

Episode 48: Representation and Parenting with Michelle Wescott
Released on June 25, 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. 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.

[00:00:40.18] 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.

[00:00:57.34] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel.

[00:00:58.72] ANTHONY SIS: And you are listening to Beyond Binaries. Michelle, thank you so much for being our guest on our Beyond Binaries series. And so, before we get started, if you just want to do an introduction of yourself, your name pronouns, where you work here at Cornell, as well as some of your salient identities.

[00:01:23.77] MICHELLE WESCOTT: Sure. Absolutely. And thank you so much for having me, Anthony. I'm Michelle Wescott. My pronouns are she, her, and hers. I work for eCornell, which is the external education part of Cornell. I'm an instructional design director. And my Italian identity-- I thought that was a really great part. So I'm Black, I'm female, I am lesbian. I am also a mother and a vegetarian. And I like to include all of those because really all of those things make me who I am. So I liked that I got to identify myself with my identities, Anthony. So thank you for that.

[00:02:05.83] ANTHONY SIS: Yes. And special shout out to one of our great colleagues, Jen Majka, who actually inspired us to ask that question for the series. And so she was a part of one of our summit panels, the Inclusive Excellence Summit panels, and she asked that question. She asked us to ask that question. And I think it was a really great one. So shout out to Jen Majka. for that.

[00:02:24.56] So before we get started, I wanted to ask you a trivia question. I learned a lot myself. And so I know you don't know the question in advance. So the question related to Pride Month in general is, how many countries have legalized same sex marriage?

[00:02:42.21] MICHELLE WESCOTT: Oh. Oh, that's really interesting. 11.

[00:02:45.85] ANTHONY SIS: Is that your final answer?

[00:02:48.00] MICHELLE WESCOTT: That's my final answer.

[00:02:50.46] ANTHONY SIS: All right. Well, it's a good guess. But the answer is more than double that actually.

[00:02:54.97] MICHELLE WESCOTT: Really?

[00:02:56.27] ANTHONY SIS: Really. Really. Yes. So the answer is 29. The little text here I'll read two is, "On April 21, 2001, the Netherlands became the first country to legalize same sex marriage. Since then, 28 other countries have done the same. While this is progress, there are many more countries in the world that don't offer LGBTQ couples the same rights as heterosexual couples.

[00:03:17.72] MICHELLE WESCOTT: Wow. Yeah. That's way higher than I thought, obviously, because I guessed 11. But yeah. There's lots of progress to be made.

[00:03:26.48] ANTHONY SIS: I know. And this is what? 20 years later from the Netherlands being the first country. So yeah. A lot more progress to go. So Michelle, I really just want to thank you again for being part of this series. And as we think about Pride Month, I think about so many different things. Feelings, emotions, celebration, and whatnot. So to kick us off in terms of this conversation, I just want to ask you when you hear the word, pride, what words, feelings, or experiences do you immediately think of?

[00:03:58.03] MICHELLE WESCOTT: It's a really interesting and kind of loaded word for me, Anthony. As I said in my identities, I'm a Black woman. So I was once a black child. And growing up in my household, pride was something that my parents really, really instilled in us. And it was almost like a defense against the world. So a world that undervalues our contributions as Black people. My parents made sure that we always knew that when they were proud of us, but also that we should be proud of ourselves regardless of what the world told us.

[00:04:34.78] So when I came out in my late teens, I sort of took that definition of pride, or that need for pride, and I laid it over all of my identities. Including my identity as a lesbian. And I knew that the world was a harsh place. I knew that being a lesbian was something that wasn't even understood in my family. So therefore, it wouldn't really be understood in the greater world. My parents were really loving, and accepting, and kind. And were honest and said we don't understand this. Teach us. And I'm really grateful that I had that parenting experience because I know that a lot of LGBT youth do not have that experience.

