

Episode 46: Upbringing, Allyship, and Protecting the LGBTQ+ Community with Cole Johnston

Released on June 11, 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.

[00:00:09.65] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:14.38] 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.

[00:00:40.26] Through this series, we will interview Cornell staff who identify as LGBTQ to 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.

[00:00:57.12] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel.

[00:00:58.80] ANTHONY SIS: And you are listening to Beyond Binaries.

[00:01:08.93] Cole, thank you so much for joining us today on the Beyond Binary series. Really excited to be here with you this morning. And so to get us started, do you want to just introduce yourself, your name, pronouns, also where you work at Cornell, as well as some of your salient identities?

[00:01:25.79] COLE JOHNSTON: Great. Yeah. Thank you so much, Anthony. So my name is Cole Johnston. I use he/him pronouns and I currently serve as the Program Assistant for Regional Programs. I work in an administrative capacity in terms of supporting all of the different Cornell clubs, Cornell Club of Washington, Cornell Club of Boston, those types. But I also get a chance to interface directly with volunteers, which is really my favorite part of the role.

[00:01:53.93] And, gosh, picking salient identities is challenging. I'm a 23-year-old white gay man. I grew up in a working class background in rural Oregon, so that was a huge influence on how I view myself and kind of my values. Yeah.

[00:02:12.68] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you. And you are also based in New York City. Is that correct?

[00:02:16.07] COLE JOHNSTON: I am, Yeah. I'm based in Brooklyn.

[00:02:17.90] ANTHONY SIS: Awesome. So we don't really get a lot of people from outside of Ithaca, so it's really great that I'm learning this about you now as well. So to get us started, I have a trivia question that I want to ask you, and this question you may or may not know the answer to. That's OK if you don't. So the question is, which two US presidents have officially acknowledged Pride Month?

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[00:02:41.28] COLE JOHNSTON: That's a great question. I think that it's probably Barack Obama and Donald Trump. Is that true?

[00:02:50.52] ANTHONY SIS: Close. You got one of them correct. So President Obama is one of them.

[00:02:54.33] COLE JOHNSTON: Is correct. OK. So Donald Trump did not?

[00:02:56.97] ANTHONY SIS: He did not.

[00:02:57.69] COLE JOHNSTON: OK, great. Great, great. Fits the narrative. So OK, OK, is the other one Joe Biden?

[00:03:03.72] ANTHONY SIS: Well, prior to this year, it was actually President Clinton.

[00:03:07.08] COLE JOHNSTON: Really? OK. OK. I don't know that.

[00:03:09.39] ANTHONY SIS: Yep. So to get us started, I want to talk a little bit more about this word Pride, and I feel like Pride Month in particular, the word Pride itself, has such different meanings for every person, even within the community. And so for you, when you hear the word Pride, what words, feelings, experiences do you immediately think of?

[00:03:31.17] COLE JOHNSTON: Absolutely. You know, Pride is a word that has a lot of connotations and a lot of meanings across my life in different contexts. And I grew up in a really small town, a rural area, in a family of very conservative religious Christians, so Pride was something that, at an early age, I was socialized to think very negatively of.

[00:03:53.83] So in that sense, it's a word that was very challenging for me initially as I grew older, and realized I was gay, and what that meant. But I think also now, Pride is something that I think of as an opportunity to affirm myself and celebrate the things that I've overcome, and also to reflect and realign on what I still want to accomplish in the future and the work that still needs to be done. So Pride has morphed from this kind of negative thing to avoid towards something that is almost a form of joy.

[00:04:29.74] ANTHONY SIS: What are some other things when-- so I think about particularly when you felt included. So you talked about your upbringing and having this particular kind of negative connotation with the word Pride, and so can you think about-- or can you share, if you feel comfortable, around what was that experience like when you did feel included, when you did feel like you were seen, heard, acknowledged for who you were?

[00:04:53.67] COLE JOHNSTON: Yeah. You know, I think it's hard to pinpoint the first time ever, but I will say that it's not something that I really experienced, this feeling of inclusion, of, like, a basic affirmation of who I am, until I came to Cornell as an

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undergraduate. So I'm a recent graduate. I graduated in 2020. I graduated high school in 2016.

[00:05:17.22] So I came out at the end of high school and it was a pretty disastrous experience, caused a lot of stress for me. In many ways, I think worsened my self-esteem, those types of things. And freshman year of college, I met one of my best friends, and he's a straight man, and it was very shocking to me.

[00:05:40.62] That's the emotion I remember first, is shock, when someone is capable of understanding the nuances of what it means and the experience of living in a straight culture. Basically listening to what I have to say and hearing, you know, if I'm frustrated or challenged by something that's happening, for example, like, in a student organization, him being willing to go and have those conversations with other straight people was a mind blowing experience for me because I only really had myself as an advocate in that arena prior to college.

