

An Interview With Tyler Figueroa

IDENTITIES AND THE PERCEIVED DIFFERENCES THAT ACCOMPANY THEM ARE AN INHERENT PART OF SOCIETY AND HUMAN NATURE. HOW DO WE FIND A BRIDGE TO REFRAME THESE DIFFERENCES AND COLLECTIVELY RESPECT, VALIDATE, AND ELEVATE THESE DIFFERENCES? THE NEWEST MEMBER OF THE DEI TEAM, TYLER FIGUEROA AIMS TO CONTRIBUTE TO THIS MISSION. USING HIS BACKGROUND IN COMMUNICATIONS, TYLER WILL SERVE AS ASSISTANT DIRECTOR FOR DIVERSITY, EQUITY, AND INCLUSION THROUGH MARKETING AND COMMUNICATIONS | OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT.

AN ILLINOIS TRANSPLANT, TYLER GREW UP IN THE RURAL TOWN OF TILDEN LOCATED IN SOUTHERN IL. HERE HE FACED THE REALITY OF BEING OUTSIDE THE NORM, WHICH DESPITE THE HARDSHIP PREPARED HIM FOR AN EVEN LARGER WORLD FULL OF OTHER HARDSHIPS. DESPITE THESE OBSTACLES, TYLER IS GRATEFUL FOR THE EARNESTNESS THAT CAME WITH LIVING IN A SMALL TOWN, AS HE BELIEVES IT ISN'T ALWAYS SEEN IN THE REST OF THE WORLD.

TYLER GRADUATED FROM HIS ALMA MATER, BRADLEY UNIVERSITY, LOCATED IN PEORIA, IL WITH A MAJOR IN ADVERTISING AND MINORS IN CREATIVE WRITING AND THEATRE, LEADING TO A ROBUST LEARNING EXPERIENCE. HE ADDS, "A FUN FACT ABOUT BRADLEY IS THAT WE WERE FOUNDED BY A WOMAN NAMED LYDIA MOSS-BRADLEY, WHICH WAS PRETTY UNHEARD OF. SHE'S A DYNAMIC CHARACTER AND HER LIFE WAS FULL OF TRAGEDY, BUT SHE KEPT GOING AND AIMED TO CREATE A COMMUNITY THAT WAS PRETTY INCLUSIVE GIVEN THE TIME PERIOD!"

DURING HIS TIME AT BRADLEY, TYLER GREW A SENSE OF WANTING TO WORK IN A FIELD THAT CONTRIBUTED TO THE GOODWILL AND DEVELOPMENT OF ENSURING "OUTSIDERS" WERE HEARD AND VALIDATED. HIS DESIRE TO PROMOTE ADVOCACY WHILE STILL RETAINING CREATIVITY LED HIM TO MOVING TO NORMAN IN AUGUST 2020 FOR INCREASED PROFESSIONAL OPPORTUNITIES.

FOLLOWING A YEAR OF ACCLIMATING TO HIS NEW ENVIRONMENT AND FURTHER PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL GROWTH TYLER DECIDED IT WAS TIME TO PUT HIS DREAMS INTO ACTION.

IN HIS ROLE HE WILL FOCUS ON DEVELOPING CAMPAIGNS FOR THE DEI ORGANIZATION AND OTHER COLLABORATORS, AND DISTRIBUTION. THIS INVOLVES THE DEI NEWSLETTER, SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS, AND FUTURE COMMUNICATION CHANNELS. TYLER'S POSITION WILL IMPACT THE DEI MISSION BY HIGHLIGHTING DEI INITIATIVES TO CULTIVATE AND STRENGTHEN EFFORTS AT OU BY ACTIVELY SPREADING AWARENESS, PROVIDING RESOURCES, AND SUPPORTING THE OU COMMUNITY.

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I. COULD YOU TELL US ABOUT YOUR BACKGROUND?

TF: I AM 24 YEARS OLD WITH A MIXED BACKGROUND, BLACK, PUERTO RICAN, NATIVE, AND WHITE. I AM A QUEER MAN AND USE (HE/HIM/HIS) PRONOUNS. I LOVE MUSIC, READING, AND I HAVE AN ORNERY, BUT ADORABLE ORANGE CAT NAMED ARISTOTLE!

II. HOW MANY YEARS HAVE YOU WORKED IN HIGHER ED.?

TF: I HAVE WORKED EXTENSIVELY ON CAMPUS JOBS DURING MY UNDERGRADUATE CAREER, PREPARING ME FOR THIS SHIFT INTO HIGHER EDUCATION. HOWEVER, THIS IS MY FIRST YEAR WORKING IN HIGHER EDUCATION IN A POSITION RELATED TO MY AREA OF STUDY.