[00:05:17.98] But pride just became something that is almost like armor against the world that will undervalue you, or disregard you, or deny you rights. I was always taught in everything to stand tall, and to be proud of myself, and proud of my identities. And that didn't change when I came out. So that's what pride really means to me is literally being loud and proud. But just having that sort of shine through as your identity. There is nothing to be ashamed of. There is nothing to hide. There is nothing that should be secret. And just making sure that the world knows you can say whatever you want. This is who I am, and I know that I have value.

[00:06:12.67] ANTHONY SIS: Woo. I'm trying not to get emotional here. It's just because it's a beautiful message. And it's so kind of different from my own experience.

And so that's why I feel like it's such a beautiful message to kind of be reminded of that. And for our listeners to hear that because I know for me in terms of my upbringing-- and this is something that I talked about with Toral. It is just the role of culture. And how the role of culture really-- and what I mean culture more so in terms of racial ethnic identity. How that has influenced part of my coming out process. Not in the most positive of ways. But how I've grown to be more prideful. How I had to learn the word pride. And redefine what pride meant for me after coming out just because of that kind of cultural backlash initially at the onset when I did first come out.

[00:06:59.15] And so I think just hearing your story, and hearing just how different it is from mine, I think it's such a beautiful message to be reminded of. And to just remember for our listeners that pride can mean so many different things beyond just this one identity. So I love that.

[00:07:13.87] MICHELLE WESCOTT: Thank you. Thank you, Anthony.

[00:07:16.72] ANTHONY SIS: So what do you make of this Pride Month, there are a lot of memories that I attribute with it. A lot of experiences. And so can you talk about the first moments where you felt truly represented and included? Whether it was at work or in a different setting? What was that like?

[00:07:32.62] MICHELLE WESCOTT: That's a great question, Anthony. And I'm going to focus on the word moments. Because for me, it truly is moments. Moments in time that are like ingrained in my memory. I have so many different identities that I never like in a long term consistent fashion felt completely recognized or completely accepted. But there are those moments in time. And one that I remember so significantly was actually when-- I live in Rochester, New York. And my wife and I moved here from Columbus, Ohio. And we'd engaged a realtor. And the more he learned about us, the less he wanted to work with us. So I don't know if it was race, if it was because we're lesbians, if it was because we were working class. I don't know. But the more he learn about us, the less he wanted to work with us.

[00:08:32.14] And the night before we flew from Ohio to New York, he decided he didn't want to be our realtor. So he sort of fobbed us on to a colleague that I later learned he did not like. She did not like him. And so he put us with this colleague. And the minute I met her, I felt completely seen. Completely accepted. She was a Black woman. She was a lesbian. She had a partner. My wife's name is Michelle. My name is Michelle. Her name was Linda. And her wife's name was Linda. So like in so many ways.

[00:09:15.94] And my wife is white. I'm Black. Linda the realtor is Black. And her wife is white. So in every respect, I felt known, I felt the scene. I told her I wanted to live in a neighborhood where I didn't feel like the only Black person, and that my wife didn't feel like the only white person. I wanted to live-- I didn't even really had to explain to her where I wanted to live. She got it. She totally understood it. And I felt so seen.

[00:09:51.20] And so I think of this story, and how you were rejected by her first realtor. I think it was so much happiness. Because quite honestly, if he had not rejected us for whatever reasons he did, and fobbed us off to his worst enemy, we wouldn't have had the amazing experience that we had. We found the perfect house in the perfect neighborhood for us. And have loved living here for 16 years. So I think of that. And I have had so many moments like that throughout my life of just feeling fully seen and understood because I'm interacting with someone who has similar lived experiences. Or who looks like me, or acts like me, or has the same combination of experiences as me. And I love those times.

[00:10:44.92] I just also recognize that those times are few and far between, I think, because they need to be so that I can interact with people who don't look like me, and don't act like me, and don't think like me. Because that diversity adds so much to life. And then there are times when I just really want to be understood without explanation. And interacting with people who have similar lived experiences is so critical in those times when maybe you're hurting or vulnerable. Like moving to a totally new state and buying a house sight unseen.

