

Speaker 1:

Hello. This is Evan Schneider and welcome to Let's Talk About, produced by the Pace Center for Civic Engagement at Princeton University. In this season of Let's Talk About, we are featuring Princeton University students who are passionate about making service a part of their Princeton experience and living lives of service after they graduate.

Speaker 1:

In this final episode of season two, Julie Wilson, class of 2023, we'll be conducting the interview. Julie is currently an intern with Let's Talk About. She's been working this summer to edit season two episodes and coordinate interviews. Julie is a sophomore at Princeton from Newton, Massachusetts. She plans to major in psychology with a certificate in Spanish and is also on the premed track. She loves music, swimming, and working with young people.

Julie Wilson:

Emily Perez is a rising sophomore from Chattanooga, Tennessee, hoping to major in comparative literature with certificates in history and the practice of diplomacy and values in public life. Emily is currently working as a community action fellow with the Pace Center, where she is helping to design a service focused orientation experience for incoming freshmen, which will introduce them to learning and serving in the Princeton community. She has also been working this summer as a summer engagement coordinator, facilitating small group discussions and activities with cohorts of freshmen to help them get to know each other and learn more about Princeton. Hi, Emily, how are you?

Emily Perez:

I'm doing well. How are you?

Julie Wilson:

I'm good. So I'm really glad that you're on the show today, and I'm really excited to hear about the Community Action experience, especially because there's a lot of incoming freshmen who might be interested in hearing about it. So I'm really looking forward to talking with you today, and to get started, I was just wondering if you could share a little bit about how you got involved with CA and why you decided to become a CA fellow.

Emily Perez:

Yeah. So I wanted to get involved with CA because I did participate in the Community Action program as a freshmen, and my experience was really, really integral in helping calm my nerves about Princeton. I think a lot of freshmen come into Princeton with this sense that everyone is smarter than them, and I was the same way. I really thought everyone was going to be smarter than me and I wouldn't be able to keep up, but when I got involved with the community action orientation program, I found instead a group of students who were just like me and they had a lot of the same worries that I had, and my leaders were super helpful and really willing to answer any questions that I had.

Emily Perez:

So that really helped me feel like my college experience wasn't going to be this frightening nebulous world that I had imagined, and I really wanted to play a part in providing that experience for other students, and then I also really think that service is probably the most valuable way that students can

engage in the Princeton community. So CA gives a really important entryway into the world of service at Princeton, and as a CA fellow, I would be able to give students a chance to serve and to learn more about their home for the next four years and so that's a really exciting and invaluable opportunity.

Julie Wilson:

Yeah. Actually, I totally get what you're saying about feeling super nervous about coming to Princeton, and I also felt worried that everyone was going to be cooler than me or everyone was going to be smarter and I wasn't going to compare to the other people, and I also did CA and I made some great friends on my trip. So I'm wondering, what was your trip like? What did you do and where did you go?

Emily Perez:

Yeah, so I was part of the ... the theme was interfaith, multi-faith, and so we went to Stony Point up in New York, which is ... they described it as, an intentional multi-faith community. So I met a lot of people from a lot of different religious backgrounds, and that was a really interesting experience for me because I live in Tennessee in the Bible belt of the South. So I had never really gotten a chance to be with people who practice differently than the people at home, and I had a lot of really interesting conversations with people of different faith backgrounds, which taught me a lot about, I don't know, different perspectives that I hadn't considered before, and everyone was so respectful and really interested in hearing what other people had to say, and we had some really deep philosophical conversations, even just on the bus ride back. So that for me was just really neat. It gave me a sense of the type of conversations I'd be having later on at Princeton. I actually ended up having a lot of similar conversations on campus with other people, and yeah, it was just a really cool experience.

Julie Wilson:

That sounds really cool, and I feel like a big part of CA in general is the people that you meet and the conversations you have with them, and I'm really glad that the virtual structure, having it now be virtual, the conversation aspect probably won't be affected, but obviously there will be other elements that will be affected by the fact that it's virtual this year. So I'm just wondering, how did you plan the virtual structure for this program? How is it different and what challenges did you encounter?

Emily Perez:

Yeah, so it's definitely going to be a pretty different experience. We had to keep a couple of things in mind as we plan for a virtual community action. So one thing was that CA usually comprises these full days of programming. You're busy basically from the time you wake up to the time you go to bed. There might be a break in the middle or breaks for mealtimes, but it's really a very scheduled out day, and we didn't want that because we don't want students to have to be glued to their computers for several days straight. Zoom fatigue is a really real thing. So instead we plan on having about three hours of virtual programming every day, with some synchronous activities and some asynchronous activities, which will give students sort of the flexibility that they need when they're completing programming at home. This will especially be happening right before students move on campus so if they're busy packing or if they have home responsibilities, we want them to also be able to have the flexibility to complete those while doing CA, and we had to really restructure what we imagined community action to be.