III. HOW MANY YEARS HAVE YOU WORKED IN OTHER INDUSTRIES?

TF: I WORKED IN RETAIL FOR THREE YEARS, WHICH HAS A STIGMA ATTACHED TO IT. WHAT IS OFTEN OVERLOOKED IS HOW COMMUNAL RETAIL CAN BE. DURING HARD DAYS SEEING HOW MY ACTIONS OR WORDS COULD CHANGE SOMEBODY'S DAY OR SHARING ADVICE WITH A CUSTOMER (AND VICE VERSA), HAD A SIGNIFICANT IMPACT ON ME.

OUTSIDE OF THAT FIELD, I WORKED IN THE AMERICA READS PROGRAM WHICH IS A READING AND LANGUAGE RESOURCE FOR CHILDREN AND TEENAGERS FOR FOUR YEARS. I SERVED AS BOTH A TUTOR AND MONITOR, GETTING TO WORK WITH KIDS IS ALWAYS REWARDING (I ARGUE THEY TEACH YOU MORE THAN YOU TEACH THEM). AS A MONITOR I WAS ABLE TO DEVELOP MORE LEADERSHIP SKILLS.

ADDITIONALLY, I INTERNED AT CRITTENTON CENTERS WHICH FOCUSES ON COMMUNITY WELLNESS AND OUTREACH, SPECIFICALLY FOR FAMILIES IN CRISIS DURING MY LAST YEAR OF UNDERGRAD. THE ABILITY TO MAKE A POSITIVE IMPACT ON THE COMMUNITY WHILE ALSO USING MY WRITING SKILLS WAS A WONDERFUL OPPORTUNITY.

IV. HOW IS DEI PART OF YOUR PROFESSIONAL CAREER?

TF: BEING A POC AND QUEER IS NOT SOMETHING THAT CAN JUST BE REMOVED. AS I ENTER THESE SPACES, IT IS A PART OF WHO I AM AND HOW OTHERS PERCEIVE ME WHETHER I LIKE IT OR NOT. BEING IN THESE SPACES, ESPECIALLY THOSE IN WHICH WE ARE THE NON-MAJORITY, PROVES THAT WE DO BELONG AND OPENS THE DOOR FOR OTHERS WHO AREN'T THE MAJORITY AND EASES THAT ENTRY FOR THEM.

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V. WHAT IS DEI FOR YOU?

TF: DEI IS ACKNOWLEDGING THAT WE ARE DIFFERENT. IT INVOLVES A CERTAIN AMOUNT OF EGO AND HUMILITY TO COME TOGETHER TO LOOK AT THESE DIFFERENCES, THE HISTORIES OF THESE DIFFERENCES, AND WORKING TOGETHER TO ESTABLISH A PRESENT DAY AND FUTURE WORLD THAT AIMS TO VALUE, RESPECT, AND ELEVATE THESE DIFFERENT IDENTITIES.

VI. WHAT TRIGGERED YOUR INTEREST FOR DEI?

TF: AS A QUEER PERSON OF COLOR, IT IS JUST A PART OF MY EXISTENCE. I BELIEVE GOING FROM A SMALL TOWN WITH A LACK OF DIVERSITY AND THEN ENTERING COLLEGE MADE ME MORE MINDFUL OF HOW IMPORTANT A DIVERSE POPULATION IS. HOWEVER, AS I WENT THROUGHOUT MY COLLEGIATE CAREER, I REALIZED THAT ALTHOUGH THIS COMMUNITY WAS VISIBLE SEEN, WE OFTEN WERE NOT BEING HEARD.

IT IS IMPORTANT THAT MARGINALIZED POPULATIONS, OR IN THE WORDS OF MICHAELA COEL (CHEWING GUM AND I MAY DESTROY YOU) "MISFITS" ARE NOT ONLY HEARD, BUT THAT WE ARE LET INTO SPACES WE TYPICALLY ARE NOT; WHILE STILL RETAINING OUR "MISFITS" IDENTITIES, AND THAT THESE SPACES MAKE INTENTIONAL CHANGES TO WELCOME US.

VII. WHAT IS SOMETHING ABOUT YOU THAT SURPRISES FOLKS?

TF: I LIKE TO WRITE! MY MUSE IS POETRY AT THE MOMENT.

I HAVE ALWAYS LOVED READING AND THAT LED ME INTO BELIEVING I WOULD BECOME A FICTION WRITER. DURING MY SENIOR YEAR I TOOK A POETRY WORKSHOP AND FELL IN LOVE. POETRY LENDS ITSELF TO CATHARSIS AND A DEEPENED SENSE OF CONTROL AND IMMEDIACY IN COMPARISON TO FICTION/LONG FORM WRITING (IN MY HUMBLE OPINION).

VIII. HOW EXCITED ARE YOU ABOUT THE POSITION AT OU-NORMAN?

TF: I AM BEYOND EXCITED AND EXTREMELY GRATEFUL TO BE OFFERED THIS OPPORTUNITY AND USE THE WISDOM I'VE ACCUMULATED THROUGHOUT MY JOURNEY TO MAKE A POSITIVE IMPACT ON OU'S CAMPUS THROUGH THE DIVISION OF DEI!