[00:06:14.28] I think also one of my other best friends, his name is Dustin, he's wonderful. I'm sure several of our colleagues at Cornell have gotten the chance to work with him. But he was kind of a role model for me. He was someone who very authentically embraced who he was in every part of his identity as a gay man, and he really ran with it. There was no covering. There was no filtering. There was no censoring of his true authentic self, and that's something that I took a lot of wisdom from.

[00:06:45.63] ANTHONY SIS: What I love about what you just heard too is the importance of allies, right? And how sometimes people can surprise you in different ways. And so just the importance of allies, I can think of definitely some straight people in my life who have really gone above and beyond and continue to amaze me. And so your story, just for me, really highlights just the importance of allies and being able to have people who identify as such and be proactive about showing it in our lives.

[00:07:17.19] COLE JOHNSTON: Yeah. Yeah, absolutely. I think that Pride is also something that gives me an opportunity to remember that there's such a capacity for change. You know, even talking about the role of allies in my life, in high school, I remember, as I approached coming out, I pretty much systematically went through and ended every friendship that I had with a man, just because I had already closed myself off to that opportunity and I had assumed that every single man in my life would react incredibly negatively.

[00:07:49.59] And for me to end up finding such a comfort, and a home, and affirmation from a friend who was straight with something that really shattered my worldview and really, really forced me to consider, what role does my vulnerability and my connection with straight people have on how the world looks like for the LGBT plus community 20 years in the future.

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[00:08:13.02] ANTHONY SIS: Yes. So for our listeners listening, if you're an ally, just know that you have the power and ability to shape our lives, and so thank you. Thank you.

[00:08:22.41] COLE JOHNSTON: Absolutely.

[00:08:23.94] ANTHONY SIS: In your opinion, why should people care about Pride Month? I know we've talked about the importance of it to you and how it's kind of shaped and evolved over your life, but why should other people, allies, nonallies, even care about Pride Month?

[00:08:38.77] COLE JOHNSTON: Yeah. You know, I think for me, Pride Month is an important opportunity to look forward and ask what still needs to be done. From the research and learning that I've done, I really like to view Pride as an act of resistance or challenging of the status quo, right? And I think there's a discourse right now. I don't know how on the Twitter sphere you are, for example.

[00:09:02.85] ANTHONY SIS: Yes, yes.

[00:09:03.63] COLE JOHNSTON: You know, there's so much conversation happening right now about what is Pride, who is it for, and what's its ultimate purpose. I encourage others to engage with Pride Month and to do that learning, and to engage with people who-- engage across difference, to focus on how can we break down these systemic barriers that LGBT plus people face every day even further.

[00:09:25.41] ANTHONY SIS: Mm-hmm. You talked about this notion of Pride being an act of resistance. Could you elaborate a little bit more on that and what you mean by that?

[00:09:33.72] COLE JOHNSTON: The origins of Pride as I understand them come from radical acts of resistance, specifically the classic is the Stonewall riots and how that group of LGBT plus people who were at the Stonewall that day when the police raided the-- what do they call them, The Morals Squad, and how the LGBT plus people there ended up rioting, throwing bricks, and barricading the doors, and essentially saying, no more. Like, why do we have to take this?

[00:10:05.97] I was just reading an interview with Sylvia Rivera last week, and at some point, she says, my friend Marsha and I turned to each other and said, why is it always us? Why do we always have to take the brunt of this? And I think that's the true spirit of Pride. It is an opportunity to celebrate and find joy, but I think that that is a side effect or a byproduct of really recognizing that we deserve the full dignity that straight people are afforded.

[00:10:33.39] ANTHONY SIS: Absolutely. And so just for some context for our listeners, so Marsha P. Johnson is who Cole was just referring to, and Sylvia Rivera. So those two in particular, they are trans women of color and they're seen kind of as the pioneers,

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really, of the Stonewall riots and who kind of led the movement after that event to be what it is today, right? To be the Pride celebrations and everything that many of us celebrate each and every year. And so please definitely do your research on them and just the importance of their work and their impact on the LGBTQ community. So thank you, Cole, for sharing that.

[00:11:08.37] COLE JOHNSTON: Absolutely.

[00:11:10.23] ANTHONY SIS: You mentioned also earlier about advocacy, and so I'm curious from your perspective, what does advocacy look like for non-LGBTQ people beyond Pride Month? And so we know Pride Month is 30 days, but what does it look like beyond that?

[00:11:29.04] COLE JOHNSTON: I encourage them to think about the most vulnerable people in their communities, the most vulnerable LGBT plus people. And for me, in my home community, I think of the minors who live in households that are very violently homophobic or violently transphobic.