Emily Perez:

There's a lot less action when everything's virtual. So a greater proportion of the time is spent doing team building activities within small groups, which will hopefully allow the students to get to know each

other and give them some familiar faces when they get on campus, and we really wanted to prioritize some of the hallmarks of CA, like Brave Spaces, which gives students the opportunities to share about their lives and their backgrounds and their fears, and so even though direct service is really difficult to achieve online, we still wanted to give students a strong introduction to the Princeton community and to the community partners that we usually work with as well. So students will have kind of an opportunity to interact with those community partners through panel discussions and talks and other sorts of activities.

Julie Wilson:

That's really cool that you are continuing to have these discussions with community partners, even though you can't obviously do it in person. I think it's really valuable to be able to meet people who are affiliated with the Princeton community and meet people who are doing great things in the world and who can inspire students to engage in service when they get on Princeton campus. So you have both synchronous and asynchronous activities. So obviously it's probably not going to take as much time as normal CA. So I guess I'm just wondering, why bother still doing it if it's this challenging, or if it's not going to take as much time. Why is it still important to have the CA experience?

Emily Perez:

Yeah, that's a pretty fair question, something I thought about a lot, but I realized that for incoming freshmen, Princeton feels like this nebulous and scary world before you get on campus. A lot of people have this idea, they don't know a lot about it, especially these freshmen who didn't get a chance to do an in person Princeton preview. You just know that the acceptance rate is really low, and it's, for a lot of students, a much bigger student population than their high schools, and you know that there are a lot of opportunities, but you probably don't know exactly what those opportunities are or how to get involved, and I know a lot of students worry about keeping up academically or finding a strong community. So orientation and community action, especially, are really central in giving you a sense of what resources are available to you.

Emily Perez:

Your CA leaders are some of the first upperclassmen that you meet and they help show you that there are a ton of people to help you through every step of the way at Princeton. For me, orientation showed me that Princeton really puts a lot of thought into their undergraduate experience. I remember being really struck by how planned out every moment was of CA and of orientation. So I have been able to see that also firsthand as a CA fellow, and an online orientation is definitely going to be different, but it'll still give students a really strong understanding of what to expect when they arrive on campus, all of the resources and people that will guide them through the next four years, and they'll also meet fellow first years, get to know some familiar faces, which is really important when you're entering an unfamiliar environment.

Julie Wilson:

Yeah. I actually had the same feeling last year when I had my orientation experience, because a lot of my friends at other schools, they kind of just got thrown into their classes or they had two days of orientation, but meanwhile, we had two full weeks, and while everyone else is starting their classes, I was like, "Yeah, I'm still playing Frisbee on the field," or something, just doing random stuff, and I agree. It really does show how dedicated Princeton is to giving its freshmen a good experience in setting them

off on the right track to succeed, and I'm really glad that you guys are putting all this work in to continue giving freshmen that experience, even though it's not going to be in person.

Emily Perez:

Yeah, definitely, and also all the CA fellows and other students have been working as summer engagement coordinators this summer. So part of the orientation experience has been all the freshmen are put in cohorts and they meet every week for five weeks and we've done all sorts of team building activities. So hopefully between the summer engagement program and the CA program, students come in with these people that they know, that they have contact information for, so as they're entering not only the unfamiliar environment of college, but the incredibly unfamiliar environment of post-COVID college, they have people to share experiences with, have fun with, commiserate with, whatever they need.

Julie Wilson:

Yeah. This is kind of a random question, but I'm wondering what activities have you done that have been particularly helpful in building that community?

Emily Perez:

Yeah, we've done a lot of activities which allow students to sort of share their different backgrounds with each other. So one thing I think that people seemed to enjoy was we did this roadmap of your life. So everyone had a Google slide where they went through sort of the story of their life and their really important moments and people that helped them to where they are today, and then they went into breakout rooms and they shared with each other and then we came back and talked about that a little bit, and sort of getting the opportunity to share a brief example of your life story with other people, I think was really fun for them because it really ... for the first time, you see how different everyone's lives are, and yet you've still made it to the same point and you're all coming together for the experience of Princeton for the next four years. So that's been really fun.