[00:11:20.86] So I just think about it that way. Yes, there are definitely moments. They're few and far between. But that creates this value in them. And it leaves lots of space and time for me to learn more about others.

[00:11:34.71] ANTHONY SIS: It makes me think of a couple of things, Michelle. What you just shared is that sometimes rejection even as a member of the community, can actually be a positive thing. And so I think oftentimes people are always so like, you don't want to be rejected. And so I think that certain spaces like work, that's not a really great place where you want to be rejected. But sometimes rejections outside of that context can actually lead to better opportunities. And better connections with other people who might have similar identities.

[00:12:01.17] It makes me think of this experience when I was studying abroad. And my host family-- I was supposed to stay with the host family that was all women. So the women didn't feel comfortable having-- because it was me and another male. And so they didn't feel comfortable having two men in their house with a house full of women. So at the last minute, they switched us. And then my new house, my house family there, and my house father in particular, he was gay. He is gay. So it ended up working out because then when we met, we kind of gave each other that look. That look when you see another queer person in a space full of straight people, and you're like-- I think.

[00:12:38.31] And so literally, the first time I saw him we exchanged glances. And then I was like, oh my goodness. And then we had a conversation. I remember the first night we moved in he showed us the house. And he said, I just want to let you both know I'm gay. I have a partner who I've been with for 20 plus years. And if both of you have a problem with it, either one of you do, we're going to have a problem. There was this awkward silence moment. And then I said, well, that's great because so am I. After that, it last minute switch, but I think it ended up working out for the better.

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[00:13:07.35] And the host family who initially I was going to stay with, it's not that it's because I was gay. They didn't know I was gay before. But we ended up being really good friends with them because they were family members of my host dad and their family. And so it all worked out for the better. But I think about that moment a lot as like a moment of rejection initially. But then it ended up working out for the better. And I could not imagine that experience with anyone else.

[00:13:32.13] And then another thing that it made me think of in terms of what you shared in terms of your stories is just the importance of connecting with people who have similar identities to you. I know that's something that's really big for me, especially when it comes to my health care. So for example, I just actually ended my therapy sessions with a therapist who I was very intentional about seeking who also identified as queer, Latino, Latinx. And I told them at the very end of my session I said, it's just so nice to connect with somebody where I didn't have to do that education work. I didn't educate them on that intersection of identities. That lived experiences.

[00:14:09.06] He just simply understood it, and was able to really give me strategies to be able to overcome some of the challenges that I had regarding my mental health and well being. And health in just general. And so I told them I was like it was such a liberating experience, and I wanted him to know that as I was finishing my sessions with him. Because it was just so impactful to just not have to do that education work.

[00:14:29.58] And then shortly after, I had heard somebody, a family member of mine, who had sought out therapy. And they quit because they said every session felt like they had to educate their therapist. And I was like, no. That's exactly what I don't want. And I hope nobody ever has to go through that. But the reality is that a lot of people do. And so I think--

[00:14:47.31] MICHELLE WESCOTT: Absolutely

[00:14:48.06] ANTHONY SIS: I think that's another part of your story that really resonated with me. Just the importance of connecting with people with similar lived experiences and identities where you don't constantly have to explain yourself.

[00:14:57.47] MICHELLE WESCOTT: Yes.

[00:14:58.87] ANTHONY SIS: So key. And when I think of Pride Month, I think of that. You should be able to just be yourself authentically. And for one month at least, not have to constantly educate people about your identities.

[00:15:09.57] MICHELLE WESCOTT: Right. It's so important, Anthony. And it's something that I was thinking about when I was reading and preparing for this podcast. LGBTQ+ is such a big bucket. And I completely agree with you that in Pride Month and beyond, really, quite honestly we should always be able to find people who know what it's like to be us. To seek those moments of solace and support. But especially in Pride Month. But I think one thing that we forgot is it's such a big bucket of people.

