

Voices of MSU

Interviewee: Jessica Gray (JG)

Interviewer: Mileena McDonald (MM)

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MM: Can you tell me where you were born?

JG: Yeah, so I was born in Southfield, Michigan, but I grew up in Detroit, Michigan.

MM: Can you tell me a little about your family?

JG: I have one sister; she is twenty years old. Then, I have my mother. I know my father. They are divorced, so he lives in New York and my mom lives in Detroit.

MM: Where did you go to high school?

JG: I actually went to three different high schools. I went to Renaissance High School for my freshman year. I went to Flat Rock High School for my sophomore, junior year, and part of my senior year. Then, the rest of my senior year and graduating, I went to University Preparatory Academy High School.

MM: What was your experience like in those school systems?

JG: Honestly, it was very interesting. Renaissance is a public school; Flat rock is a public school in the suburbs; University Prep is a charter school. It was vastly different going to each one. Renaissance was my favorite; it was livelier; I had a good time. It had a lot of resources there as far as STEM [science, technology, engineering, mathematics] and performing arts.

Flat Rock was smaller; everybody knew each other. Football games were big there. It was a small town type thing. Actually, no, that was my favorite because they had a lot of different resources and classes you can take.

At Renaissance and University Prep, it mainly was generalized courses instead of like, you know, parenting classes, different skills you can do. U-Prep did its job; it helped me graduate high school [laughs]. That one was pretty cool. They did not have a lot of resources there; it was just normal stuff. Maybe every now and again, you would get a few good classes like pop culture.

MM: What were some of your interests in high school?

JG: Back in the day, I used to want to be a nurse. When I first started, I would say my interest was medical. I was involved in the blood drives and doing things of that nature. I was in choir; that was interesting [laughs]. Most of my college career, I was in some sort of choir. Those are my main interests and doing stuff in the black community. When I went to Flat Rock, which was predominantly white, I would do stuff like—*Ok, we are going to learn about black history this month*—learn about black culture, black hair, things like that. I say activism, medical stuff, and the choir were my interests.

MM: Was there anyone in particular that influenced you during that time?

JG: I did have one teacher. When I graduated from University Prep, I had a teacher; her name was Miss Alba. She actually encouraged me to apply here because I did not want to apply. She is actually the reason why I applied here. We were doing a class competition; she was like, “I know you can get into all these universities like definitely apply. At least, one more application, so you could say I got this many applications.” I would say her because she really pushed me. She did not let me be lazy like I really wanted to be.

MM: Was there anything else you heard that made you want to go to MSU?

JG: Initially, I didn’t want to go to MSU because I said I did not want to be another number. I was like, *I’m just a dollar sign*. It was really Miss Alba and my mom who convinced me to apply. Then, I found out I got a scholarship that would help me pay for tuition. I was like, *Money speaks, so I am going to MSU*.

MM: What were your first impressions of campus?

JG: Big. The first time I came on campus, I was like, *This is huge; I am going to get lost*. It was pretty because you know it was summer, so you had the flowers and everything. Mainly, just big, scary, and pretty at the same time was my first impression.

MM: Was MSU a diverse space during your time as a student?

JG: I would say it depended on how active I was as far as seeing the diversity. When I first came here, my answer would have been no. It would have been it is a predominantly white school. I didn’t really see any diversity, but the more I got involved in campus. . . Now, I am an RA; I definitely see a whole other side. I would say yes; it just looks different.

When I first got here, I saw diversity as you got multiple races of people. It is like the flyers where you see everybody walking around. I feel like MSU’s diversity is mainly international. You have students from China, from Japan, from Africa, from Asia, and Middle East. I would say yes

and no. I definitely think it can be improved, but I do think they are diverse as far as getting a whole bunch of international students and expanding that part.

MM: What was the transition like when you first came to MSU?

JG: The transition was very interesting. My first roommate, I knew her at high school back at Flat Rock. I thought it would be an easy transition but it really was not. I had to get used to doing everything on my own. So, making sure my transportation was covered—buying my bus passes, getting on the bus, making sure, I get to class on time—was a very difficult transition for me. In a way, I am always . . . I am still kinda late [laughs]. But, back then, I was really late all the time. Just getting adjusted to like, *Ok, I got to eat in front of a whole bunch of people all the time if I want to eat* [laughs]. I would say it was a big transition.

MM: What would you say helped with that transition?

