Julie Wilson:
Welcome to Let's Talk About. In this short installment of the series, we're interviewing the four recipients of the Fisher Award, a prize presented by the Pace Center to a Princeton senior who demonstrates an entrepreneurial spirit, zest for life, love of people and loyalty to Princeton through their work in the realm of civic engagement.

Julie Wilson:
In this episode, we're speaking with Krystal Cohen. Krystal, a member of the class of 2021, has served as project leader and executive board member for Community House, a Pace Center program that works with families to support underrepresented youth in the Princeton area. She's also an operations coordinator for Camp Kesem, Princeton, and the former community outreach lead for the Engineers Without Borders Kenya team. Hi Krystal. How are you?

Krystal Cohen:
Hey, I'm good. How are you doing?

Julie Wilson:
I'm doing well. I'm so glad you're here talking to us today. Obviously you've been super successful with your service during your time at Princeton, with being project leader and being an executive board member for Community House and everything like that. Obviously your work with Pace has been amazing overall. I was just wondering if you could tell us a little bit about just a story about how you approach service and addressing the needs that you see in the world.

Krystal Cohen:
Sure. I'll tell you about one of my favorite service projects, which was actually a civic service learning camp that I designed for a local charter school in Trenton called Foundation Academies. I was actually connected with them through PICS as a summer intern and just kind of never left. I still work there now. But my first summer there was pretty special, partly because of this program.

Krystal Cohen:
Essentially the school has a summer academy that students can go to for academic credit, but it's really just academically focused. The summer before I arrived, one teacher who kind of had a passion for it, saw the program kind of as an opportunity to do more and to get students more involved with service specifically. She kind of started this informal sort of program where she'd kind of drive around her personal vehicle, pick students up from their houses and kind of take them to volunteer of course, with parent permission and all of that. They'd kind of do like park cleanups or volunteer at a food shelter, kind of five or so kids, maybe a couple of times a week.

Krystal Cohen:
When I joined and I kind of heard about that, I absolutely loved the idea of a service-oriented summer camp or enrichment program for students. My team and I kind of just ran with the idea and kind of turned this informal system into a full-blown summer camp. It was every day for half a day, ran for several weeks, really aimed at kind of getting students more involved with service and connecting them, giving them opportunities to connect with their community and kind of apply a service lens to their everyday life.
Krystal Cohen:
I mean, I think I saw several needs there and kind of an opportunity to do a lot at once, so kind of addressing summer slide and kind of giving students a staple and enriching environment every day during the summer, but also kind of connecting these students with these amazing non-profits and trying that were looking for volunteers and kind of giving them a platform to give back. That was definitely a fun one for me.

Julie Wilson:
That is so cool how you were able to combine all those different motives together into one thing and also how you were able to sort of take the personal, it was like kind of a personal mission for one person operating from her own car and things like that, to making it into a real sort of organization. That is so amazing that you were able to do that.

Krystal Cohen:
I mean, I'm definitely a big fan of institutionalization. I think individual people have really great ideas and that's really just about kind of fully establishing those into the culture of an organization and that's kind of how you get them to last.

Julie Wilson:
Absolutely. I feel like since you do so much work with students and motivating students to participate in service, I feel like you'll have a really good answer to this question, which is given your success with service, what advice do you have for other students maybe at Princeton or outside of Princeton who want to get involved?

Krystal Cohen:
I mean, short answer, just do it, get involved. But long answer, I think anything service related just comes from passion. It's like if you have a passion for something or if there's a certain social cause that you're really interested in, just follow that passion, find other people who are interested in it, and then that's kind of how you find the groups and the organizations that are doing that sort of work.

Krystal Cohen:
If you're interested in criminal justice reform, there are so many amazing people on campus and so many amazing groups who are doing stuff like that. If you're interested in education reform, there's community house. We'd always love to have you. But really just having conversations with people and kind of going where your heart leads you, and then you'll kind of find the right fit in terms of timing and what sort of work you're doing. But there are so many opportunities out there so just get started.

Julie Wilson:
Absolutely. I felt like when I was coming to Princeton, I was almost overwhelmed by the number of things that were available to me when it came to service. I felt like, "Oh, wow, there's so much to do. How am I going to be able to pick one thing." But you're right, just kind of following whatever you're particularly passionate about at the time. I guess not overloading yourself too though.

Krystal Cohen:
Definitely. I think we have the big service fair at the beginning of every year and there are just so many tables and it's easy to get overwhelmed there, but just remembering you have time and also remembering that service isn't just something you have to do while you're at Princeton. It's not like you have a time limit of four years where you have to do all your service, just remembering that it can be a lifelong journey. Whatever you do now, you can always move around and shift and follow other passions.

Julie Wilson:

Definitely. If you look for things, there's always going to be an opportunity for you to help and engage in some way. But thank you so much. That was so great. It was really good to hear from you. Congratulations on the award and thanks so much for being here.

Krystal Cohen:

Thank you. Thank you.