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[00:15:46.05] My lived experience is still very unique even amongst LGBTQ+. And I think sometimes, especially if you're outside the community, I kind of assume that we understand everything about all of the different identities. And sometimes we put that pressure on ourselves. I know I was-- I can't remember what I was working on, but I was working on something. And I didn't know. And it was somebody who was non-binary, and use they/them pronouns. And I was like, does the verb become plural? I don't know how. And I was ashamed to ask. I was like, I should know this. I'm a lesbian. I'm in the LGBTQ community. I should know how to use all the pronouns.

[00:16:36.18] And I was like, I don't. And I sought out a friend who uses they/them pronouns, and I knew wouldn't like judge me. And they told me. And they were really honest too. They're like, yeah, when I first started using these pronouns, I wasn't quite sure either. So I Googled it. And I said I Googled it too. But I got two different answers. And we ended up having this great conversation about it.

[00:17:02.29] And I think that's really, really important to like-- if you're in the LGBTQ community, to just acknowledge hey, you know you represent one subset of this LGBTQ+ lived experience. And it's OK to not be completely clear about everything else. And for the greater populace to not think every lesbian knows what everybody's sexual experiences, and every gay man's experiences, and every trans person experience, a non-binary. We don't necessarily know everything. And don't expect us to be a representative of the LGBTQ community. Just like, don't expect me as a Black woman to be the representative of the Black experience. I'm a representative Michele Wescott's experience.

[00:17:55.71] And I know what it's like to be a Black lesbian in America. But I don't know what it's like to be every Black lesbian in America either. And I just think-- I don't know. We're such a big group. And Pride Month celebrate so much different culture and different experiences. And I was thinking I know you have a question about advocacy, and how we advocate even outside of Pride Month. And that's what was just make me think. I'm like, there's so many different things. And things I don't even necessarily know. And things that as a lesbian, like you were saying marriage is legal. I can go and get married. But there's lots of people in the LGBTQ community who can't.

[00:18:50.10] We don't all have equal access to the same things. So there's even like privilege in our community that we need to recognize and think about. Anyways. Sorry. All got me thinking about like--

[00:19:06.54] ANTHONY SIS: Yeah. I just want to say I hope our listeners really listened to the last four or five minutes of what you just shared. Because yes, yes, and yes. And I think it needs to be put on a higher pedestal-- that information. That knowledge that you just dropped with everyone. So thank you. Thank you for sharing all of that.

[00:19:26.22] So I guess since we did answer some-- well, you already answered some of the questions I was going to ask you.

[00:19:31.70] MICHELLE WESCOTT: I'm sorry.

[00:19:32.45] ANTHONY SIS: No. Totally fine. Totally fine. I'm wondering, Michelle, from your perspective, what are some of the-- I know you touched a little bit upon this. But maybe if you can expand on it a little bit more since you already got to it towards the end of just what are some of these pressing and relevant issues affecting members within the community? You talked a little bit about privilege within the community. So I think that's a really key one. But what are some other ones that come to mind for you?

[00:19:57.51] MICHELLE WESCOTT: Well, one of my identities is that of mother. I have a nine-year-old daughter. And something that is I feel critical-- we read a lot. We are always at the library. Books are our friends. We are constantly immersing ourselves in books. And having LGBTQ representation in books is so important. One thing that has been important for my daughter ever since she was a baby is seeing herself in the books that she's reading. And that means something different as she gets older.

[00:20:32.52] So when she was really little, seeing other little girls who look like her. And she would look at a book, and anyone who had-- she's got sort of like cocoa colored skin. Anyone who had cocoa colored skin, that's me. That's me in a book. It didn't matter what nationality, what gender, what ethnicity. It didn't matter anything. If they had the same color skin as my daughter, she saw herself in a book. So as she gets older, she's able to distinguish different characteristics. And she starts noticing, wow, there's no families that look like mine in these books. There's no families with two moms. Or if there are, there are two moms of the same color. There's not a black mom and a white mom.