JG: I would say friends, so like getting to know people. When I first got here, they told me, *Ok, the more involved you are on campus the easier it would be to make friends and the easier you'll adjust.* For me, that wasn't particularly true because I was involved in different things, but nothing really stuck because I did not know who I was fully. Talking to different people in my class, in my major, that helped me the most.

When you go cafeteria, you can eat with people in the caf; you get to know them better; they direct you to different things on campus, different resources. I learned about the MLC [Math Learning Center] from my friends. My teacher talked about it—it is kinda like when your mom says something, but when your friend says it, it is a revelation. It was like that. Not my mom, my teacher would say, *“Go to the MLC for math.”* But, my friend was like, *“The MLC really helped”* and I am like, *Ok, I'm going to the MLC.* I would say making new friends, meeting new people really helped me adjust very well.

MM: Did you already know what your major was going to be before you arrived?

JG: Yes, I actually have a different major now. Before I came, I was convinced I wanted to be a geriatric nurse. I was like, *This is my life's work.* I took care of my great grandma. She is still alive, but she was sick. I took care of her and I was like, *I am a nurse* [laughs]. I was dead set on becoming a nurse. Then, actually taking the classes that I needed to take to become a nurse convinced me that I was not a nurse. I found out that I was a social worker. When I first came to college, I thought I knew. I was determined to finish school. Then, actually going through college, taught me something else.

MM: What kind of classes were you most interested in taking?

JG: Honestly, out of all my college career, I would say sociology and history, which kind of go hand in hand to me. I really liked my. . . I can't remember, it was Race and Ethnicity or something—that sociology class was really interesting to me because it gave me a different perspective. It was my freshman year when I took it; it was the first time I heard perspectives that were different than mine. Going to school, you hear a lot of things that are similar to yours or a majority of perspective comes from the teacher. I would say definitely my sociology class because it exposed me to different views. Then, my history class because it informed me of the past. Oh, and my religion class, those were good.

MM: What kinds of perspectives were you exposed to?

JG: Well, people's viewpoints of college was very interesting. I never had a choice to go to college—my mom was like, "You're going to college." Ever since I was nine, my mom was like, "What are you doing when you grow up? Going to college." It was drilled into me. To see people who were like, "My family don't even want me to be here and I'm here" was very interesting to me. Just seeing their views on hot topic issues. It was a long time ago; I don't remember the hot topic issue back then.

Just seeing the class was mixed with African Americans, Caucasians, and international students. It was a batch variety of international students coming from another country, they were like, This is how I feel. . . I met one person from Germany in high school. We talked for two seconds, but I never for real heard an international student's perspective of race in America from their perspective as an outsider looking in.

MM: What are some of the things that they talked about regarding race?

JG: Colorism is prevalent everywhere, so they talked about that. They said that the context of race was different. I think there was somebody from Latin America and they were like, "We are all just this . . . you are just a brown version of it." I don't remember the exact country, so I'll just use Cuba as an example. They would be like, We are all Cubans. It is not, you are black Cuban; you are white Cuban; you are this and that. Of course, they still have colorism—preference was still given if your skin was lighter—but, at the end of the day, it wasn't you are a whole different person than me. It was just you get better privileges if that makes sense.

Just seeing that or having them ask me certain questions was interesting as well. Sometimes they would not even know about race in America. They were just like, Oh, you're Black American. . . It is just a thing; there's not really anything that comes with that. They would ask me questions: Why is it such a big deal? Why do you feel like you're being treated like this? Oh, I didn't even see that. I thought I would be treated like this. We started talking about stereotypes. They actually woke me up to a lot of stereotypes that I thought were incorrect.

MM: What activities and groups were you involved with at MSU?

JG: I was in a group called Students for Social Work. I was in it for two years. I did some things in it, but I wouldn't say I was an active member. Right now, I am in the Association of Black Students Social Work Students and Alternative Spartan Breaks. I was in this organization—technically, it wasn't on campus, but it has been a big part of my experience at MSU—it's called the Listening Ear. I used to volunteer there. I would say those are the main ones I committed to. Everything else, I went to a meeting and never came back or I went to two off and on. I wasn't really committed until not too long ago.

MM: What were the kinds of things you did in those groups?

