

Transcript Episode 19: Happy Pride!

Introduction:

You are listening to the UnDeniably Well podcast hosted by the University of Delaware's Employee Health and Wellbeing Team. Keep listening to discover ways to be your best self each and every day.

On today's episode, I'll be talking with Em Rowe, the chair of UD's Pride Caucus. We will learn what the tPride Caucus is, what pride gatherings mean to the LGBTQ+ community, and how all of us faculty and staff at UD can work towards increasing feelings of belonging at work.

Ryan Shuler:

Hello, and welcome to this episode of UnDeniably Well. I'm Ryan Shuler, Associate Director of Employee Health and Wellbeing at the University of Delaware. Today, I am very excited to be joined by Em Rowe to talk all things pride in honor of June being Pride month. Em is an academic advisor in the College of Arts and Sciences, and as the current Chair of the University of Delaware's Pride Caucus. Welcome, Em.

Em Rowe:

Thank you so much for having me.

Ryan Shuler:

I would love to start just learning more about what the Pride Caucus is at UD, and how you got involved with this.

Em Rowe:

Sure. Yeah. So the Pride Caucus is a group of faculty and staff. And also actually now we have one graduate student kind of liaison, in some ways between us and the grad student body. So we're a group of people who are working to support the LGBTQ+ community here at UD, to advocate, basically to provide any kind of assistance that that might be needed and also to help sort of foster this community on UD's campus

Ryan Shuler:

Do you have to be a member of the LGBTQ+ community to join the Pride Caucus?

Em Rowe:

No, you don't have to. We have various identities represented across the board. So, no, you can be an ally, and I think that's actually great if you are that strong of an ally that you really want to join the board, make your voice heard, make sure that you're doing your best to advocate for our community, I think that's awesome. Technically our constituents are any queer or LGBTQ+ identified individuals at UD, and then also their allies. So we include allyship in the definition of sort of how we see our constituents and our membership body.

Ryan Shuler:

That's fantastic. And you mentioned sort of this liaison with the graduate student. Is there a separate student organization similar to the Pride Caucus for students?

Em Rowe:

Yeah. So it's actually really cool. They have started doing just excellent work. They have like a mindfulness retreat coming up. They just do a really good job providing space and affirmation for grad students. They're called the Queer and Trans Graduate Student Union, and actually their entire executive board was nominated this year for a Triangle award, which is an award that the Pride Caucus gives out for excellence in support, advocacy, and visibility of the queer community. So, that, I think, really speaks to the good work that they're doing, the fact that the whole board was nominated. But they're relatively new. So we kind of incubated that space for a graduate student a couple of years ago. This was some history, a group was started when I was a grad student here for grad students and it was called Prism. And Prism lasted for maybe a year or two. With the grad students who were in charge at that time, they were in programs where they'd be here for about two years and then they bring their thesis and they'd be gone. And so we just didn't have that forward momentum, and so the leaders of the QT GSU came in, and they were like, no, we need a group that is long-standing that represents grad students. And so they've really stepped up and replaced Prism with this group, which is now housed, I believe, under the Graduate Student Government. So they're just better institutionalized, to have sort of a lasting power.

Ryan Shuler:

That's very cool to hear. One of our sort of major tenants of wellbeing or concepts of wellbeing... I think it's becoming more popular, more common sort of everywhere is this concept of belonging or belongingness. We've had other episodes talking about what belonging means. We have the Campus Coalition for Wellbeing and Mental Health. That's one of the four pillars is belonging. And that Coalition sort of defines belonging as a meaningful connection to the people, places, and systems that shape us and that we influence. And the community of work learning and living where individuals are valued.

So hearing you sort of talk about this from the grad space, from the faculty and staff space, is that the Pride Caucus is really giving the LGBTQ+ community at UD this concept of a space where individuals are valued. Would you agree with that? That that's sort of one of the, I guess, purposes of the Pride Caucus, is this whole concept of belonging.