[00:21:16.95] Maybe they have more kids. Or maybe they don't have kids. Or something like that. So she's got a laser focus to see families that look like her. And then I think of I have kids in my family who have recently come out as bi and trans. And they were older than my daughter. When they were kids, there were bi or trans kids in books. We don't really necessarily talk about sexuality of children in books. But kids are coming out younger and younger. And maybe we do need to start talking about that. Maybe we do need to start seeing just representations of kids in the sort of realizations that they're having at the ages they're having them so they don't feel so alone. So maybe in their community they aren't going to find another little trans kid. But if they can in a book, that at least makes a huge difference. If they can find someone who looks like them, who acts like them, or presents like them, who's having the same struggles.

[00:22:28.23] And there are some books that really do explore the continuity, and the differences, and show the reality of life. But they're so few and far between. They're not usually at the library. They're not usually in mainstream bookstores. You have to order them online. And that presents a question of access. That presents a question of equity. And that presents a question of the immediacy of it. Right now, I am struggling with this. And I just realized this thing about myself. Wouldn't it be great if I could go to the corner, and go into the bookstore in my neighborhood or the library in my neighborhood, and see a book or some sort of resource that would help me through that?

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[00:23:15.10] So I think because I am a mom, and I have got a kid who I have no idea who she's going to be. But I want her to be able to sink herself into something that resonates with her and I want that for all the kids, the teens, the young adults, the 40 something year olds like me who maybe I'm discovering something about myself. And I'd really love to see myself in a book, or in a resource that resonates with me. A television show, A podcast. Something that resonates.

[00:23:52.59] And I think my main focus of advocacy is just that representation. And knowing and understanding how important that is.

[00:24:02.06] ANTHONY SIS: Absolutely. When I think of representation, I think about I'll be quite honest and say the show Pose that is currently out on FX. That was probably-- which was just released a few years ago. About a couple of years ago, actually. But that was probably one of the first times where I saw myself. And I saw people and my friends who looked like me, or who looked like the members on the show. Black, queer, trans, brown in terms of skin color. Everything. So that was really like the first moment where I felt like, oh my goodness. And so I remember that first season, I almost cried at every episode because I could think of a moment that corresponded with my life. And it was something that I knew many of us had experienced-- other queer people of color. An trans people of color as well. But then to see it on a major media platform like Pose, and to see it backed up with these well-known writers and directors and producers, I was like, oh my goodness.

[00:24:57.41] And then to also know that the people behind the scenes were also queer and trans people of color. I think it was so key. And it's one of those things that I always remind people that when it comes to representation, it's one thing to have-- say for the example with Pose, it's one thing to have the actors be members of the community as well, but imagine how much more powerful and significant it could be if you include people behind the scenes as well to be writing these stories, to be producing these stories, directing these stories. That was Janet Mock's first directorial debut was on the show in season one. And she was the first Black trans woman to ever direct a show for a major media network.

[00:25:36.50] So it's like those kinds of things. And then you think about the storytelling, especially in that show. for me, that really resonated. I was like, wow. This is what happens when you're intentional about incorporating people from diverse backgrounds. Not just in front of the camera, but behind the camera too. And so, I think about that a lot when I think about inclusion. And what is true authentic inclusion look like? It's not about just the forward facing, the public facing, image. But also the people behind the scenes.

[00:26:03.35] So if we're talking about books, what would it mean to have the publisher and the people who work for the publishing companies who are also helping bring these stories to the forefront? There's just so much more power. And you can tell. Particularly members from the LGBTQ community, all these intersection of identities, like you can tell when something is authentic and when something is not. And Pose, for me was

really that first moment where I was like, wow. My community's here being represented. And millions of people are seeing this. This is awesome.

