**Rhianna**

Hi friends, welcome to the Purple Couch Clubhouse by the Ohio University Women's Center. My name is Rhianna Hunt and today I'm coming to you from my very fancy recording studio. It is blue and plush and looks oddly like a couch. Join me for a short while to escape the never-ending news cycle and to sit and chat about a book that we could all learn something from. I understand that we're living through unprecedented times and you're probably thinking there's no way you'll be able to read a whole book. No worries, I already read it and just like an in-person book club, I'm prepared to be the only one who's done the reading. The conversation will be guided by concepts from the book, and I will include the important context.

I am joined today by the wonderful Chloe McDowell. Chloe is a COVID campus liaison for the COVID office here at Ohio University so you may recognize their voice. They have worked at institutions across the country, including Massachusetts, Maryland, Oregon, and of course here in Ohio. When they aren't on the phones talking to Ohio community members Chloe enjoy spending time with their partner, Lysha and their pets, a greyhound named Barry and their cats, Crit, Crowley, and Meelo. How are you today?

**Chloe**

Hey, how's it going?

**Rhianna**

I'm also joined by the lovely Luvina Cooley. Luvina spends most of her days running around popping from meeting to meeting thus, she was ecstatic to spend some of her downtime reading about something other than 20th century anthropologists for her studies. In her work with the LGBT Center, she's constantly on the lookout for an opportunity to learn about new topics and incorporate them into her programming. When she isn't working or studying, she can usually be found snuggled up with her black Labrador Macy. How are you Luvina?

**Luvina**

I'm doing pretty good.

**Rhianna**

Amazing. And last, but certainly not least, is the wonderful Dr. Jan Huebenthal. Jan is the Assistant Director of the LGBT Center at Ohio University. A recovering academic, he has researched and written extensively on HIV/AIDS and continues to promote health awareness and education, the love of his life. Sorry – Jan's husband – is his nine-month-old dog Lobo, who has successfully been trained not to go potty in the house, which is Jan’s proudest achievement as an educator. In his spare time, Jan enjoys cultivating his encyclopedic knowledge of reality TV, particularly 90-day fiancé. How are you today Jan?

**Jan**

Hi there. I'm well how are you?

**Rhianna**

I am good, thank you.

This month we will be reading *Becoming Nicole: The Transformation of the American Family* by Amy Ellis Nutt. This is the memoir of the parents of Nicole and Jonas Maines; these twins were adopted by Kelly and Wayne Maines right after they were born. We follow from there through the twins’ childhoods and the internal and external struggles the parents faced as they strove to ensure their children's happiness and safety. One of their children, Nicole, is trans and while was identified as a boy at birth is clearly a girl. The parents struggled from - the parents struggled, from a father that initially did not understand and a mother seeking out information but not finding enough. They had struggles external of their family as they tried to protect their child from cruelty, through all of the major milestones they experience. We end the story with the twins graduating high school and Nicole's gender affirmation surgery. Nicole Maines is the Jane Doe in the Maine Supreme Judicial Court Case Doe V. the Regional School Unit 26 in 2014. The case focused on whether the elementary school Nicole and her brother attended had violated the Human Rights Act when they forced Nicole to use a staff bathroom after another student's grandfather complained about her using the girl's restroom. The Maines family sued, claim- claiming the school had been discriminatory. Ultimately, the court ruled in the Maines favor prohibiting the school from barring a transgender student from the bathroom consistent with their gender identity. This does not mean that the fight for equal access to bathroom facilities is over though and we've seen the tide turn again and again on how Title IX is interpreted by the federal government to protect, or not, the rights of trans students in particular. But to return to Nicole, the namesake of our book for this talk. Nicole is now an actress most recently known for her role as Nia Nal, aka the dreamer in Supergirl, the first transgender superhero on television and quite frankly, one of the best superheroes.

So, not to get super nerdy. But on Supergirl, Nia Nal says, “the greatest gift we can give each other is our authentic selves and sharing that, sharing our truth is what makes us strong.” So why is sharing the story of this family through *Becoming Nicole* so important? And what does this book mean for other families that are trying to ensure their trans children have happiness and safety?