JG: When I was in Students for Social Work, one of the things I did was public speaking. It was the 50th anniversary of Bloody Sunday . . . the movie "Selma" is based off that. In Selma, Alabama, there was a large group of African Americans who were trying to get equal voting rights. They marched across the bridge, or at least attempted, and they were beaten down—dogs were left on them; it was a horrible scene. It was the 50th anniversary of that and President Barack Obama went down to Selma. Myself and about seven other women went down to Selma on our own and represented the school down there. They were all in the club, so that is how I joined the club. I was like, *I am going too*. We all went down to Selma. We talked at multiple different events about our experiences down there.

We met a foot soldier. A foot soldier is someone who walked across the bridge and was attacked or put in jail. We met a foot soldier and she gave me her medal. I ended up donating it to the school. That was something we did. We talked about our experience for the next half year. That was some stuff I did in Students for Social Work.

With the Association of Black Social Workers, we just started; I am the treasurer of it. We plan to go in April—hopefully, it gets approved, if everything goes right—to the 50th anniversary of the National Association of Black Social Workers. To learn about how Black social workers are experiencing social work for themselves professionally, different techniques they have, what populations they work with, and why. Those are some of the things I did in that organization.

MM: What is Alternative Spartan Break?

JG: Alternative Spartan Break—I am the President, so I got this down pat—is a student organization that sends students across the country and world to volunteer for a week or a weekend. During winter break, spring break, throughout the semesters for weekend trips, we send students to volunteer for a week. They learn about social issues and how it is affecting that community. For me, when I first got involved with ASB, I was what they call a site leader,

which is someone who is kinda like the mom of the trip to make sure no one does anything illegal or anything like that [laughs].

We went to a small town in the Appalachian Mountains called Pulaski. They were dealing with drug abuse, job loss, and how it would affect the kids. For a week, I volunteered there. I learned about their history, different things that impact them, and how it was affecting the children. We worked at an after school program. I would say it was a powerful experience. That is what ASB does. What I do now in ASB is kinda run it [laughs]. I make sure everything is done: I accept the people, make sure that scholarships get out, and word gets out to make it as successful as I can.

MM: What are the requirements for students to participate in Alternative Spartan Breaks?

JG: It is really easy. As far as requirements, there are none. It has a price with it. It is four-hundred-ten dollars, as of now, it might change. You just got to make sure that you got the money to go and you are good. You just come to the meetings and make sure you stay in contact with your site leader. Nothing really required in order for you to go unless it is an international trip where you need a passport, things like that. For the most part, you apply and you'll get notified when you are let in, which I got to do (laughs). You get an email saying, You are on this trip, have fun.

MM: What types of scholarships are available?

JG: Most of them are reimbursements. Once you come back from the trip, you say, This trip really inspired me. Tell us how you were feeling about it and what happened. Based off your essay, we vote and say, Ok, you get the scholarship.

There are two scholarships that give you a full reimbursement—not including the flight because that is on your own. There are two scholarships you get beforehand. You say how you are involved in your community. If I wasn't a part of ASB, I would say, This Is what I am doing for my community to make it better and to change it.

Most of the scholarships are essay based. You just say what you are doing. There is only one scholarship that shows how you promoted ASB. You could do like a vlog or a whole social media account dedicated to it. We review that and see which one we like the most and that person would get the scholarships.

MM: What was one experience that has really stuck with you?

JG: Ugh, there are so many. What immediately comes to my brain is when I was in Pulaski. It was my first ASB trip and we were volunteering in Pulaski Middle School, which was very

interesting—I will explain in a minute [laughs]. We were volunteering there and I was having a conversation with a teacher. It was two instances back to back. The teacher was telling me how the school had to cancel a lot of times in the summer because it was too hot; resources were not put in the school. We were talking about the upkeep of the building and the resources for the students.

My mom worked in Detroit school systems for over twenty years or fifteen years—a very long time, to say the least. I was telling her about my mom’s experiences. We were comparing and contrasting to see how urban and rural schools have a lot in common. I would say that was most impactful. I did not want to go on the trip I was assigned. I was like, *Can I get a different one?* When I first went there, I thought it would be country, but to see it was so similar—the only difference was location.

Then, the second one. There were only two black people on my trip. This girl, she was biracial; her mom was black and her dad was white. She came up to me while I was helping her out and asked if I knew where her mom was. We had gotten close over the week. In Pulaski, a lot of the parents will leave their child and never come back. I know [pause]. It won’t be like a lion does with a cub and leave them in the wilderness. It will be with families, but they have a lot of single-parent homes out there where the biological parent is not involved in the child’s life.