[00:11:45.66] And I think it looks like straight people or people who want to be allies, who want to practice allyship in those communities, stepping up to have conversations with others and protecting the members of the community that truly don't have the financial ability to relocate to a safer location or they don't possess the power in the household to advocate for themselves or protect themselves in any way. At any time, if you're wanting to practice, just stop to yourself, think about your context, your community, and ask, who are the most vulnerable and what can I do to support them.

[00:12:21.73] ANTHONY SIS: Yes, absolutely, 100%. I'm just shaking my head, like, yes in agreement. Because think it's so true and I think it looks so different for each geographic location, right? And so depending on where you live, some of those issues might be more prevalent among LGBTQ folks than others. And so Cole, I really appreciate your insight on that.

[00:12:43.15] Transitioning over into some of these relevant topics, issues within the community. So we've talked a lot about allies. We've talked a lot about their impact, which is great. But as a member of the community, what do you think are some of the most pressing relevant issues that are happening right now?

[00:13:01.12] COLE JOHNSTON: For me, the most important pieces that I think about in terms of supporting our community is jobs protections and housing protections. I think that's something that many LGBT plus people have been asking for for decades now, in many respects, has still not been fulfilled.

[00:13:20.80] It was particularly interesting for me to learn that marriage equality was not actually something that was a priority in the early days. It was not necessarily that LGBT activists wanted to be included in the institution of marriage, but more so just

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wanted to be able to live and to work without constant threat of being fired for who they were.

[00:13:43.00] I look at a lot of statistics. I do a lot of research, right? I was a Cornell student and academia is one thing, but I had a very visceral experience my junior year of college that really kind of humanized some of what we're talking about. I was working for the Intergroup Dialogue Project, which is a project on campus that works on communication across difference, specifically human connection, social identity development, and those types of things.

[00:14:07.55] And we were in training and we did a Privilege Walk. So for listeners who aren't familiar with the concept of a Privilege Walk, essentially, everyone starts in the middle of the room, and then you read a series of prompts that are designed to highlight certain access or lack of access that someone might experience based on a social identity.

[00:14:26.72] So, for example, one prompt from this Privilege Walk in particular might have been, take a step forward if you can hold hands with your partner in public without fear. You know, something like that. And then everyone takes a step forward.

[00:14:41.33] So throughout the course of the activity, I went through the prompts and, by the end of this activity, I had my back against the back wall of the room, which meant that, essentially, I had identified with the most prompts talking about lack of access or experiencing some kind of systemic oppression related to being a gay man.

[00:15:03.10] And it was mind blowing for me because I was looking at every other person in the room. There was probably around 45 of us in front of me, and it was kind of a really challenging moment because I had worked so much talking about gender, talking about race, right? These social identity axes where I have a lot of access and privilege.

[00:15:21.82] And I realized, I asked myself, why am I the only person back here? Why am I standing here? Why is no one with me? And I remembered that kids in my community, they get kicked out of their houses at early ages, right? Many of them die by suicide. If they don't die by suicide, then oftentimes they're living lives where the primary goal is to survive. There's no college. There's no career. There's none of that.

[00:15:46.74] And so I ended up-- I profusely sobbed for, like, 30 minutes after that experience because it was really, really Earth shattering. It was a reminder that, maybe in the Cornell context, it's hard to see the ways that systemic oppression are affecting life outcomes. Sometimes, not always. But in other contexts, things are still just as bad as they might have been 20 years ago.

[00:16:10.75] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you for sharing that. You actually just reminded me how I had a very similar experience when I had done the Privilege Walk for the first time when I was an undergrad, and it was interesting because where I grew up, so I

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grew up in Chicago. Now, when I went to college, I went to college in Connecticut, small liberal arts college, and there were a lot of people who did not look like me.

[00:16:33.35] And so I had this moment, a very intense culture shock, that when I then did this Privilege Walk and realized how much privilege I did not have, even though I was somewhat cognizant of the amount of privilege I did have being here in Chicago, it was a jarring moment for me as well, where I was, like, oh my goodness. Like, what?

[00:16:53.84] Similar to you. Why am I all the way in the back and yet all of these folks here are-- and mind you, this activity, I remember doing it with other people of color. And even then, I was still towards the back particularly because of my LGBTQ identity, as well as socioeconomic status and other identities, and so all of that together for me was just so overwhelming and I was, like, oh my gosh.

[00:17:15.70] And so I really had to find a way to survive, really, from that activity, and to find a way to survive in that setting. I had never been introduced to that kind of activity, and just in that particular setting was so much more impactful I think, to a certain degree, in a negative way.

