our GroupMes—and be like, “Hey, you should come to this or you should come to that, there’s free food at this thing.” And also I just have a lot of friends—I think it’s important to have a lot of friends who all do different things. I feel like if you’re only, if you’re all just in one thing, like you’re not hearing a lot about everything that is going on. So I have friends who are in different orgs across the AUC, or are just doing different things, and they’re always like, “Hey, come to this, tell your friends.” Um so that’s how I hear about most events.

M: Awesome and do you participate in any?

P: Um yeah I do. I try to show solidarity with AUC’s Empty Closet. I try to go to their events whenever I can. I try to go to Morehouse’s Safe Space events. I try to go to—Lorde’s Dream was another queer org on this campus that has since been discontinued, but when they started up this year, um we tried to show solidarity with them. But I try to support the arts in any way I can, because Spelman does not provide a lot of funding and resources for their arts majors. Um, so
especially their music majors. So whenever they do anything I definitely try to show support for them

M: Of course and are any of the organizations you participate in LGBTQIA+ specific

P: Um yeah, so um Afrekete is our LGBTQ org, I’m in that. And then I’m also on the Sex Discrimination Student Commission, and while it’s not entirely focused on LGBTQ students, we definitely um pull heavily on providing resources for us and making sure that we feel safe on this campus.

M: Beautiful, and so do you feel like your extracurricular activities have brought you more into the sphere of the LGBTQ community on campus?

P: Oh definitely I think that um Afrekete is unique in the way that our alumnae are really loyal, so like the founders of Afrekete actually just sent me a text and were talking to me about kind of some of the things that we’ve been doing. So I uh I think that you get to know way more LGBTQ people, but I think that you also kind of realize how Spelman works and like how to get LGBTQ rights pushed through, because it is really hard. So it’s not that I met more people, it’s just that I met more of the right people.

M: Definitely, that makes sense and so you kind of mentioned this earlier but are there any inter-AUC organizations that you participate in, and how did you find out about them?

P: Um AUC Empty Closet, I’m not in it, but we—Afrekete tries to like show solidarity with them and like partner with them. Um we tried to partner with them during our pride week and things like that. Um Morehouse’s Safe Space, um Lorde’s Dream, there was another one. And we also just do a lot of stuff, like with Agnes, Agnes Scott—they’re not in the AUC, but we do stuff with their Affinity Group, um and GSU, their Affinity Group and their Gay Straight Alliance. Um so we try to connect with all of the LGBTQ orgs in, pretty much in Atlanta.

M: Oh that’s interesting, and how do you share or find information about staying safe on campus?

P: Um we find, we pull from our resources. Spelman does, especially the title IX office, they have a lot of good resources about staying safe on the campus and in the AUC, and also just outside, just in Atlanta in general. And so um we’ve uh had meetings this year that just talk about uh dating safety and like just um walking around campus and walking around Clark’s campus and things like that. And just um sexual safety. So we do a lot of like big general body meetings around that, and then if Public Safety sends a report like, “Hey crime has been happening in this area,” or if someone is like, “Hey I just got like gay bashed,” or something then we we’ll like decimate [disseminate] that information on all of our social media sites, put it in our GroupMe, and you know, give people tips, like walk in groups and carry mace and things like that.
M: Yeah, and um how would you compare your social experience at Spelman to what you perceive of the LGBTQIA+ experience at Morehouse or in other institutions of the AUC?

P: Um I think that [cell phone makes a notification sound] um, I’m sorry, I think that they are very similar experiences um in the way that you kind of have to stick together. And what I mean by that is that Spelman does not recognize how many queer people are on this campus, they don’t even recognize on our Founders’ Day that the college was started by lesbians. So when you have that level of erasure, you have to like carve out your own place, because Spelman doesn’t make one for you. So you kind of do have to stick together, which is why everyone is like, “Oh, the gay people stick together.” We do, because we have to. And I think that Morehouse, it’s something similar, because Morehouse, because of its history of just queer erasure as well and just its overt toxic masculinity that they try to promote, um queer students, gender nonconforming students, trans students have a really, really hard time over there and they face very real physical violence. So they do themselves have to band together and be a very tight group. And then we come together and we’re a very tight group all together. And the same thing with Clark’s campus. So I think that they’re all very similar. I just think that the types of violence we face is slightly different in the way that it is promoted by our institutions, but at the end of the day, we’re all discriminated against.

M: Of course. And um have you heard from Spelman alumnae?

P: Uh yeah, we have. We’ve heard a lot from general alumnae, we’ve heard from um alumna who actually started Afreke in the ’90s. So yeah we hear pretty consistently from people who just graduated, people who graduated ten years ago, who all want to come back and want to know how they can help us.

M: Awesome and what information do they usually share, or how do you guys use that information?

P: Um they usually share with us like how they have gotten initiatives passed in the past, and how they have become very visible on campus, and the different ways that they’ve gone about just making themselves visible. So like for example they were the ones that told us a few years back, “Hey you should have a pride week.” So we started having pride weeks and we started um demanding like visibility at new student orientation, and demanding that we be in the RSO fair. Um so different things like that the alumnae have told us to do, and we use that information especially now when we are trying to negotiate with the school about LGBTQ rights. Um we’re definitely taking the types of things that they’ve used in the past that have been effective and incorporating them into that.

M: Beautiful and is there any advice you would give to someone in the LGBTQ community who is thinking of coming to Spelman?
P: Um I would say um the people who are already here, the LGBTQ students who are already here are working really hard so that you can feel safe on this campus. Because as of right now, to be honest, with all of this queerphobic hate letters that have been happening we do not feel safe. Um but we are working really hard to make this place a truly inclusive space. That being said, it’s gonna be a very slow process because it’s about changing the culture of Spelman, which takes a very long time. So if you come here, you have to be prepared to educate a lot of people. And also have to deal with people who just don’t want to be educated, who just want to be hateful. That being said, if you do come here, we have a great queer community who is always watching out for our own, and you’re not alone.

M: Thank you! Is there anything else you want to talk about in terms of your experience, um finding information, your experience being queer on our campus?

P: Um, I think that if you are going to come here, I think the biggest thing is to do what you wanna do. Like whether or not you’re queer, Spelman definitely makes it seem like you have to be a certain way. And you have to dress a certain way, and look a certain way, and have a certain group of friends and be in certain things. I see freshman trying to spend like half of the semester trying to figure out like how they can be popular and where they can fit in. But honestly if you just do your own thing and you are who you are, the right people will find you. And that’s the people you wanna surround yourself with. So even if it does take some time to find those right people, you will find them, and it will be worth um maybe not having a super close group of friends like the first day you get here.

M: Of course, well thank you so much. I really appreciate it.

P: Alright, thank you so much.