**Luvina**

I would say it is really important just because it helps families like hers to not feel so alone. I know I came out in my late high school life, and it was still really difficult because I haven't had like any access to places to turn to or anywhere to really like help my family out with it. And so, it's been really difficult because they haven't known a lot. And so, I've had to kind of do all of that education work on my own, which is exhausting, especially when the family's having a hard time with it themselves. And so, it's kind of like double the work. And I think being able to have a resource like this is really helpful, because it helps to kind of like, it helps that process and it helps you not feel so alone, and it helps the families not feel so alone.

**Chloe**

I also think it's great from a broader perspective and a societal perspective, just in terms of normalizing experiences and these stories; particularly now, when we're starting to see more, again, kind of more and more, not of trying to protect trans folks at the state level. Uhm, you know, particularly, you know, in Alabama with them trying to make it a felony to provide trans affirming care to minors, normalizing these stories and understanding that this isn't some terrible scientific thing being done, because it's something that is actively lifesaving care. And so, seeing the process of that journey, I think, is also probably, is both normalizing and helpful in terms of what Luvina was sharing in terms of, you know, understanding the - the expectations and the knowledge.

**Jan**

Yeah, I would concur with all of that and really amplify what Chloe and Luvina said, and I'm so happy to be here and be part of this conversation. One of the things that I think needs to be driven home again and again, is that representation is really powerful, right. And I think it's so easy, to just say like, like Luvina outlined, that your family is the only one going through it right and that nobody has ever faced these struggles before. And in fact, when we kind of look a little more broadly, in the United States, similar battles are being fought against, you know, school systems, school boards, really in different states, there was a very kind of famous case involving a high school student named Gavin Grimm, that went all the way up to the Supreme Court. And won really important protections, just very recently, for trans students to use the bathroom of their choice. And so, I think just, you know, the more those stories get normalized and shared, the easier I think it becomes for people to advocate for their children in their community.

**Rhianna**

Yeah, that's all so amazing and, um, so one of the stories that I think can help, as one of the stories from the book that was shared that I think can really help other families as well is that right before the start of fifth grade, Nicole officially changed her name and pronouns. And this is an exchange between her and her grandfather, the first time they had seen each other since this official step, quote, “Wyatt, do you want some ice cream?” Grandpa Bill said, Before Nicole had a chance to even answer, Bill realized what he’d just done. “I'm so sorry. I meant Nicole. I'm so sorry.” Nicole walked right over to her grandfather and gave him a hug. “It's okay, Grandpa, I know it's hard. I love you.” Unquote. We've seen a lot of people's personal stories represented in media with some having families that are not supportive of their authentic self, but others having families that are. Some of the ones that I think of to that end are the ones where families will do new birth announcements, acknowledging that they were wrong when they announced their child's gender, what are ways in which families can show public and private support for their trans family members?

**Chloe**

I mean, for me, I feel like Grandpa Bill did exactly what I'd like in that situation. That that kind of scenario, by and large, I think maybe a little more apologizing than I would like at this stage. But you know, I think it, the intent is clear. And I think that's really, what matters to a lot of us, particularly for the folks that are close to us and we understand may have that difficult experience. You know, I have difficulty sometimes because I can understand why families sometimes have difficulty and may in some respects kind of grieve what they think is a loss when people come out like that. And so, I think that that's where those apologies can sometimes take that tone and be difficult, but I think just the recognition of the error. For me, really, in my own personal experience has been a huge signifier.

**Luvina**

Yeah, I definitely agree with that. I'm a fairly private person, and so I think I would be really uncomfortable with like any public announcement like a, like you had mentioned that the public birth announcement that would make me really uncomfortable. But like, I also don't want to make a big deal out of it, and so like, it's just something as simple as correcting themselves or correcting others and moving on in that conversation. I would also say if they want to advocate for you when you aren't around that matters so much, because, you know, you can only do so much, but knowing that somebody else is going to have your back like that is completely, it's just like the best feeling ever. Because, you know, this is somebody who I can trust in who sees me for who I am. And I don't have to worry about them being performative or whatnot. And so, I think being able to correct other others and kind of stand up for you is really good, because you can only stand up for yourself for so long before it gets exhausting.