[00:17:32.56] But I was able to overcome it and I was able to really, then, explore these identities a little bit more and how it shapes how I navigate, or navigated, rather, that space of being in small town Connecticut or small city Connecticut on a liberal arts college campus with only less than 2,000 people. So it was definitely quite the experience, and it definitely brought me back to a memory that I don't think super fond of, but nonetheless really shaped and molded how I talked about my own experiences in other spaces.

[00:18:04.63] COLE JOHNSTON: Yeah, absolutely. And I think it's just a quick note. It's worth noting too for listeners who work in anti-oppression or in inclusion that it's important to think very critically about what types of activities we're doing and the context in which we're doing them because they do have the capacity to cause almost a traumatic moment.

[00:18:23.64] ANTHONY SIS: Absolutely. So I'm feeling this conversation. We've talked a lot of really heavy things, so I do want to acknowledge that there is a lot of work that needs to be done, and, at the same time, leave opportunities to talk about the joy of being a part of the community. And so I'm curious. Can you think about the first time you ever attended a Pride event or celebration, and what was that feeling like for you as a first time attendee?

[00:18:52.78] COLE JOHNSTON: Oh, yeah. So I attended New York City Pride, this was my first Pride event, in 2019.

[00:19:01.32] ANTHONY SIS: That was the year of World Pride, I believe, right?

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[00:19:04.12] COLE JOHNSTON: No. Yeah, that was World Pride. I attended in 2018. I was abroad in 2019. I was very, very, very jealous that I didn't get to go to New York City World Pride. But 2018 was still not-- it was not a small to do by any means. And I cannot describe, like, what a surreal and guttural experience it was to be on the street, and to see a street person, and be, like, oh, like-- you know, that's just not something that I had ever, ever experienced. It was something like total and complete feeling of freedom, a capacity to do whatever I wanted to, like, a complete uncovering.

[00:19:47.56] I'm no longer thinking, like, oh, is there some kind of, like, violent person who wants to-- who will react negatively to me kissing my partner in public or walking too femininely, whatever that means, right? It's elation. That's the only word that I can really think. It was elating to just be completely and utterly surrounded by people like me.

[00:20:10.51] ANTHONY SIS: That's awesome. I 100% agree. My very first Pride was also at New York City, and this was in 2011. And similarly, it was just such a liberating feeling to just see so many people. Even the allies, right? Be so passionate about being at this event celebrating LGBTQ Pride. And I'm like, why does this straight person have more pride than me? Like--

[00:20:37.26] Yeah. Well, because, you know, at the time, I was still early in my own understanding of my identity and what it meant to be gay at the time. And so it was still new for me, and yet here are thousands of people on the street just yelling, and screaming, and voguing, and dancing, and singing.

[00:20:56.17] I was like-- I mean, it was just-- it was a lot, but in a very positive way. And I think it definitely shaped and molded how I then kind of came out or was openly, I guess, more myself to other people in public. And so nonetheless, though, still very overwhelming. But a positive one. As you said, I think elating is the best way to describe it.

[00:21:16.43] And I think also New York City in particular. I've attended a few other Prides in different cities, and New York City, I think, because of just the size of the city and the size of the event, like, and especially World Pride, which was the last one I attended, it was just-- it was already bigger than what it was previously, and I didn't think that was even possible, but it was. So I 100% agree with you on that.

[00:21:40.18] Cole, it's been a pleasure having this conversation with you. I really appreciate just how much you've shared about yourself, and about your experiences, and your vulnerabilities, so I definitely want to thank you for that. And so to wrap up our time together, I want to ask you, how do you plan on celebrating Pride this year?

[00:21:57.22] COLE JOHNSTON: I have been actually asking myself this over the past few days and thinking, you know, what does it look like? And I think, honestly, my personal project, this is a very personal response. I'm looking to just spend time with my loved ones and to do some, like, just overtly queer behaviors.



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[00:22:19.54] Like, you know, I don't know if it looks like-- one of my friends for example, wants to do, like, a drag brunch on her roof and, like, have a bunch of different friends perform, and dress up, and just go over the top. It's been a very, very difficult year and I think that this is an opportunity to celebrate, like, once again, the overcoming of something that's extremely challenging, and taking part in, and celebrating, and saying, like, we're continuing onward, and this is our space to claim.

[00:22:53.06] ANTHONY SIS: It is our space to claim. So once again, Cole, thank you so much and happy Pride.

[00:22:58.88] COLE JOHNSTON: Yes. Thank you so much. Happy Pride to you, Anthony.

[00:23:01.04] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:23:02.40] 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](https://diversity.cornell.edu). My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:23:17.91] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel.

[00:23:19.41] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you for listening to the second episode of our special series, Beyond Binaries.