Julie Wilson:

Yeah, that's really cool, and I'm glad you found activities that get people to bond, because I know that's really hard to do over Zoom. So I guess I'm wondering, this is now speaking to the incoming freshmen if they're maybe listening to this episode, I'm just wondering, what's something that you want them to know or what's something you want them to hear about it?

Emily Perez:

Yeah. So one thing is that I want the freshmen to note that I really do feel for them. I understand that in many ways, this experience is not what they expected or hoped for, but as I've been speaking to the freshmen as a summer engagement coordinator, I've been really incredibly encouraged to see the optimism and the positivity that they're bringing in to the school year. A lot of them have been really dedicated to the summer engagement program and to showing up every week for the meetings and to talking to their fellow first years. So I really hope they bring that same sort of optimism and positivity into the school year. The school year is really going to be what you make of it and it's not going to be exactly what everyone thought it was going to be a year ago. It's really going to be a historic school year. So hopefully they make the best of it and still make some really good memories, and I want them to know also that we've put a lot of thought and care into designing the orientation experience. I hope that

shines through, and we're really excited to meet them and I really do think they'll enjoy what we have in store.

Julie Wilson:

Yeah. So I really like that perspective on how this year is just going to be different. It sounds worse, but in a way it'll be a bonding experience and kind of a valuable experience to just sort of cope with this situation all together, in a way. So I like that perspective a lot, just sort of it might be different, but it doesn't have to be bad.

Emily Perez:

Yeah, definitely.

Julie Wilson:

So for our last two questions, we ask these to everyone, and I'm just wondering, what are you feeling passionate about right now? And by passionate, I mean kind of ... it might not be a good thing. Maybe you're passionately angry about it or something like that, or maybe it's a good thing, who knows? So what are you feeling passionate about right now?

Emily Perez:

I mean, a couple of things. One thing is obviously my life has been Community Action. So I feel like to some extent I have to answer Community Action. I'm really proud of my team and the way we've adjusted our expectations and designed something completely unprecedented, and I've always been passionate about serving and helping others. So I think it'll be exciting to see how we can continue to encourage students to serve in a virtual format, and at the same time, I have been really working lately on trying to figure out how I'm going to do completely online classes from home and how I personally am going to make that the most optimistic and positive experience, and that's also any advice that I have for freshmen that I can offer, through my own learning, through trying to figure out what works for me in online classes, that I can pass that on to the students I'm talking to. So I'm really just, I think, passionate about making the absolute best of the very strange circumstances that we've been put in lately, and really trying to make this the best experience possible for myself, for my family that I'm going to be living with for the next few months, for the freshmen we're going to be talking to.

Julie Wilson:

Yeah, I really like that. You're feeling passionate about making it the best it can be. I want to have that attitude too, because I obviously have been feeling kind of dejected about it. It makes me feel good that we're all working on making the most of it together and we're all kind of in similar situations, and that like inspired me what you just said. Okay, I'm wondering, what are you feeling hopeful about right now?

Emily Perez:

Yeah, I mean kind of, I guess, in a similar vein, I'm class of 2023, so I'm not going to be back on campus and I am hoping that I'll be back on campus in the spring, but to be honest, we really don't know. So I'm obviously really sad about that, but I'm also really hopeful about the upcoming semester. I feel like I have inner strength that I need to tap into or something to get past the challenges of online classes. I'm excited about the new classes I'm going to take, and I'm also really hopeful about the different ways I can continue to be involved at Princeton from home. I have seen the emphasis that Princeton is trying to

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put on community building right now, even virtually. I have been involved in that emphasis on community building virtually. So I'm really hopeful and optimistic about my own fall semester, and I also, speaking to the freshmen, really hope that the class of 2024 feels the same way.

Julie Wilson:

Yeah. If they don't feel that way right now, do you feel like CA will help them get there?

Emily Perez:

Yeah, I think it'll give them a chance to see that the people at Princeton are really trying to create these programs that focus on them, that are individually designed for the freshmen. They're not just being thrown into this. Every single other freshmen is in exactly the same situation, pretty much, with online classes, and if they're on campus, social distancing protocols that will make it a challenging semester, but it'll be a challenging semester for everyone together. So hopefully they'll feel fairly optimistic about that.

Julie Wilson:

I hope so.

Emily Perez:

Yeah.

Julie Wilson:

Well Emily, thank you so much for joining us today, and I really hope that any incoming freshmen who are listening to this get something out of it, or they're getting excited for their orientation experience, because we're really excited to have them on campus or part of the Princeton community, whatever kind of campus that may be.

Emily Perez:

Thank you so much.

Speaker 1:

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