She came up to me and asked me if I knew where her mom was. She said, “You look like you might know her”—I knew it was because I was black—“Here’s her information. Do you know her? Do you see her?” She was kind of begging me in a way. That stuck with me the most. It got me emotional; I cried a little bit. I was like, “Oh my gosh, I am so sorry I will keep a look out.” Knowing, that I was never going to see her mother. I do not even know who her mother is. It showed me how real their social issues are. You learn about different things in class. You may see different things on the news, but to hear it, especially from the viewpoint of the child and see how it is affecting them emotionally and physically is eye opening. It tugged at my heartstrings. I was like, *I got to do something to help.*

MM: You discussed the differences between the rural and urban schools. Could you talk more about the similarities?

JG: Yeah, it’s a lot. Let’s see, the city’s priority as far as education was basically the same with Pulaski and Detroit. Some schools would get completely build up brand new while other schools were falling apart. In Detroit, it made headlines a few years ago; there was mildew and mold and water damage. The floors would go up; there were bubbles in the floor. There were not any bubbles in the floor in Pulaski, but the same thing happened there where the building upkeep is horrible and the school supplies provided. In Detroit, at least my time there, the supplies would be outdated and same with Pulaski.

As far as the actual city, you can tell the difference in both locations between those who have and those who have not. You know priorities as far as getting services out to community members and how low that was. It was basically the same between the two. Their ghetto looked just like Detroit's ghetto. You can definitely tell who had the money and who didn't. Talking to the community members and seeing how they value everything reminded me so much of home. They love their city. You can't tell them nothing about their city just like you can't tell me nothing about Detroit, but the resources that go to it is ridiculous. They don't prioritize taking care of their community. When I say "they", I mean the city government.

MM: If you could improve one thing about Alternative Spartan Breaks, what would it be?

JG: Honestly, having more diverse trips. That was my goal coming in here, but leaving—because it is my last year, I am a senior—MSU and ASB is something I want to improve on. Before I was the president, most of the trips we had were dedicated to animals or nature. It was whole bunch of animals, nature, recycling type trips because that was the priority of the last executive board.

This year, it is a lot more like social issues dealing with civil rights—I am actually going on that one—LGBTQ rights, things like that. More people-focused and I want it to get even more diverse to suit the student body. I feel like that will keep us thriving and keep us going in the long run if we make sure we are accommodating our diverse students. So, maybe working with a new population that we haven't heard of. I know, this year, we implemented a few new trips. I know one is dealing with sex trafficking because I used to volunteer at Listening Ear it's really close to my heart. Definitely, implementing more diverse trips that fit everybody's needs and not just nature trips in a way.

MM: You mentioned sex trafficking was at the Listening Ear?

JG: It does not specifically have anything to do with sex trafficking per se. Back in the day, before this big scandal that happened. I used to volunteer there and I was a medical advocate. After someone has been sexually assaulted, raped, things like that, I would go to the hospitals and I would be there with them and go through the whole process with them.

Sparrow is the only one in Ingham County and a few counties around that provide free sexual assault kits. What happens is you have a SANE nurse, which is a Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner, who examines people and provides everything you need for free, so you do not have to tell your insurance. While doing that, I learned a lot about human trafficking because sometimes it can go hand and hand depending on the person. That's why when I say, "It is close to my heart", I coincide everything dealing with domestic violence and sexual assault.

MM: Were you involved with any protests while you were a student here?

JG: Yes [laughs]. The first protest that I did was a Black Lives Matter protest. We did a die-in at the library. I was on the ground with my little sign, dead [laughs]. That was one. We did a march afterwards and I did the Love Trumps Hate protest. There was a protest after that one I was a part of. I have done a few protests. I haven't been as active as I used to be, but yes, I have done some protests.

MM: What is a "die-in"?

JG: I don't remember what university started it. It was very popular at the time. The Black Lives Matter Movement is still going on, but at that particular time, it was very popular to do what was called a die-in. You would get everybody who wants to be involved and they would lay on the floor and block traffic. If they were really good, stop a business to bring awareness to issues. Everybody would have different sayings on their signs. Some people would just have Black Lives Matter. I think this was after Sandra Bland that we did this. I think that was 2014. A lot of people died for stupid stuff in 2014. We would pay homage and acknowledge certain things.