**Jan**

Thanks for that Luvina, I think that's really powerful. And it's because it really speaks to the idea that transitioning really is a collective journey, right? Of course, it's your own personal identity, but then again, that process of really sharing a positive experience really is up to each family. You know, what I always think about is that sometimes trans parents have to be really fierce advocates of their children. And I always think about this one professor, I knew when I was in graduate school, whose, whose child came out as trans when the child was in, I want to say, elementary school, at a very young age. And, you know, for the professor, it was never a question whether it was valid or real. It was just the way it was the name was changed, the name was enforced, the pronouns were changed, it just kind of was a seamless transition. But I remember her telling me that she had family members who vociferously disagreed, right, in a- in really loud, and really obnoxious, and really uncompromising ways. And she ultimately, you know, had to make the choice to no longer allow those family members to be in her life, and in her kids' life, right. And I think that sometimes you really, what good parents have to do is to be well, there's always the spirit of educating and having open conversations. But at some point, you've got to draw the line, right? If this is how you're going to feel, then I don't know that you can be in my child's life any longer. So sometimes, it's also having to make those hard advocacy decisions. And I think that's part of ally ship, also not making uncomfortable choices.

**Chloe**

Yeah, I think jumping off that uncomfortable choices thing too, it reminds me a lot of like, how difficult sometimes our allies may have it. Like, coming from Residence Life, I've worked with students who have been out with me and in their community, but then when door tag season comes around, said, “please use my previous name,” because they're not out to their family. And so, it'd be one of those things where they'd be like, “Okay, my family's coming everyone like, with, let's keep this on the down low for a little bit, because I still need to go home for the summer.” And so those kinds of shifting faces can be really difficult to manage.

**Jan**

So that's so real, you know, in the LGBT Center, we, you know, informally advise students for how to navigate Housing and Residence Life. And, you know, at Ohio University, we have wonderful gender inclusive housing options that a lot of students take advantage of but the thing that, you know, sometimes stands in the way is like, how do I register for that housing, if my parents don't know that I am trans or that I, you know, that I'm nonbinary, or whatever the case may be? And, you know, thankfully, there is a certain amount of discretion built into that process. So, on the housing contract it doesn't show up, “this is gender inclusive housing,” you know, it's, it's not like that, which is good, I think. But I think having to navigate that kind of double consciousness right, is obviously an incredible, incredible burden.

**Rhianna**

Thank you so much for sharing all of that. Yeah, I have also had the experience of friends who will be out with me, but not necessarily out in all spaces. And so, navigating that is often tricky, and you just want to protect the person that you love. But you don't want to put them in a situation that they're not going to be comfortable with, right? And so, in creating those spaces, this book really does challenge us to think about what we can do to create inclusive spaces for trans people. So, what do you want to see in higher education and workplaces that would truly demonstrate inclusion and equity for trans people?

**Luvina**

I think I have been really surprised at Ohio University, because they've been doing a really good job of it. Like Jan had said, there's a lot of discretion in those policies that allows students to kind of do, like that allows them to make decisions about their time at Ohio without the implication of it getting back to the families. I know when I was applying, I was not completely out yet at that point, but I was still able to use like a preferred name within the system and that was, you know, super helpful. So, I could have this area of my life where I was able to be authentic, even though in some other areas, I was less authentic. And I think being able to have those kinds of, that kind of discretion and keep that kind of boundary between those different spheres is really important. And I also think just being able to be active allies, rather than just performative. But like, make sure you have inclusive access to restrooms on campus, making sure that you have professors who will use those names and pronouns, that can be a really hard situation, because even if it's listed sometimes, they don't, because whether or not it because it interferes with the beliefs or whether it's just an oversight, it can be hard. And so, I think being able to have those types of trainings for professors is really important too.

**Chloe**

On my end, it's also been really interesting seeing kind of design, intentional design coming into things. You know, my last institution, when they're putting up new buildings, they're intentionally building restrooms as gender neutral. And so, they're incorporating it in such a way that you wouldn't necessarily think of it as a gender-neutral restroom, or you think you walk in, and it’s still kind of a pretty standard restroom. But it might just be that instead, they actually have some floor to ceiling, you know, doors for the toilets. And people actually feel like they have the privacy they need to shower and use the restroom, regardless of their identity. And so, taking some of those aspects and making it like no, like, we really can do this in a thoughtful way that's good for everybody. And it's kind of this idea of that universal design, while also still respecting folks concerns that they may have about their own privacy and display of their body. And so, kind of recognizing that and the design process of physical spaces has also been kind of interesting to see.

