

***Studenting* S2E4: Queer History: 2S&LGBTQ+ Community at McGill**

*Guests:*

**Margaret:**





**Brooklyn:** If I could cut in. I absolutely agree, I think, honestly, the stress of the pandemic, the stress on our communities, on the medical infrastructure, all of these things, I think in my experience really bring the cracks in the foundation to light. I think something that we're really hearing now is that students don't want to go back to normal. We don't want to go back to the way things were pre-pandemic. I think a lot of excellent measures have been put in place by the university in terms of promoting accessibility, especially for students with reduced mobility, students who, for whatever reason, find the traditional university experience of, you know, going to class in person, waking up for lectures, traveling to campus, you know, inaccessible. And we find that a lot of students are quite worried to lose those accommodations that they have been granted, you know, under these special circumstances.

And I think as a community, I always like to think that common goals really, really build communities, that common causes are great for people to rally around. And we've seen, you know, yeah, as I mentioned, I do believe that the pandemic has brought quite a few issues to light. And I think that as a

**Margaret:** I think that's a really beautiful summary of the work that your group does, and I think that both of your points speak to sort of how the pandemic not only opened people's eyes to the barriers to accessibility, but also really had those those moments of sort of beautiful adaptation within the queer community and sort of the McGill community at large. And I think that that's a really, really important point to focus on. That this hasn't been sort of as a single point issue. It hasn't been uniquely good, uniquely bad. It's been so, so multifaceted and so complex for so many people. And sort of speaking to like the communities that you serve, there's longstanding communities, but what would you what would you say to like a first year student coming into McGill, wanting to know how to get in touch with resources, services like how would you serve that community best?

**Margot:** So I think it's a really good point, actually, that a lot of first year students are coming to McGill, and this is like the first time that they're not at their home, they're not living with their family. Perhaps they get to be themselves for the first time. They get to sort of reinvent themselves in a lot of ways. And I think that it's a very unique time in life when you get to be that person for the first time. And some students are coming to McGill and they have been out for years and this is just who they are and their families are very supportive. And for some students, that's quite the opposite of the truth. And I think that while I'm very happy to support the first group of students, and I obviously continue to support them. I think that when we focus on the second group of students, it provides a ... we - Queer McGill and the wellness advising team - really have a unique time to like, bring them in and tell them that they're loved and tell them that they're accepted. And I know that that sounds kind of smarmy or like shmoozy or whatever. But I really do mean it because I think a lot of students have come to the point, maybe they're 17, 18, 19 years old, and they've literally never said out loud a thing about their sexual orientation. And this is like the first time that they get to say this out loud or they've never met another queer person or they have, but they didn't know it because they were from a community where this is not a thing that you're allowed to talk about, or they come from a country where being out is equitable to being persecuted for it.

And they come to Montreal and Canada, where this is like a thing that is not persecutable and on the contrary is by and large accepted, especially in our like privileged community of McGill. And I've got to say that like, I think that we're very lucky to be in a community where like being part of the 2-spirit and LGBTQ+ community is accepted is, you know, embraced and is celebrated. And that's not the experience for everybody. So in answer to your question, like what do we do with first year students and how do we make sure that they are welcomed? I think, I mean, Brooklyn, put it really well when you said how many opportunities students have to plug in, whether it's through events, whether it's through, you know, like one on one peer support. And that's another thing that I really wanted to highlight from like from a wellness advising perspective. I get I have the privilege of meeting with students one on one, but also the Wellness Hub has peer health supporters, many of them who identify as queer and many of them who participate in a lot of different programming around the university.

So I think like I just don't want to speak only for myself. I want to like, like lift up my colleagues too, because there's a lot of really awesome peer health supporters who are doing really excellent work in the workshop work that they do, in the one-on-one work that they do at the Healthy Living Annex. Even like a greeter, for example, at the Wellness Hub, you know, a person who does a good job there – and I've got to say all of them are doing such an amazing job. But a person who does a really good job there will make a person who might be accessing health care for the first time and like, for example, a student who's never accessed health care but is looking to speak to a doctor about hormone therapy, for example, when they're greeted and their gender is respected. And, you know, like assumptions aren't made based on what they look like. And that's what our peer health supporters are doing. They're very good at making sure that

they're providing good care. That feels really good. And it's sort of like a non spoken and a nonverbal way of letting this person know that this is your community. You are accepted, you are loved. So I think that that's really important and I'm proud to be a part of that, you know?

