

Episode 45: Beyond Binaries with Sue Brightly
Released on June 4, 2021

[00:00:00.33] ANTHONY SIS: The opinions expressed by the guests and contributors of this podcast are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Cornell University or its employees.

[00:00:09.66] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:14.47] Welcome to the Inclusive Excellence Podcast. June is LGBTQ+ Pride Month, a month that recognizes the 1969 Stonewall Uprising that took place at the Stonewall Inn in New York City. To honor this month, we have collaborated with the LGBTQ+ Colleague Network Group at Cornell to create a special series called "Beyond Binaries." Through this series, we will interview Cornell staff who identify as LGBTQ and share what Pride means to them and celebrate the diverse, lived experiences among members of the LGBTQ community at Cornell. My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:00:57.54] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel.

[00:00:58.92] ANTHONY SIS: And you are listening to "Beyond Binaries." Before we start, we'd like to warn you that this interview contains a brief conversation on the topic of suicide, which may be upsetting to some listeners. For resources on this topic, please view our show notes for this episode.

[00:01:23.74] Sue, thank you so much for being our first guest on this series, "Beyond Binaries." And so just to get us started, if you want to share your name, your pronouns, your role at Cornell, as well as any other salient identities that you hold.

[00:01:39.97] SUE BRIGHTLY: Sure, I am Sue Brightly. I use she/her pronouns. I work in HR communications, and my identities are queer, middle-aged, earthling artist.

[00:01:56.39] ANTHONY SIS: Awesome. Well, to get us started, I wanted to ask you a question. So I'll be asking each of our guests for this month a different question related to Pride Month, and so my question to you to kick us off is, why is Pride Month celebrated in June here in the United States?

[00:02:13.80] SUE BRIGHTLY: I know this one, and it's because it's when the Stonewall riots happened in New York City.

[00:02:19.87] ANTHONY SIS: Exactly.

[00:02:21.23] SUE BRIGHTLY: In June.

[00:02:22.30] ANTHONY SIS: In June, so yeah, so here in the US, we celebrate Pride Month specifically in June as a result of the Stonewall riots that occurred in June and July of 1969. So it's been a while, but I think it's really important that we remind our listeners about this event, why it's important.

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[00:02:41.17] And so yeah, so there's a ton of research. And if you go on our diversity website, under DEI Celebrations, you'll be able to see some of those links and get a little bit more information about what the Stonewall riots were. So please feel free to do that. Link is in our show notes.

[00:02:57.05] All right, Sue, well, I want to acknowledge that you are not only a member of the community, but you also play a really key leadership role particularly with the LGBTQ Colleague Network Group, or CNG for short. And so for our listeners who might be listening outside of Cornell, these are our employee resource groups. We call them CNGs, and one of them is specific to LGBTQ identity.

[00:03:21.32] And Sue, you are the chair of the CNG, and so I wanted to just get a little bit really in regards to what your experience has been. What can you tell listeners about the CNG itself?

[00:03:33.42] SUE BRIGHTLY: OK, well, most of all, our CNG is a place for LGBTQ employees to find community and support. And we provide social and networking opportunities, and we advocate for our employees at Cornell. And we also work to give back to our communities and provide support for recruiting talent to Cornell.

[00:03:58.33] We have monthly meetings. We have discussions. We have guest speakers, and it's a great place to meet other LGBTQ employees and just get to build the community and know the community.

[00:04:10.12] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah, and I just want to acknowledge that for you, this is a big transition into this role, too, right? And so if you could just share a little bit about what your experience has been in terms of playing a leadership role in this. And I know this is a big leap for you, so I want to acknowledge that but also give you a little bit of an opportunity to just maybe share some insights, share what has changed for you, what growth has come about by being a chair in this CNG.

[00:04:37.78] SUE BRIGHTLY: Well, the opportunity to be a chair of the CNG has been - it definitely was a push for me into my discomfort zone because I'm much more comfortable behind the scenes and providing support rather than really helping to drive anything or be in front of people. So even just this interview is really challenging, it's in my discomfort zone, but I really appreciate that that's really where growth happens. And I appreciate the opportunity.

[00:05:12.97] And we have a great group. We have a wonderful board of really experienced people and caring people, compassionate people, people that really care about our community. And so that's actually made it a lot easier.

[00:05:27.77] And then I think on a personal level, the CNG has meant a lot to me individually because my whole coming out experience has been while I've worked at Cornell. So finding the CNG and being able to come to the meetings, I was able to meet other people who shared the same perspective, shared the same similar experiences.

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[00:05:52.90] I discovered I was not alone as being like this only person ever in her 50s to have an identity shaken to the core and discover or rediscover myself, and that's meant an awful lot. That's meant a tremendous amount to my feeling confident at work and feeling a part of a community. It's been really great. So I'm very grateful that the CNGs exist, and I'm really grateful to have an opportunity to give back and hopefully to help other members of our community to experience that same feeling of support and belonging.

[00:06:41.87] ANTHONY SIS: Absolutely. I love that. I love that answer.

[00:06:44.76] So when you hear the word "pride," what are some words, feelings, sentiments that immediately you think of?