Em Rowe:

Yeah, I definitely think so. That's true of all the Diversity Caucuses here is that we're trying to make our mark on the University, right? We're trying to represent this group and say, you know, we're here, we exist, so we want to do that work to make sure that we're advocating for ourselves, that we're working to implement the policies that will support people from our community. But I agree that I also think, that what the Pride Caucus does almost implicitly is it does provide a space for us to find each other, for us to come together, recognize that there are others who might share similar backgrounds, and I think that is really where a sense of belonging sort of comes in. Like I know from my own personal experience, joining the Board, I just feel like I've found my people, you know, I feel, okay inn this group, even on zoom, even through COVID, like I have this group of people who kind of gets what I'm going through or understands what it's like, let's say to be mis-gendered or to not have my partner be interpreted as my partner. And in fact, be interpreted as my twin sister, which always happens. It's ridiculous. They are always so hesitant too. They're like, can I ask you a question? Are you twins? It's like, why, why did you

have to ask that? I don't know, I don't know, it's so funny, but yeah, so to not have my partner be read as my partner, right.

And I think that others on this Board have experienced similar issues. And so I think it is really important to find your community for that reason, because it just helps you feel affirmed and valued. Like you talked about value as well. And I think when you find your community of people, you're able to build up that understanding like, yes, we are valuable here as employees at the University of Delaware, look at the good work we're doing, look at all the things we've been able to accomplish. And I think that kind of sense of purpose also helps to add to a sense of belonging as well, when you've left your mark on an institution.

Ryan Shuler:

Absolutely. I think just in hearing that, that comment, you know about you and your partner. And so having gone through the ally training, that was one of the things that I think was just very, I don't know, it put a lot in perspective. Like if I walked into a brand-new job, and I had a picture of my husband up, there would be no explanation, right? I wouldn't have to explain that. Whereas members of the community, they're asked that question, so it just, it put a lot in perspective for me, and I do get all the emails from the Pride Caucus, but it's just, it's really been helpful for me, really to learn how to be a better ally.

So again, I don't consider myself a member of the community, aside from being an ally. But to understand it from your perspective, from the Pride Caucus perspective, it makes everything, I guess, so much more human, instead of like reading it in a textbook or reading an article or watching some standard news explanation just to hear like stories like this or the humanitarian side of it. I'm just trying to make sure that individuals and their partners can get healthcare coverage or that individuals are getting the same fair shot at a promotion. It really pulls that human side into it, which I feel like can be lacking at workplaces a lot of times. So I really, I think that it's fantastic what you all are doing and sort of bringing our real stories and real people that you're trying to change here.

So I just, I think that's very important. I think people don't always realize that. It's always like out there in the world. It's not always that it's happening right here in your own safe little bubble, but these things can be happening in our safe little bubble. So, I really do, I just commend the Pride Caucus on all you've done, especially the last few years.

Em Rowe:

Thank you so much. Yeah, I think we're very lucky and this is something we talk about on the board and with our members, but you know, in academia in general, it tends to be a more progressive, more liberal climate, where acceptance is I think much higher than it is in other workplaces across the country and across the world.

So in a lot of ways we are lucky, but there are still things to work on. For example, we've had a really difficult time trying to figure out how to work on employee and staff name changes in places where names are publicly displayed. So I'm not sure why that's such a challenge, but I know that I think it just speaks to the ways in which like cis-genderism is kind of baked into our institution and our policies.

And I think that gender-based issues are becoming sort of the next wave of LGBTQ+ activism, and the work that we need to do, and so you sort of see that there too, right? Like I, I don't often feel homophobia on this campus. I would say very, very rarely. And if I do it's because an outsider has come in to protest in sort of a flamboyant, ridiculous way, but I do see more instances of institutionalized transphobia. For example, I think also the fact that our bathrooms are still gendered across campus, you know, that's another example of something. Yes, we have definitely done some of this advocacy work to make things better. And in other ways the institution itself is already a privileged place, I think for a queer person to be able to work, but there's always work to be done, so that's why we're here.

