

John Boccacino:

Hello and welcome back to the 'Cuse Conversations Podcast. I'm John Boccacino, Senior Internal Communications Specialist at Syracuse University.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

leaders at the United front Multicultural Center at the university. They introduced me to that center. It allowed me to meet a diversity of different people from a variety of backgrounds. I became a student leader in that center and I would not be the VP for diversity inclusion today were it not for that event. It fundamentally changed my life.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And I realized that I did not want students to ever feel that isolation, that fear, that confusion. And I wanted to take an active role in making sure that campuses across the country were welcoming, were inclusive, were able to provide environments where students and their families and communities can thrive. And so that's one of the main reasons why I actually chose to do this work.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And since then as an undergraduate and throughout my professional career, I've done different aspects of DEIA work, including being a dean of students overseeing a multicultural center, also working on campus climate assessment. So the breadth and depth of my portfolio is really due in large part because I wanted to make sure I was doing work in different parts of the campus that would have the broadest reach in addition to students, how can I also work closely with my colleagues, work closely with alumni and with community leaders who can make this environment inclusive and accessible for all?

John Boccacino:

What exactly when we're talking about diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility, what does DEIA mean to you?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

It includes the full participation of all members of our community. It creates opportunities to thrive and to be successful in their respective roles. It is a feeling of belonging, a feeling that I can contribute to the greater good of the community and that my contributions will be valued. It's looking at issues of fairness and of equity. It allows for all members of the community, again, to participate in ways that are meaningful for them. It creates opportunities for, as I did, as an undergraduate student actually reclaim some parts of my identity, explore, express different parts of my identity, including my gender identity, for example.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And so when I look at DEIA work or diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility, I'm really thinking about how can all of our community members in their respective roles create meaningful experiences for themselves to be successful in their roles? So they don't have to hide parts of who they are that, they can come in as their full selves to contribute and be successful without fear of any kind of harm, psychological, emotional, even physical harm, but that they can be all of who they are and be successful in the community.

John Boccacino:

When it came to Syracuse University and your talents, why was this a good match? Why was Syracuse a place you wanted to take your talents to next?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Mm-hmm. So, first of all, the other piece is that Syracuse has a really strong reputation around DEIA. And in particular what makes Syracuse special is around accessibility and also its reputation of being a destination for veterans. As a child of a veteran, I benefited greatly from those benefits. And so I

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And while a lot of times we might say that we espouse these values. If we don't have the resources allocated to do that, then we really set up those vice presidents up for failure. And I found that Syracuse is really poised for greatness to be both a national, international leader around these topics. And I really am excited to work with the team to do that.

John Boccacino:

We are so excited to have you joining our university campus beginning on June 1st. And I'm so happy that you talked about the brilliant resource that is 119 Euclid. It's welcomed and opened to all. It's such a hub of cultural activity. The food that's cooked in there is phenomenal. The music, the cultural experiences. Do yourself a favor if you're listening to this podcast, 119 Euclid, check it out. It's a fantastic resource for our students of all backgrounds of all ethnicities.

John Boccacino:

It's really a welcoming space for all. And it's one of several outstanding resources that you're going to get to work with in your new role. I want to offer you a chance to talk about two of them in particular, the Intercultural Collective and Multicultural Affairs, which have been staples on this college campus. What do you look forward to most about working with those two entities?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Mm-hmm. That's actually where I've come from as well. I used to be a director of multicultural centers, and I used to be someone who oversaw similar grouping as the collective. And so for me, it's actually easier for me to blur those lines between administration and student experience, for example, because at the end we really are student-centered. And so the most important thing is that students also don't need to know where these divisions lie. Because at the end of the day, what they need to do is have the support, holistic support network for them, again, to be successful.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

I'm really excited about drawing from the collective wisdom of my colleagues who are in those areas. They come with an incredible wealth of knowledge and experiences. And if you were to take the number of years of experience that we've had there you'll have over a century. And I like seeing the ways in which the collective in particular is modeling a very holistic approach to DEIA.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

The fact that we also have a disability cultural center. Again, phenomenal, innovative, very different. That's not something that you always see. And so to be able to work with colleagues who come with that wealth of experience and knowledge is very exciting to me, and I look forward to working with them.

John Boccacino:

You've already been to our campus several times before actually taking over in this role. Why was it important for you to get to know our campus and who have you been meeting with so far during your visits, and what have you learned about the university during those in-person gatherings?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Mm-hmm. I know that the campus is excited and anxious for the new vice president to hit the ground running, that there has been a lot of work done previously, whether it's the campus climate assessment or the various reports or the draft strategic plan that I'd referenced earlier. And I wanted to make sure that when I start on June 1, I wasn't coming in completely unknowledgeable of some of the foundational



Mary Grace Almandrez:

And the third is making sure our policies, our procedures, our practices are inclusive. I come from a tradition that allows for multiple voices to be at the table. And if we don't all fit at the table, it's going to move the table. And so my leadership style is one that really draws from expertise and wisdom from all parts of the university. And I think that's going to be really critical as we move forward.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And the last piece I would say is let's do it, let's do the work. Again, we need to make sure that we're doing right by all of those individuals who contributed to the draft strategic plan, but also all the students who had demanded changes. All the alumni who are looking back and saying, "Why is it still like this?" Let's make it different for them. Let's make it different for the future generations. Let's make it different for us as community members who are here now.

John Boccacino:

I think it's refreshing to hear your attitude, your energy. I can tell right away, you can't wait to hit the ground, not just walking, but running on June 1st. And I love your analogy of getting a bigger table. If we don't fit at the table, we'll have to make the table as large as we can to, again, make this as welcoming for everyone on the university campus.

John Boccacino:

I want to pivot to something you brought up that I was not aware of when it comes to DEIA, and it's the veteran piece, the veteran's component. We have prided ourselves and Chancellor Syverud has done such a great job in making Syracuse University the number one place for veterans. Is this a new part of the DEIA movement?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Yeah. And what makes

monocultural way, but we have a more intersectional way in which we talk about these issues in these groups.

John Boccacino:

I want to now go and give you an opportunity to enlighten us into your background. And is there a piece of advice, is there words of wisdom that you were told that somewhere along the way resonated to the point where Mary Grace now every day carries that bit of advice with her? What's the best piece of advice you've ever received?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

You can't see it now because my office isn't set up. However, in my office, I hang a painting that my brother got for me from the Philippines. I am Filipina and I'm very proud of that identity. And in that painting, it depicts the value of Bayanihan. And Bayanihan refers to a community coming together for the greater good. And how that's expressed in the painting is you will see a group of individuals who are carrying on bamboo poles on top of their shoulders, a hut, a hut made of materials.

Mary Grace Almandrez:

And Bayanihan refers to a practice typically in rural villages where the townspeople would come together and help their neighbor move their house, move their hut from one part of the village to another. Everyone from the community who is able-bodied would be able to would help in that



I know nationally it's celebrated during May. You're going to be starting in June. So we're kind of in that overlap period, but could you elaborate just a little bit more for us, what exactly your Filipina heritage means to you, how strongly that identity is a part of exactly who you are?

Mary Grace Almandrez:

Actually, my dissertation was on Asian, Pacific Islander women in leadership. Both because I saw the