[00:26:36.70] MICHELLE WESCOTT: That's so beautiful, Anthony. And it's beautiful and amazing. And if that was the first time-- you're a grown up. You're an adult, and just in the last couple of years saw yourself fully represented. And that was so impactful for you. And I feel the same way. We talked about these moments of when you felt fully seen. I don't even know what it would have felt like to be seven and feel fully seen. And I had a great upbringing. I had a great childhood. My parents were wonderful. My brother and sister were great.

[00:27:29.46] But I was different. I didn't even know how I was different. I just knew I was different. And I was weird. And I'm using finger quotes although this is a podcast, and you can't see that. But I don't know. Just making a difference for children, I think it just could make such a difference for society in general if we start with the kids. And just like accepting them. And providing them opportunities to have the experience that you had with Pose. Like seeing yourself so fully, and your experience represented in this way. And how impactful that was for you. And then just imagining as a little kid having any realization and seeing it represented fully somewhere. In a book, in a cartoon, in something that means something to you.

[00:28:32.58] Just for all of the self-esteem and self-hate that so many of us have gone through, I think it could make a huge difference to erase some of that. And make us not need so much therapy as adults.

[00:28:49.05] ANTHONY SIS: To normalize it. To make it OK. And to not feel so excluded from the outside world because other systems, other institutions just aren't representing who you truly authentically are I think is so key. And I just really appreciate that response that you shared with your child for example. And just the importance of representation as a child. And like you said, I don't know how I would have responded if I had that representation early on. And yeah. I mean, just to know that it could have such a significant impact.

[00:29:23.88] And also just kudos to all the young LGBTQ children that are coming out at a younger age in life. I mean, the amount of courage and bravery that they must have. I mean, kudos. I would have never been able to. I grew up as a child in the early 2000s into 2010 and everything. And so I couldn't because the representation wasn't there. The world wasn't ready for people like me to be authentic, and to come out in a very positive, reaffirming, safe, physically safe way. So safety being a key part of that. And so kudos to all the children out there. And all the parents who are raising children and being their authentic selves.

[00:30:04.24] MICHELLE WESCOTT: Yeah. And I echo those kudos I also cannot imagine. I grew up in the '80s. And I didn't even know the word lesbian in the '80s. I'm sure the word was there. I know it was there because there's books written about it. But yeah. It wasn't in my vocabulary. It wasn't in my parents' vocabulary.

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[00:30:25.98] So I came out in '94. And the process of coming out, I had to learn some new vocabulary and language to just describe this thing. And it was then in the process of teaching my family what these words meant. And thankfully, thank God, they wanted to know. They wanted to know who I was. And were willing to listen and accept, which is it's very harsh reality that that's not the reality that most people have. Or the experience that most people have rather.

[00:31:05.15] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you, Michelle. I know we could talk about this for so much longer. So I just want to thank you once again for taking the time for sharing your story with us on this series, on this show. And so as we wrap up our time together for our listeners, I wanted to ask you, how do you plan on celebrating Pride Month this year?

[00:31:23.45] MICHELLE WESCOTT: That's a great question. I don't know yet. We always go to the Pride Parade. But I don't know if they're having it this year. And my daughter's too young to be vaccinated. So we have safety concerns and whatnot. But we will probably do what we always do with every celebration. And that's read a bunch of books about it.

[00:31:45.57] ANTHONY SIS: I love it. I love that.

[00:31:48.13] MICHELLE WESCOTT: We love books. We love reading. We love stories. So I'm sure we'll find a bunch of books at our library, and just really enjoy Pride through reading.

[00:31:58.10] ANTHONY SIS: I'm taking so many parenting notes from you. The little that you've shared with us so far. Thank you, Michelle. once again. Hope you have a wonderful day. And Happy Pride Month.

[00:32:09.83] MICHELLE WESCOTT: Happy Pride to you too, Anthony. Thank you so much for having me. It was really an honor.

[00:32:15.69] 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 diverity.cornell.edu. My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:32:31.17] TORAL PATEL: My name is Toral Patel.

[00:32:32.67] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you for listening to the fourth episode of our special series Beyond Binaries.