Some people had signs that said, "I can't breathe" that was for Eric Garner. Trayvon Martin was up before that. I can't remember who was. . . Mike Brown. You have the different sayings that was associated with that person while lying on the ground to bring attention to it. We did ours in the library. Everybody involved would lie down on the ground with their sheet of paper over their chest with whatever saying for like fifteen minutes—it was not a long time, maybe five, I don't remember exactly. You would lay on the ground for a period of time to bring awareness to it. It was like a silent protest.

MM: What made you choose Social Work as your major?

JG: After I was lost because I failed anatomy, I went through a period where I was taking personality quizzes and trying to figure out my life. My mom was like, "I work with a social worker. You should try social work." I did not want to be in CPS, which is Child Protective Services and I did not want to work in the school. At first, I did not want to be a social worker [laughs]. I started investigating, so like googling. At the time, I wanted to be a geriatric nurse so if they had any geriatric social workers and what they do. Google helped me want to be a social worker. From there, I met with an advisor and changed my major.

I committed to being a social worker when I was actually in a program. I started getting more involved in communities and seeing that social workers do not have to be in policy or have clients. They could be activists in the communities and start nonprofits. That made me want to be a social worker. First of all, it is a big profession. You can start off in one section and go in a completely different section. It is very flexible in what you can do. You can adapt it to anything.

Basically, I am going to be getting paid to advocate, make sure my voice is heard, and make sure I am speaking on behalf or empowering a community, which is essentially what I love to do.

MM: What about Social Work really sparked your interest?

JG: I found as a social worker, you can work in a hospital. You can work with discharge. Before I wanted to be a nurse, I thought I wanted to be an occupational therapist. I found out that you could work with the elderly making sure they have access to the different resources they need, making sure they are not being abused. If they are being abused, take them out of that situation. Just learning that you could actually interact with people. If you need to do medical stuff, you can, without being a nurse and prescribing medicine really sparked my interest. I was like, *Oh, I can still help them*. I just knew I wanted to help people and I did not pass out at the sight of blood—I was like, *I am a nurse* [laughs]. To just see that I can still help people and make a difference in a person's life. I could work with old people, young people, or adults, hospitals, wherever. It was really cool.

MM: Did you have any mentors or professors that really inspired you at MSU?

JG: I have. I am trying to make sure I don't miss anybody. As far as strictly teachers, one comes to mind, which I have an interesting relationship with, her name is Pilar Hornar; she started off as my policy teacher. During that time, it was very interesting. She swears up and down that she will not give you her perspective, but it seeps through just a little bit—her thought process on everything. She'll say, "it feels so good to be right" and everything like that. She will acknowledge the human side of wanting to be evil, which I find very interesting [laughs]. At the same time, she will push you and she'll encourage you. I have her for the second semester now. The first time I had her, we kind of fell out in my head. She gave me a 2.5, but this semester I still realize that that taught me a lot. Even though, I did not get the grade I wanted and I felt like I deserved differently.

She taught me how to own what I do, mean what I say. When I turn in something, I would be like, "Err, kind of", she would say, "Stick by the pickles in your red velvet cake." She was like, "I may hate red velvet cake or pickles or whatever, but stick by what you do and mean what you say, own it." Ever since then, I have become more confident in my work. When I turn something in, I am not like, *This probably isn't any good*. I am like, *No, I am sticking by the pickles in my red velvet cake*. I would say teacher wise she has definitely inspired me the most.

MM: What about any other students?

JG: I actually have a few. As far as student leaders go, she does not go here anymore; she graduated but her name is Adriana Flores. I spoke to her at her event when I was a "Selma

girl”—when people went down to Selma. She inspired me because she is doing exactly what I want to do. We had the same views as far as social work. We did not want to do policy and we did not want to do clinical, which is one on one. We wanted to work with communities. She is doing that. When she sees a need in a community, she does what she need to do to get it done.

She lives locally. She noticed that people in the Lansing Community needed to get supplies laundry detergent, feminine products, stuff like that, but it wouldn't be covered by food stamps. She developed a box she called the Empathy and Equity box, E- Squared. People can donate those products. Instead of having to travel on the bus or out of pocket, they can just go up to this box, open it, get what they need, and go. It is anonymous, but the community is involved in it so nobody steals from it. She does what I wish I can do. She inspires me a lot because she shows me if you don't find a way, make your own way. Create your own path.

