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Evan Schneider:

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.

Evan Schneider:

Krystal Cohen, Class of 2021, is a rising senior from Jersey City, New Jersey. At Princeton, she is majoring in the sociology department while pursuing certificates in African American studies, statistics and machine learning and leader preparation. Cohen's interest in educational equity has informed her involvement in Community House, a student led organization that works with families to support underrepresented youth in the Princeton area. Currently, she serves as the co-chair of the Community House executive board, as well as the project leader for CHASE, Community House's After School Enrichment program for first-generation, low-income, high school students.

Evan Schneider:

Hey Krystal, how are you today?

Krystal Cohen:

I'm good. I'm good. How are you?

Evan Schneider:

Yeah. Thanks so much for agreeing to do this. Really appreciate it.

Krystal Cohen:

Of course. Thanks for having me.

Evan Schneider:

So I just want to start by asking you, can you describe some of your life experiences that brought you to doing the work that you do at Community House, both with CHASE and also with CHEB, and also what are those?

Krystal Cohen:

What are CHASE and CHEB?

Evan Schneider:

Yeah.

Krystal Cohen:

Okay. So CHASE is an afterschool program held right on campus that works with local high school students, all of whom identify as low income, a student of color, or would be first generation of college. So it's kind of a tutor mentoring setup. Can you help with homework, but we also have movie nights and college prep workshops and all that fun stuff. But Community House executive board... So CHASE is one of 16 Community House programs and the Community House executive board kind of oversees all of

those. So I'm also the co-chair of the board. So I get more of a macro level view of the other projects and things, which is really cool.

Krystal Cohen:

But as for how I got there, usually when people ask me this question, I say that I went to 10 different schools throughout the course of elementary school. Just kind of my fun fact. But on a more serious note, going to that many schools, you start to notice the differences between them, whether your teacher's there every day of the year or if they're absent for half the time. If you have to share textbooks or if you get your own Chromebook. So yeah, I kind of went to quite the range and after a while, started to kind of pick up on different things, just subtle differences usually with the schools that I went to that were more predominantly low-income or predominantly black, there just wasn't the same quality of education.

Krystal Cohen:

And I think the older that I got, the more that I wanted to actively fix that and actively reshape the experience of students like me. I've been coming to Princeton and finding out about CHASE and CHASA and Community House. It was just directly aligned with what I wanted to do.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah. We see that disparity just between Princeton and Trenton as well. It's very, very clear that people are having very different educational experiences in those two cities.

Krystal Cohen:

Yeah. For me, that difference is a little strange just because... So I also intern at a school in Trenton, so I've kind of been able to see the two ways that the districts have been handling it. And yeah, the difference there is just mind boggling to me.

Evan Schneider:

So what are you working on this summer and how did you get interested in it?

Krystal Cohen:

So a lot, but my main thing, I'm doing a internship with the Corporation for National and Community Service, which is just the federal agency that oversees some of the broad service projects like AmeriCorps or CityCorps. So I was connected with them through a fellowship aspect, actually. I'm a part of the SINSI program, Scholars in the Nation's Service Initiative. But essentially, the program tries to encourage students to pursue a career in the federal government, and part of that is doing an eight to 10-week internship at a federal agency.

Krystal Cohen:

So when I was looking at different things I could do, AmeriCorps just seemed to make the most sense. There are a lot of ed-focused programs within that, like Teach for America or City Year. And I think the idea of being able to engage in service on such a broad level while also being able to evaluate the impact of some of these targeted programs really appealed to me.

Evan Schneider:

Have you started your internship yet?

Krystal Cohen:

Mm-hmm (affirmative). Yeah, I have.

Evan Schneider:

How's it going?

Krystal Cohen:

Good. Good. It's a different thing to the type of work than I usually do, which has been interesting. I think I'm usually a very on the ground person when it comes to service and with this internship, I'm in the office of research and evaluation. So I'm doing a lot of surveys and data analysis, which I guess I usually equate with academics. So being able to do it in more of a service sphere through this, I guess, more professional lens has been pretty interesting.

Evan Schneider:

And having both been now a remote student and I guess, I assume a remote worker, are those two experiences comparable? What are the big differences? I know you probably just started. So...

Krystal Cohen:

Yeah. I mean, I think adjusting to Princeton remotely definitely helped prepare me for engaging in my internship remotely, but there are definitely some big differences, one of them being structure. Princeton remote at the very least had certain times when I had to log on to Zoom and be in class, I think. But with my internship, it's just a lot more free-flowing. My supervisor, "doesn't do video calls." So I've gotten to know their voices quite well, which is just a different kind of feel. But yeah, I guess we'll see as I go, but still adjusting.

Evan Schneider:

So I want to switch gears a little bit and talk about what's going on in the country right now with the renewed focus on racial justice. Educational programs face unique challenges in taking care of and educating students. So what responsibilities do you think Community House has in how it addresses this issue? And I know that this is not a new issue that all of a sudden Community House has to start thinking about. So it'd be really helpful if you just let us know, how does Community House think about racial justice?

Krystal Cohen:

So, yeah. I mean, like you said, this isn't a new movement. Racial inequalities have been around for a while, and I think that education inequality specifically is a very big subset of the racial justice movement. You can't have racial justice without criminal justice reform. You can't have racial justice without education reform. You can't have racial justice about addressing food insecurity. I think it's all very related.

Krystal Cohen:

And Community House has been doing a lot of work in that area for the 50 years of its existence. And I think now, it's on us to one, continue doing the work that we've already been doing, supporting our

students, addressing the education gap, making sure that our students continue to get the resources and mentorship that we typically provide, but also in serving as a resource to others and a source of knowledge in educating people about these issues and these different dynamics and the ways in which race influences education and that whole interaction there.