**Margaret**Absolutely. And I think you, you know, you sort of cut yourself down there saying that it's smarmy or cheesy. But I think that for a lot of queer kids, like hearing someone older than them happy, healthy and live, telling them that they are loved and they are appreciated can be life changing. And so I think that that that is such an important message, especially to get to younger kids or people that, as you mentioned, haven't experienced this kind of community and acceptance in their life previously before coming to McGill.

**Brooklyn:** Absolutely, absolutely. Um yeah. I think 100% there are so many students coming to just at university in general, but McGill, in our case, never having explored their gender, sexuality, never feeling comfortable to do so. And I think a lot of, for example, the social events that we organize, these kind of networking - I hate the word networking, it feels so like entrepreneurial. But, community connection events, I will say, are designed to let people explore their gender or their sexuality. This is kind of a bit of a granular detail, but something we at Queer McGill do is check ins. We ask people's name and pronouns every time that they come into the space, every time that they that they access one of our services. Of course, if they're comfortable doing so, to give people an opportunity to test out new pronouns, test out new names, to explore themselves and to give them the space to do so. Because quite often, you know, as freeing as university life can be, you know, moving away from home, the amount of liberty that affords at the same time, it can be quite constricting if you're if you're in the process of exploring your gender.

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take the steps that they need to take to, you know, live as their true selves. Which sounds like it's coming from a queer self-help book from the nineties. We have plenty of those in the Queer McGill library. Side note: CaPS has donated so many, like queer in the workplace books to us that takes up a solid like fifth of our library is queer self-help books from CaPS.

**Margot:** Because the flip side of that, of course, is that, well, you know, you scroll through on mcgill.ca/LWA, you scroll down and you see Science, Engineering, Music, Arts, 2-Spirit LGBTQ+... Like ideally in an ideal world, if we look five, ten, 15 years on the future, it shouldn't be that I'm the only person that can provide the kind of care that I'm providing, ideally. And I mean and to credit my colleagues, my colleagues can also provide very good care to queer students. I think what's important is that, as you pointed out, it's the identification and like the feeling that like this is a dedicated space. I've had actually students book appointments with me and then email me and say, "Am I allowed to talk about anything?" which I find so endearing. Because my answer is, "Of course, dear. You can talk about absolutely anything you want." Because I think that people's understanding of what it means to receive mental health care is very like structured. Like I had one student asked me, like, "What is therapy?" And I said, "Well, you know, like in cartoons, when there's a person with a clipboard and then like somebody lying on a couch, that's like one version of it. But my version of it is like, whatever conversation is going to lead to making you feel more well, you know?" And so I think like if a student can see an acronym on a web page and they feel seen, great, let's do it more, you know?

**Margaret:** Absolutely. It's a huge first step, and I think that that's an important part of advocacy is recognizing the moves that have already been made, appreciating them, but then also still continuing to listen to the student body and move forward in really cool ways. And if you wanted to speak to that, you can go ahead.

**Brooklyn:** I'll try and make it quick for the sake of time because I do want to say I think McGill, as an institution, has made a lot of great first steps. Has made, you know, things, of course, like your position as a wellness advisor dedicated to queer 2-spirit students, I think is so admirable and so respectable as an institution to put that effort in. That being said, I think something that people forget about, as I mentioned, I think a lot of great first steps have been made. I think people forget about second steps and third steps and the follow up that needs to happen because as much as students will appreciate and value having a wellness advisor for them, I think end game.