I am more of her mentor, but she still inspires me, her name is Shavona Green. She is so positive. Even when she is discouraged, she still stays positive. Instead of keeping it to herself, she spreads her positivity. Even though she thinks I am her mentor, she is really mine. Definitely, her. Those two because they inspire me a lot.

MM: How have your experiences changed the way you live your life?

JG: For social work, I sought to get a diversity certificate. You have to go to three different diverse events and take a diversity class. By doing that, it informed me about other communities. When I first came to MSU, I did not know anything about the LGBTQ community. I did not know anything about trans people and things like that. Because I did the diversity project, I got more involved. I would not say I am out there like, “rah, rah, rah!” I do not feel like I am like that anymore. But, just to be cognizant that not everybody has the same label or the same opinion. It was something I still do today. In my email signature, I am like, “My pronouns are this...” Before I address somebody—I address them by their name if I don't want to make them feel uncomfortable—I will say, just to be respectful, “Do you mind telling me your pronouns, so I can address you correctly.” Just acknowledging that everyone has their identity and respecting that.

MM: What do you think is the biggest challenge working in Social Work?

JG: Burn out [laughs]. Burn out is the biggest challenge. As social workers, we put everyone else before us. It is always about our client, our community, whatever, getting that task done. It is never really about ourselves. We take classes on it and try our hardest not to burn out and make sure we save time for ourselves. That is the hardest part of social work. The things that make you a good social worker you cannot turn off. You can try to compartmentalize.

You can't turn off empathy. You can't turn off genuinely trying to understand somebody. You can't turn off being an advocate because it is in you. My teacher, she is pregnant right now. She was talking about advocating for her daughter because she wanted to see—I think it was Paw Patrol—the female dog with more toys [laughs]. You literally cannot turn it off. Burnout, definitely, that's what gets everybody at one point and time. You can only neglect yourself for so long.

MM: What would you say is the biggest reward working in social work?

JG: That's a good question. My biggest reward is just being a helper. You do not always get to hear how you've impacted somebody. When you do, it literally makes your life. To hear somebody say, "I wasn't thinking about this, but you've inspired me." That has happened to me a few times and I almost cried. To hear someone say, "You've helped me a lot." Or to see the physical change of a community. That what I am doing makes a difference. Even if I go into a community and nobody says, "Thank you, I appreciate you", just seeing the physical change, habits, and progress is the best feeling.

MM: What are some social issues that you think need more awareness?

JG: There is a lot. I feel like the ones I would normally say are getting a lot of attention right now. Because I am a black woman, issues dealing with the black community, dealing with colorism because I am a darker black woman, and equal rights. There are still things we deal with on a daily that is ridiculous, but with social media we have a community now and more things are coming to light. I would not say there are any social issues that I wish would get more attention. I wish certain habits would get attention, so it would change. Although I love social media, I feel like it has helped a lot of social movements; I was talking to Pilar; we are stuck in this box where everybody thinks like us. We are not challenged.

Although it is good as far as support, it is bad because we don't want to hear anybody's position anymore. It is about being right instead of understanding. It is not a social issue, but it's a bad habit. Instead of seeking to understand, listening to understand, or hearing another side, we are quick to shut down. To say, you are wrong, I am right. I am not going to listen or hear where you are coming from, which is toxic.

Within a lot of the movements on campus, especially those labeled progressive, when somebody from the opposite party genuinely wants to understand something . . . for example, I am black, let's say somebody white comes to ask me a question and they don't ask me in the way that I deem is socially acceptable or politically correct, so I shut them down. I noticed that habit. I feel like that is counterproductive because you are giving somebody reason to think all black people are like this. Instead of like say, "Ok, you did not say this politically correct, but

that is ok. Let's first figure out what you wanna know, answer your questions, and then figure out how to make that politically correct."

Not everybody starts off at the same level. Not everybody starts off as, I am going to say this as eloquently as possible. You do not know it is a boundary until you step over it. I feel like a lot of people forget that. They are so caught up in, *Everybody else around me thinks like that*. They are not aware that there is different people; different people value different things.

I am still not versed in things dealing with the LGBTQ community, but the fact that they took the time out to educate me and not shut me down when I made certain comments—they were not bad. They were ignorant because I did not know much about it. Now, I do, I acknowledge, and I'll educate others. Just realizing that not everybody starts off at the same level and you got to meet them where they're at is very important. That is my little spiel on that. It really irks me when people do that.

MM: What do you think we can do on campus to foster more active listening?