Ryan Shuler:

It's interesting you bring this concept. I have noticed the last two years, and maybe this is sort of like a blessing in disguise with COVID, having to use zoom where people put their name and their pronouns as their name is not something we would have otherwise ever had. If I was in a meeting, you know, a lot of times people are not going around saying their pronouns, but to see it all on zoom, you're like, oh, now I know the appropriate pronouns that that person would prefer to be called, so it's been kind of cool, for me, I think see, that shift and that switch and even sort of the cis-gender that, you know, I identify as female and I use she/her pronouns, to still see that that is almost okay. Well, that's what she prefers or to use they/ them pronouns, or if there's someone transgender that you may otherwise not know, but zoom has really, and I, I really on most of these episodes, I say this, I hate zoom. I would much rather be in a room with you, but that I think has been really helpful to see that, and has opened a lot of conversations, at least in my world, in the wellbeing world that otherwise may not have been had.

Em Rowe:

Yeah, I think zoom has done a lot for equity and inclusion. It's made classes more accessible for many of our students who haven't been able to come in person. And zoom does a lot of cool things to make, you know, lectures accessible for students who need subtitles on the screen or things like that. And I think that with pronouns, it's really cool that zoom implemented that because I think it helps to normalize the question of pronouns. Right? It's like we then take what we see in this digital world or the technological space, and we translate it into our physical spaces. And so I think it has helped to normalize the process of going back into our in-person meetings. And when we go around in a circle, you know, it's not just name, where you work, it's name, pronouns, where you work. So I like thinking about the ways that technology can also shape our actual lived physical reality.

And the ways that it can really help, you know, make people's lives easier. Like for me, it's much more difficult for me to have to take a minute, to explain my pronouns and try to figure out how do I incorporate this? When do I incorporate it? Will this group be accepting? Will they not? Versus it is just a normal part of introducing yourself. You know, and that helps take a lot of the burden I think, off of those who use pronouns that are not the normative, he/ him, she/ her

Ryan Shuler:

I'm curious, sort of with June being Pride Month to sort of expand this bigger than UD, we were talking in our office recently, you know, that the large pride celebrations in June have really been non-existent the last two years because of COVID. So this year, now that things are sort of opening up again, what does that mean for this community to finally have sort of these large pride gatherings back?

Em Rowe:

Pride is super fun, and it is something that has definitely been missed. With COVID we couldn't hold pride celebrations, pride parades, like you said. So now that we're getting back together in person, I think there's just such an overwhelming, like warm and happy and positive and encouraging feeling that you have when you are surrounded by people who again, share some of your background or your identity characteristics, or just an understanding of some of the things that you might've gone through. It's like a judgment free zone where you don't have any of those kinds of questions of like, am I going to have to explain myself in any way? Right. And I think that's what makes it so fun is that it can be such a, such a carefree kind of environment in that way.

That said, I think there is a lot of activism, and of course there's a lot of activism in the history of Pride, in celebrating Pride, but I think today we really approach it as kind of a party because we're celebrating, you know, ourselves, and we're celebrating where we are and the ability to be, to live our lives in this way, at this point in history is really awesome, kind of without question. So I think that it's really important for us to be able to get together, and it's very exciting. Like we were talking about Delaware. its 25th. This is the 25th year of Delaware pride. So not only is it a big year for them and for us, in terms of we're finally able to get back together because we're past, well, we're not past COVID, but we're a little bit past COVID, but it's also because it's been 25 years of doing this. So it's going to be a really big celebration this year. And one of our Caucus members, Brandon Toole has been really instrumental in promoting Delaware Pride this year. So it's on June 4th. So if anybody wants to come, can come. I highly recommend it. Brandon had said it's going to be a really good time.

Ryan Shuler:

And where does that take place?

Em Rowe:

It's in Dover.