[00:06:54.32] SUE BRIGHTLY: Well, pride is the opposite of shame. And I think, I was brought up in a mindset that there wasn't really any pride associated with anything LGBTQ. I think a lot of us grow up in that kind of environment.

[00:07:13.38] So the absence of shame is sort of the beginning of it, but for me, personally, I feel that pride is that ability to feel comfortable expressing yourself as yourself in front of anyone, and that's a really empowering feeling. The other thing I feel with pride is gratitude. It's synonymous for me because I'm, myself, very conscious of the fact that I couldn't have a sense of pride if it weren't for all the people who have sacrificed and continue to sacrifice to have LGBTQ rights and equality. Pride couldn't happen without all that, so I have an immense sense of gratitude that's just right there with pride.

[00:08:04.07] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah, it's a word that, especially in this month, I think, means a lot when we do think about ancestors and former trailblazers who helped advance where we are today as a community. And so I 100% agree with you on that statement.

[00:08:20.55] So you talked a little bit about this next question that I'm going to ask, but can you talk about a moment, whether it was the first moment or just a moment, where you truly felt represented and included whether it was at work or even in a different setting?

[00:08:34.91] SUE BRIGHTLY: Yeah, well, for me, it's been more of a gradual experience rather than just one thing I could point out as that was that moment. It's been a building thing, but I think really finding the CNGs or finding the LGBTQ CNG really helped give me a sense of belonging, because as I alluded to, my coming out has happened all while I worked at Cornell. And when I was hired, I had a husband. I identified as straight.

[00:09:09.89] And then during my first year, my whole marriage fell apart, and I had this experience where my identity was shaken to the core. And I wasn't even sure if I could continue working at Cornell. I thought, how am I going to-- how do I go from being

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married to a man and then not hiding the fact that I'm dating women now? That was really challenging, and I didn't know how to navigate it.

[00:09:46.14] So I thought, well, maybe what I need to do is just go somewhere else and start fresh. Just get out of here. That's the way to avoid this problem, because there was no going back. I knew that much.

[00:09:59.45] But I found a good therapist, and I found other people. I was amazed to find as many other people like through the CNG that I wasn't the only person in my 50s to go and do this or to have this happen, this realization, and it means a lot.

[00:10:20.36] The thing is, I was so worried that somehow, I was going to not be respected or that people would look at me differently. By the time you're in your 50s, you kind of have-- or at least I had this expectation that, oh, you're someone who's got their head on straight, knows what they're doing. And there's a certain kind of confidence that at work, people will have confidence in you, and so I was just worried that people wouldn't have any confidence in me anymore.

[00:10:50.75] But it turns out that all those worries didn't come to pass. I've been completely accepted and found nothing but support from my coworkers and colleagues. It's meant a lot to me. It's meant the world to me that I've been able to stay here because I love my job. I love where I work. I love the people that I work with, so I'm very grateful for that.

[00:11:18.38] ANTHONY SIS: And it shows. Really, for our listeners, I could see you getting a little emotional quickly in sharing that with us, and so I just want to acknowledge that and thank you for your vulnerability in sharing that on this show. But I think it's an important one that needs to be told, and we've talked about this outside of this recording.

[00:11:36.95] But yeah, it's these types of stories, your story, and just knowing that it's not unique to just you, that there are other people going through this. I think it's just so important. It's so important to not only hear it but to elevate these stories, and so once again, I just want to acknowledge how much you've shared with us so far. I just want to thank you for your vulnerability and for showcasing that and sharing what you've just shared. So I really appreciate it.

[00:12:01.25] SUE BRIGHTLY: Thanks, Anthony, for giving me an opportunity to share it, because I do keep thinking, if I had heard-- I could have felt so much better, I guess, or maybe worried less if I had heard other people going through some of those same things and that, yeah, you can get through it, and everything can be OK. That means a lot, so thank you.

[00:12:23.57] ANTHONY SIS: Why should people care about Pride Month? What is the importance and significance of this month to you?

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[00:12:32.33] SUE BRIGHTLY: Well, where to begin? People should care about Pride Month because LGBTQ people are still fighting for equal rights, and there's states where rights and protections are being rolled back right now, like the ability for LGBTQ people to adopt children and to have access to medical care, to not be fired from their jobs.

[00:12:55.29] And even though a lot of progress has been made, there's still horrible murders of trans women happening in this country, and queer people suffer disproportionately from inequities in access to mental and physical health care. And people still continue to be discriminated against and bullied and suffer cruelty, and there's kids that are committing suicide because they're bullied so badly just for identifying as queer.

[00:13:28.68] And I think Pride Month gives us the opportunity to educate and share the humanity of our community and the stories, because queer people are everywhere. We're your families. We're your neighbors. We're your coworkers.

[00:13:48.75] And the more you know, the more you can build bridges instead of have fear. And I think that's really important. That's an important thing for our society. It's an important thing for the workplace-- is acceptance. You gain acceptance by humanizing and by getting to know people, and I think that's where the importance of pride is.