JG: That is a good question; I've been asking myself. We have forms where it says everybody can come and blah, blah, blah. In reality, people do not feel comfortable going to that unless they agree with the things being said because they do not want to be attacked. The reality is more than likely they probably will be attacked. They might say, Why do you think like that! Just being aware when the opportunity comes to handle it with grace and maturity instead of acting out of emotion.

Let's say, I am in the Black Lives Matter movement educating the members—when someone comes up to you that may not either agree with what you're doing or just wants to know, this is how you handle it. I do not think it is anything the campus can do; it is the movements themselves. They have to say, when this happens, this is how we have to handle the situation because it might be the only opportunity we have. You can attract more flies with honey than vinegar. When you have a sweeter approach with somebody that is timid to ask, they are more likely to receive what you are saying than if you were like, "rah, rah, rah, how dare you say that!" It is more of the movements and how they handle situations like that than the campus.

MM: For the Alternative Spartan Breaks, how is it decided, which places to go?

JG: They actually apply. On our website is a list of different social issues. We do not tell you where you are going. We just tell you the actual social issue you are going to be working with. We do not want you to say, "I am going to Miami Florida or Puerto Rico." Instead of saying, "I am working with disaster relief." We want you to be interested in the topic. One, that's something you have in common with everybody else. Two, you are more engaged in the social issue.

Let's say, right now, I do not want to work with the elderly no more. If I go on a trip because the location is where I want to go, but I do not want to work with the elderly; I am not really engaged. We do not want it to be like that. It is a list of whatever trips we are offering. It will say you are going to be working with this social issue and this is what you will be doing. When you submit your application, you select the title of trip and rank it one to five. Based off the availability and selections, those are the ones you get into.

MM: Since you are a senior, is there anything you want to do or experience before you graduate MSU?

JG: I really wanted to study abroad or at least study away; I really wanted to. I got into a program, but I couldn't do it. That's the one thing I wish I would've done. I have been to different places because of ASB and because of Students for Social Work, but just to learn in another country or learn about another country would have been awesome.

MM: If you could go to a different country, what would it be and for what reasons?

JG: I will say I got three. I am a very indecisive person. I would say Greece because of *Sisterhood of The Traveling Pants* and I love the colors of white and blue. So, for the aesthetics (laughs). My second choice would be Austria because of the *Sound of Music* and I want to twirl in the hills and sing, "The Hills are Alive". And somewhere in Latin America because I am learning Spanish. I am starting to gain more friends that are Latino/a/x. It is very interesting to see the similarities of everything and to learn something new. I enjoy it very much.

MM: Are you minoring or majoring in Spanish?

JG: No [laughs]. I am just asking my friends like, "Can you teach me some Spanish?" I got survival phrase in my purse. ¿Dónde está al baño? Something like that; I don't remember. The only class I officially took in an official language was German. I took it in high school, so I was like, *I love German*, which I do. Germany, I want to visit there too.

MM: You said you have some Latinx friends. Are they involved in any groups? Do you join them?

JG: They aren't. I am like, *What is wrong with y'all?* They are not involved in any on campus things. I have one friend that kinda is, but I never have time to go. I wear a lot of hats and it's always on the one day I can't do anything they have a meeting. I think it is SOLA. . . Latinx Social Workers. I can't remember the full name, but that's the general gist. They have meetings; I always want to go, but cannot. My main group of friends that are Latinx, they are not involved. They just do their own thing. I just engage with them. I am like, "Hey, teach me some Spanish."

So, when you talk to me in Spanish, I actually know what you are saying.” They forget I don’t speak Spanish, which is very interesting.

MM: what are your plans after graduation?

JG: I definitely want to go to graduate school. I just found out today I was accepted into a program, which has me excited. I learned in Pulaski that one guy who started up or maintained the local museum went away to Duke and he was traveling the world. Then, he came back to his town and was like, “I wish I came back earlier”. . . I really saw value in that, going elsewhere, gaining knowledge, and bringing it back home. That is what I plan to do as far as my career and life. I want to travel as much as possible. I want to do American Revista. I want to be involved in different organizations, see how they run, and function. From there, develop a nonprofit in my community. If not in my community, a community that needs it just as much.

MM: How do you define diversity?