Ryan Shuler:

We'll find a website, we'll link it in the show notes. So you all have access to it. Hearing you talk about all of this, I'm thinking that maybe some of the listeners are curious the link between all of this Pride Caucus, Pride celebrations, and Employee Health and Wellbeing. And I just want to make it explicitly clear and your comment just really made me think of. When you say you can go to these, pride gatherings and truly just be yourself. There's no explanation. You just are. That is the goal of where we want to get to in a workplace. The goal is that there should never have to be a question, an explanation, any individual, regardless of gender identity, racial, whatever it may be, whatever your background is. The goal is that you show up at the University of Delaware and you feel valued. You feel welcomed, you feel like you belong. So we've done some of these episodes around sort of racial injustices that are happening at UD. We're doing this episode around Pride Month and I really just want to make it very explicitly clear to all of the listeners that we do this really to show that we in Employee Health and Wellbeing value all of these communities, but as colleagues, as coworkers, as people, we really want people to feel that they belong at UD and that they have people supporting them at UD and want the best for them. And that they have this truly equitable situation. They can get that promotion or they can get the healthcare they need or whatever it may be that sort of this concept of equity and belonging are

sort of like our Northern star of where we want to be. So I just really want to make that very explicit. As if anyone is questioning sort of why we are sort of talking on this, this is, we want to be all of us good allies. We want to make sure that all employees have what they need at UD, and it really is so crucial to this concept of belonging for us.

Em Rowe:

Yeah, I think it's an important note to make because I feel that you are bridging the gap between some of the macro institutional policy-based stuff, like the healthcare, promotions, right. That stuff you've kind of mentioned, but also just the ability to exist on a campus without the fear of facing microaggressions. And that's the much more, like, yeah, the micro piece of this, on the individual level where, yeah, you just, you don't want to have to come to work and worry about how am I going to react when somebody says this to me today? And so I think it's really important to consider these things from both levels of society, and what you talked about just now really gets at that, sort of being able to think about wellness in this very holistic way, but also this kind of individualized, just ability to exist kind of way.

Ryan Shuler:

I'm curious, do you see a difference in like generational response to this, like 50 years ago, what was the experience if someone was part of the community versus, like I look at, you know, younger teenagers today and it is so much more normalized and not questioned? Do you see, that, is there sort of hope that things are moving in such a positive direction that maybe these younger generations won't experience this level of macro or micro aggression in the workplace?

Em Rowe:

Absolutely. And there's data that, that shows that we've been moving in a positive direction. And so acceptance is always moving in the right direction. And I think that like you're getting out with younger generations, social media has done a huge amount of work in proliferating, not just education around these identities, but also just access to being able to think about these identities as something that might resonate with you as an individual, looking at this media. So, when I was doing my dissertation work a couple of years ago, that was part of what I was looking at was the way that we, or the way that younger generations are able to access, the terminology or the names of these categories, these ways of identifying and how that actually helps to sort of expand the categories themselves. Essentially, you can't identify with something that doesn't have a name to it, and so that's why we're seeing more and more of these categories become more and more popularized and prolific because more and more people have access to knowing what those categories stand for and what they represent.

And I think that's a great thing. I think it's great that our umbrella is growing and that younger generations have a better understanding of the nuance here and their ability to exist in an exact way that represents who they are and what they believe and what they stand for and how they identify. So I think that older generations, just didn't have the same kind of access to that education on this very daily, very kind of easy way or level. And so as a result of that, yeah, I think there was a lot less education. There was a lot less acceptance because our community was, you know, a lot less known. And so media has done a great job, building acceptance. And that's not to say, I mean, there are absolutely older generations who, or pockets or populations who have always been very accepting and

affirming. But yeah, I do think that as time goes on, younger generations are just much, much better about, only accepting, but actually understanding and knowing why it's important to understand these LGBTQ plus kinds of identities.