Krystal Cohen:

But yeah, I mean Community House, we serve predominantly students of color. And I think with our mission, we sit in a place that gives us the opportunity to reach our students in a way that is really helpful to families right now by giving them things to do, by giving them support and structure during this time. So I think it's on me and the rest of my Community House team to just keep doing that and keep being that place for our kids.

Evan Schneider:

Yeah. When Charlotte, who was the director of Community House was out on maternity leave, I had the privilege of getting to see Community House more up-close and personal, and I didn't realize how involved a lot of the parents are and the families are in terms of what you all are trying to accomplish. So I found that aspect really cool and exciting, and I think really smart too, obviously.

Krystal Cohen:

Yeah. I mean, I think everything that we do, of course we work with youth, but everything was a very family oriented affair, especially with a lot of our programming for the summer, just because, especially since we're virtual it's not like the student is isolated from their family. So at least what the board is trying to do is encourage a lot of family friendly sorts of things. So we're sending out a newsletter every week with different craft and baking tutorials that families can do together. It should be cool.

Evan Schneider:

So in terms of... I know one of the main goals of Community House is to provide a place where people can feel safe, which isn't necessarily an educational goal. It's just in addition to providing that educational support, you want to have an atmosphere where people feel safe. And so given that goal, but then given the need to address directly and talk about some of the inequities in society, I'm just curious how you all think about going about creating that balance.

Krystal Cohen:

I think that Community House does represent the safe space for a lot of our kids. I think when trying to find that balance, it's on me to understand that I can't and shouldn't dictate how my students process or engage in the movement right now. I think it's just about creating space for however they want to cope with it. So some of our workshops that we're running this summer are more focused on racial justice and activism. We have a history trivia night planned to focus on the civil rights movement. We're also working on an activism type of workshop, giving students an opportunity to learn skills to create direct change in their communities.

Krystal Cohen:

But we're also doing fun things. We're giving students a chance to get away from the weight of all of that right now. So just light things like baking or yoga and self care strategies. So yeah, I think when finding that balance, it's also about remembering that students have to decide what that balance looks

like for themselves. So on my end, it's more about just offering both sets of things for them to [inaudible] or opt out of.

Evan Schneider:

One of your responsibilities is to think about the student experience, a two T experience, but you're also responsible for helping Princeton students understand how to interact with the students that they're going to be working with. I'm just curious, has current events in any way changed your strategies or does it just reinforce some of the things you've always been trying to say?

Krystal Cohen:

I mean, like you said, supporting students starts with supporting volunteers. And I think that year around, before the event started, the Pace Center has always been very intentional about cultural competency training and making sure that people understand some of the complexities and issues that our students might be struggling with. And I think that now, especially, that type of thing is really coming to the forefront.

Krystal Cohen:

So it's just about one, making sure that my volunteers are aware and are informed and prepared to have those conversations with students if students want to have them, and that's just about sharing resources with them, whether it's books or movies or articles that they can read to make sure that they can engage in those sorts of discussions. But it's also about supporting my volunteers, especially those who may have a more personal connection to what's going on right now and giving them space to process and just keeping their mental health and capacity to be engaged in mind.

Evan Schneider:

So I want to take things out a little bit broader and just... I know you pretty well, Krystal, and so other people may not, but I know that you have a really strong interest in service and that service is a lens that you use to help you, an example, think about what internship you're going to do for the summer. And so, I'm just curious if you can elaborate a little bit about how service has informed both your career goals and your interests.

Krystal Cohen:

I think whenever I get that sort of question, it's hard to isolate surface in everything that I do, because like you said, it is ingrained and embedded in everything that I do from my [inaudible] to my classes to my extracurriculars, I really try to make service central to all that I'm doing on campus.

Krystal Cohen:

I think that within the service mindset that I have, I've always just had this one goal and that's to create opportunities for students of color and low income students to thrive. And I think that that goal guides everything that I do in life. That's why I joined Community House. It's why I'm on the board of Camp Kesem. That's why I've been working a school and I'm interning at [inaudible] this summer. And as I go on past Princeton, it'll be the reason why I want to work for education non-profits or do education research.

Evan Schneider:

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That's great. So we're going to head right on to the final questions, which we like to ask everyone, Krystal, which are, what are you passionate about right now?

Krystal Cohen:

What am I passionate about? A lot. I think that within this time, being quarantined and with everything going on in the world, I've been really intentional about finding new hobbies. So I've been dancing, I've been drawing, I've been doing yoga, and that stuff has really brought me a lot of peace. And I think besides that, I'm really excited about being able to share that with my kids. So with the CHASE workshops I'm doing yoga and goal setting workshop next week, which should be fun.

Krystal Cohen:

And at the end of the summer, I'm also involved in this other camp and I'll be leading a Zumba class virtually, so that should be an experience. But yeah, I think just exploring this artistic side of myself and being able to share it with my kids definitely brings me a lot of joy right now.

Evan Schneider:

That sounds great. I want to attend your online Zumba class, not just to watch.

Krystal Cohen:

Do it.

Evan Schneider:

And what in the world brings you hope right now?

Krystal Cohen:

I will say, I think that a lot of people have grown frustrated with the speed at which change has come, especially when it comes to the Black Lives Matter movement and just racial justice overall. But I don't know. I think I'm more optimistic about that kind of thing. I think that seeing all 50 states and several countries all protesting together, was really a happy moment for me, and really gave me a lot of hope that things will continue to progress and things will continue to change. Even if it's small steps, I think we're moving in the right direction, and that gives me hope.

Evan Schneider:

Well, Krystal, thank you so much for joining us. I really appreciate your time. It's so wonderful to get to catch up a little bit and talk to you today.

Krystal Cohen:

Yeah, definitely. This was fun.

Evan Schneider:

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