[00:14:13.57] ANTHONY SIS: A couple of things I really wanted to highlight in what you shared as kind of relevant issues that are still affecting the community is the homelessness issue. So according to a recent study from Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago, LGBTQ youth are 120% more likely to experience homelessness than non-LGBTQ youth. That's a ton, and the fact that in the United States alone, 4.2 million youth experience homelessness each year. So 120% increase from non-LGBTQ youth-- huge issue, and I think it's definitely one that I think about a lot.

[00:14:52.14] And you also mentioned something I hadn't thought about in a while, which was the suicide rate. And so in particular, when I think about Pride Month and the importance of it to me, too, I think about right when I was just about to come out or rather was still kind of trying to understand my own identity at the time as somebody who identified as gay.

[00:15:15.99] I remember specifically one incident, which was Tyler Clementi. He was a college student at Rutgers University, and he committed suicide due to bullying. And this happened my freshman year in college, which a few months after, I then ended up coming out to my family and close friends. But I just remember his passing just being one really heavy because I was just thinking about what it would look like for me to come out.

[00:15:44.61] And yet hearing about this suicide, hearing about the fact that it happened on a college campus, it was kind of jarring. I was like, should I do this? Should I not? And what were the risks?

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[00:15:54.90] And I just remember that time period, just hearing a lot of stories, particularly among college students like that, and then to then hear later on even children that were younger who were contemplating or doing the same thing, which is really hard and heavy. And I think months like this, Pride Month-- yeah, it's celebratory, but it's also, I think, a time to really sit and reflect on what are some of these current issues, many of what you've already named, that still affect the community that serve as a reason to not only celebrate but to also recognize the real issues, the real barriers, systemic barriers and access to health care and other resources in order for everyone within the community to feel like they can live a fruitful and authentic life. I think that's so important.

[00:16:41.57] SUE BRIGHTLY: Yeah, that's heavy.

[00:16:43.83] ANTHONY SIS: It is heavy, and that for our listeners-- just yeah, but I did want to talk about that... So we spent a lot of time talking about the issues. You've named so many of them, and we could easily go into more depth with each one of them. But for folks who are listening who are not members of the LGBTQ community, what does advocacy look like beyond Pride Month?

[00:17:08.17] SUE BRIGHTLY: Advocacy can take a lot of different shapes. And this one might sound kind of almost silly, but it means a lot to me. It's seeing rainbow signs and flags and yard signs. As soon as I see a yard sign or a sticker or something at a restaurant, I immediately breathe a little easier. I feel welcome, and I think that means a lot to a lot of us in this community.

[00:17:42.22] It's like, OK, I'm going to be OK here with my wife and hold our hands because it's a sign that we're accepted. So that's one way that I think anybody can show support or advocacy. It's a simple way, and I like simple things.

[00:18:02.44] There's a lot of other simple things to do like include your pronouns. Include your pronouns in your emails and everywhere else. Get used to saying them at meetings.

[00:18:15.31] And I know even for myself, I make mistakes all the time, and it's a process, a learning process. But it makes such a difference for people, so why not do something really simple and help other people feel welcome and that they belong? So that's a really easy one.

[00:18:35.11] Another easy one-- go through your forms at work. What forms do you have that require gender identification? If you just have an M or an F, no, no, no.

[00:18:48.55] Add a few more letters there. It's not hard. It's a simple thing to do. So those are just some really easy, simple ways I think our allies can get involved and show support.

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[00:19:03.04] ANTHONY SIS: Right? Oh goodness, when I think about gender and then I read male and female, I'm like, that's not gender. That's sex. We need to allow for more options for people to self-identify to get more accurate data and representation of people within the community, so just want a special asterisk that one especially with the forms. Yes.

[00:19:28.30] So as we wrap up our time together, Sue, I once again just want to thank you for being vulnerable, for sharing a lot on this show, and just for your leadership overall with the LGBTQ CNG, and I really appreciate it. And so I just want to end on a more positive note and ask you, how do you plan on celebrating Pride Month this year?

[00:19:50.46] SUE BRIGHTLY: Rainbows. I love the opportunity to incorporate rainbows and sparkles into every aspect of my life, but especially during Pride Month. I miss parades and picnics, and I'm hoping that we'll be able to have something later on in the summer, maybe, as our restrictions and regulations because of COVID are lifting.

[00:20:16.92] I know that, yeah, we've had some great Ithaca Pride family picnics that have been really nice, so I'm hoping that we'll be able to do some of those again. But for the time being, I'm just pulling out all the rainbows. That's my plan.

[00:20:31.17] ANTHONY SIS: Well, thank you, Sue, once again. Really appreciate it, and Happy Pride.

[00:20:35.13] SUE BRIGHTLY: Yay, Happy Pride, Anthony and everyone.

[00:20:39.43] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:20:40.27] ANTHONY SIS: For the latest updates on diversity, equity, and inclusion at Cornell as well as resources to honor and celebrate LGBTQ Pride Month, be sure to visit diversity.cornell.edu. My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:20:55.78] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel.

[00:20:57.37] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you for listening to the first episode in our special series, "Beyond Binaries."