JG: We talk about this a lot in Social Work and came to the conclusion that you can’t because it means certain things to different people. In my viewpoint, diversity can be a difference of anything. It can be difference of opinion. To me, that is still a diverse population because you can have good conversations. I would say the lack of similarity (laughs). I do not consider it just black, white, Mexican, Asian; I am from this or that country; I am able or disabled. There are so many different categories. Even the simplest difference of opinion is diversity. It is still something you have to learn about something else.

MM: Do you consider MSU a diverse space today?

JG: I do not know if I would consider MSU to be diverse today. They have a lot of international students, but I feel like they can definitely improve by having different things that cater to different groups. When I came in here because my mom got a college degree, I couldn’t be a part of the programs that cater to students who are first generation minority students but I still needed the support. I came from the same schools they did. I had the two years in Flat Rock, but at the end of the day, I still was very far behind when I first came to college.

I feel like having support for diverse communities would help a lot. I know that not every building is handicap accessible. Some buildings, if you have a disability, you are screwed. Then, trying to survive college as someone who came from an underprivileged background makes it difficult to navigate everything as well. I would say MSU is kinda diverse; I will give them that. They are trying, but they need to try harder. They need to provide the support for diverse communities. When you think about it, they got a lot of international students because they have support for international students. If you want more diverse communities, they need to

provide support because a lot of people get here, but a lot of people drop out because they can't do it. They are not supported.

MM: Is there anything else you would like to add? Maybe about being a Resident Assistant?

JG: My experience as a RA has been very privileged because I am in a graduate hall for the first time and I am not working with undergrad. I love being an RA for my residents, but MSU needs to get better at their supporting RAs and their students. There used to be a program called the LRC, the Learning Resource Center. When I was a nursing major, I would go there for one on one tutoring help. That really helped me pass chemistry, I 2.5ed it, but passed it. Those resources got cut. Now, you have to go to your neighborhood where there is all these people there. Things like that, having more support for your RAs, so they can support your students would really help.

A lot of times, they get on us about the silliest things. Like, "You're board is not straight" [laughs]. It is not sloppy, but it's not like bone straight. Or you don't have this particular thing. It won't even be for legal purposes. For example, I had to make all new door decks for sixty people—door decks are door decorations that basically say your name on it and it has to have a special design and everything—even though, only three people in my floor were brand new. I had to make some more because the new people in my floor said, I feel left out because my door decks are not the same. I feel like they need to talk to RAs more and make sure that they support them. That has been my experience. I don't have a problem being an RA; I mainly have a problem with the system. I am going to let them know in my end of the year review. It is like you love being a teacher, but the principal sometimes annoy you. That's how it feels right now.

MM: What else do Resident Assistants do to get international students more acquainted?

JG: It is nothing set in stone. They leave a lot up to you. Because I have a lot of older students who have been here longer, if they don't want to be bothered, I am not going to force myself on them. That's bad for both of us, but if they are open and talk to me. . . One thing I do is try learn all their names. I do word associations and they laugh, but they do appreciate me taking my time to learn all their names. A lot of them are like, "You are the only RA that I have ever talked to and I have been here for three years." I was like, "I am honored." Learning their names, remembering their birthday, setting up times for me to be there for them, helping them with RA interviews. Being real and not trying to fake it, like, I am a hot mess but I am a hot mess for y'all, so we're good.

I plan the events, but I really take strong consideration for what they want to do. One, I need them to show up. Two, they feel more included; they feel like they have a say on my floor. I intended it for my international students, but I only had a domestic student participate. . . I got this idea from another RA to ask students if they wanted their name in another language. I

would have their name in English and I had a little form to fill out. I am like send me your name in the language you want and I will make sure I put it on the door deck and you'll have it. One person requested Farsi, which is an Indian language. Her name is in Farsi on her door.

Also, I am like, Do you want to celebrate any holidays and are open to sharing to everyone else? I don't want anybody to be forced to do anything because it is not your job to educate. I hate when people try to force me to educate them on everything. If you are willing to do it, I am willing to look into it, celebrate, and make sure it is done correctly. I'll say, I know Chinese New Year is coming up—I found that out recently—if you want to go to the Chinese New Year celebration next door, I will go with you. We can have a good time. I am very busy, but I make sure that they know that I am making time. Not to throw it up in their face, but to say, How are you doing today? I am trying to get to know you, more about your life, what you want to do, and how to help you go there. That really helps the few international students that talk to me and most of my domestic students feel a part of MSU. I know a few have applied to be RAs because of that.

[End of interview]

Transcribed by: *Mileena McDonald, 3/12/18*