Ryan Shuler:

Yeah, and I think really to give your self-credit and the Pride Caucus credit that these younger generations are growing up with a greater understanding of this, but you all now are also working to create the workspaces. So when they come into these workspaces, they can continue that life just continues as, you know, being affirmed, being valued, feeling like the sense of belonging at UD because you all are doing this work now, making sure that the policies are there, that people are aware of what a microaggression is, and you're doing all of that good work now. So again, these younger generations, can move a little more seamlessly, and hopefully have a more positive workplace experience.

Em Rowe:

I think that's true. And I also think that it's really important to note that where this comes from in our community is, you know, this is probably something you've heard, but it's really important to look at the history of the activism here and understand that it really comes from trans women of color who started a lot of these revolutions and conversations. And I think that in a lot of ways, if we want to take an intersectional approach, this understanding of microaggressions and sort of the nuanced ways that we experience oppression also comes from scholars and communities of color, and Critical Race Theory in particular has done a lot of that really amazing work alongside Queer Theory.

But, you know, we have to recognize that yes, the queer community is doing some of this work, but I also think that communities of color, scholars of color, activists of color are... we need to work alongside them, right? And, and I think that we've learned a lot from that community and those movements, and we've been able to take those and apply them to our own sort of ability to build community and understanding and eliminate workplace oppression. So, I think it's important to give a nod to the history and where a lot of that stuff comes from too.

Ryan Shuler:

That's a really great point that you make. Just again, I keep pulling it back to this like concept of belonging, that we're all sort of fighting for the same thing, which is to be valued for who you are as an individual. And it takes a village to make sure that all of those pieces fall into place for that to happen. So sort of in that vein, and I'll ask this as sort of our last question. Are there any recommendations you have, and this is UD employee specific, or websites we should check out, things we could do at UD, anything sort of from the Pride Caucus perspective, if we could do one thing, or if you could ask one thing, do you have any thoughts around that?

Em Rowe:

I think, to give you the biggest blanket statement answer, I think I would say just don't assume and listen. You know, I think that a lot of allyship really revolves around the ability to be a good listener. And that helps you to understand what is it that this person who I'm interacting with actually needs from me?

How can I actually support this person? Rather than assuming, well, the queer community experiences X, so I'm going to give Y. It's nuanced, it's varied. Everybody is in a different place. And everybody has a different background, even though we're under this somewhat monolithic umbrella of like, you know, divergent, like gender and sexuality based experiences. It doesn't mean that we all experience in the same exact way. So I think being a good listener is the most helpful thing that you can do. And it's a way to educate yourself. It's a way to grow personally, and it's a way that allows you to understand what it is that you can do to give back and to support.

Ryan Shuler:

That's great. So we will link in the show notes, the Pride Caucus website. We will put the information about the Delaware Pride event that's being held. And, Em, one final question that we ask to all of our participants is what do you do to keep yourself undeniably well?

Em Rowe:

Hm. You know, I feel like I do a lot to make sure that I'm balancing my own mental health with my work life. And, to be honest, I think serving in this way, like I think working on the Pride Caucus is my way to keep myself well. I really love being able to be in this position, to feel connected to my community, to feel like I can give back, for all the things that the queer community has given me through my scholarship and my life, and just in general. So I think that being on this board and working in this way is something that I do to counterbalance all of the tough things in life. Right. This is a space where I can go, and be accepted and feel good about who I am and what I'm doing.

Ryan Shuler:

I love that. Thank you so much for being with us today. Happy Pride Month. I hope everyone out there can find a space to celebrate, whether on campus, off campus, in your own homes, and really, think this through, think what this means for belonging. How can you be more supportive? How can we make sure that we are all part of, again, this human race, making sure that everyone feels valued, everyone feels they belong, especially in the workplace. Be a little introspective and as Em shared, be a good listener. So with that, thank you, Em. And we will talk to you all soon.

Em Rowe:

Thank you so much. Happy Pride!

Outro:

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