Of course, students, there shouldn't just be one. There shouldn't just be *a* clinician that students feel safe going to, *a* doctor that students feel safe going to. Students should feel safe. Going to doctors should feel safe, talking to their professors, not to the one professor in the faculty that that we know as a community is safe. Because that's part of what we do at Queer McGill in terms of advocacy is keeping track of safe people in the institution, keeping track of the administrators, the professors, the support staff that students can go to and that we know will listen and treat them with respect and get them what they need. And these are not always the official, you know, administrative governance channels. It does not always look like going to the website, finding an email and going through the steps that are laid out for you. We've had to kind of find creative solutions to quite a few things.

But I think what's really important to remember with how many action plans and task forces the university has assembled: follow up is important. Because it's one thing to dedicate the resources to studying student needs and to, you know, writing reports about what students want or how we could help students. It's another thing to do the damn thing and to follow up with those plans because they're exciting. A lot of what the university has put together is exciting. And I think we as students, we just hope to see those kind of changes before we graduate.

**Margaret:** Absolutely. I think it's a really good point that you bring up that it is exciting and that actually sort of tips into that sort of last curiosity I had. I know we're pushing time. But yeah, my last question was really like whenever we talk about diversity or the 2S and LGBTQIA+ plus experience, there can be a lot of this story of like sort of Sisyphus pushing the rock, it's very like this hard, laborious experience where we're always pushing for change. But I wanted to know, like Margot, like in your LWA role, what really excites you about the work you're doing? Like what do you find rewarding? What makes you happy about showing up to work Monday through Friday?

**Margot:** I'd say that by and large, 99% of what is very exciting about this role is meeting with students. I have, I think I used the word privilege before and I'll say it again because I really do have such a privilege to meet one on one with students who are going through some tough times, but also some really beautiful times in life. And like my, my job is to sit there and talk them through it, you know, like in whether that's good or whether that's bad. I feel very lucky to be the person who gets to, like, walk that path with them because I think that like when I think of like clinical health services, we sometimes think of it as like a transactional thing where like, I am the "holder of knowledge" and I'm using air quotes here. I am a holder of some knowledge, but I am not the holder of the person's life. You know, like sometimes people say, like receiving mental health care, like you have the care and I am now receiving it. But in honesty, that is not how it works. I think I'm very lucky to be the person to walk along that path with them towards whatever that looks like. And so, you know, like in going back to what you're saying, like what excites me about this job? What excites me is that these people that I'm working with, while some of them are having some pretty rough times, what excites me is the really cool futures that they have. I think that I mean, part of... there's a technique called motivational interviewing, and it's sort of like looking down the future and seeing like, what's up? And I think that sometimes when people are in their really worst times,

disheartening when you don't see results in your lifetime at McGill. But looking back, especially looking back at Queer McGill's history and what we've accomplished over the years, the way that *we* have changed, the small differences in students lives, that is what really keeps me going. Knowing that even if I can't reshape the system in the short time that I'm here, at least I can make a difference in the lives of one or two students. At least we as an organization can improve the lives of a handful of students and make McGill a safer space for them, a space that they can identify with, that they can call themselves McGillians without feeling some resentment. And I think that that kind of fuel is necessary, you need those small wins to keep your energy up to fight for, you know, the big shake ups, the structural changes. You hope that that one day if you keep fighting and if you train the next person to fight as hard as you do that those changes will come and that someday a queer student, a trans student will just be able to go through their life at McGill without ever having to worry about it, without having to fight. And that's what at least keeps me going is that kind of that dream that one day one day someone will actually be able to just go to McGill and get their degree and be done with it without ever having to fight for their identity. And I do think we're making progress, however slow, and I hope one day the only way that I would consider really getting involved in alumni affairs would be to someday maybe see those changes and be proud of an institution that that has not always accepted me, but that I truly believe can. If given the proper time and effort.

**Margaret:** I think we've had a really, really lovely conversation today, and it's been such a pleasure to talk to you. Brooklyn, thank you.

**Brooklyn:** Thank you so much!

**Margaret:** You as well Margot, I really enjoyed the long chat with both of you.

**Margot:** Lovely meeting both of you as well. Great meeting.

**Brooklyn:** Really, it was great conversation.

**Margot:** Thanks.