**Jan**

Thanks for that, Chloe, I think universal design is such a powerful concept to think about how can we make spaces inclusive in a way that does not require people to demand inclusion? But if that they're already like that from the start? I really love this question, Rhianna because I think that, you know, inclusion in the workplace, especially trans inclusion is really one of the foremost civil rights issues of our time. You may know that the Supreme Court just ruled last year that LGBTQ folks are no longer allowed to be fired from their jobs for their identity, which was huge, right? But I think there is a difference between kind of legal rights and culture, especially corporate culture, right. So, two semesters ago, I caught, I taught a class at the Cutler Scholars Program. And we had a guest speaker from the Human Rights Campaign, which is one of the largest LGBTQ lobbying organizations in DC. And the speaker ran a project called the workplace equality project, and, you know, his job was to kind of work with corporate boards and with leadership to institute inclusive practices. And he said, he asked, he posed this question to the students, who do you think is more likely to be closeted at work? Do you think it's older trans folks? Or do you think it's younger trans folks, and every single student in the class, said well, of course, it's the older ones, right? Because they still carry those painful memories of discrimination and when you're young, you're free to be yourself like everyone is accepting. But he said that the opposite was true, right? That younger trans folks at work tend to, are more likely to be closeted, because of fears, professional ramifications, or whatever. So, I think what this comes down to is really policies, I'm a firm believer in policies, right. So, what are the policies at workplace can institute? It could be, you know, kind of modeling pronoun it, name usage, enforcing it, having leadership model it, kind of having a clear, consistent policy, about bathroom usage. If that place has a, you know, a dress code, which I don't think that many places do anymore, but if they do make sure that it's you know, gender neutral, and, and so on and so forth. But what it really comes down to is, who are the leaders in charge of these organizations and what is the model that they what is the behavior they model and how do they enforce the expectations?

**Rhianna**

Absolutely, thank you for that insight. That was so much that I did not know so that was really interesting. And as we're talking about changing culture, right, one of those things comes with children. Ultimately how we're going to change our culture is through young people. And too often adults think that this topic is going to be confusing or too advanced for children. So how can we encourage and in what ways, adults to have these conversations with children?

**Chloe**

I mean, I think honestly, in a lot of ways, it's starts with not gendering things that don't need to be gendered. I think if we're able to, in a lot of these spaces, let children just play instead of focusing on like, oh, does this, does them playing with this Barbie this week mean, mean that this, this little boy’s trans? No, they just like the Barbie this week and like that’s okay. Let people explore on their own, and I think we'll pretty quickly discover that when kids have questions they'll ask. I think that's something somewhat of a universal truth have kids sometimes identify some things that we may not think that they will and so I think just treating, almost treating kids as, as people, that's kind of where it all starts.

**Luvina**

Definitely, I totally agree with that this question. Usually, if I come up with it, it makes me really upset, because, you know, oftentimes, the kids are smarter than adults in this case, because they can they come with it all from the perspective of, you know, people of people, and that's great. So, you know, they'll be like, oh, is this person, a boy or girl, and you can just be like, well, you know, they are X, Y, or Z, you know, they are this, they, they're actually neither of them. And usually, kids are just gonna take it for, for that, they're just gonna let it go and they'll continue playing and doing whatever it is that they're doing. And, you know, you don't have to have like, the super intense conversations with them usually and it doesn't have to be like, super specific, it doesn't have to, like, be like, Oh, well, they’re taking hormones and doing all of this, because of this. You know, you don't need that, kids are going to just take it for what it is. And, you know, yeah, that's what I've got.

**Jan**

Agreed completely. Sorry, Chloe go ahead.

**Chloe**

I was just gonna say the only other thing I think that is useful, you know, is that representation piece, right? Like, you know, the - the story times where there's trans characters or other queer, gay, lesbian characters, like, if you've got the representation, and you have the environment where the kids can ask questions, and you'll actually answer them and engage with them in a meaningful way, generally, I don't think you're going to run into too many issues or confusion. I'm sure every once in a while, you'll run into someone who really wants to know the nitty gritty details of like, oh, why are they taking a pill? Or why is this happening? It's like, we can talk about that later. Like we, those are details you don't need to know quite yet like that. I think we can all recognize age-appropriate conversations, in general, as a society and just coming in like, okay, like, let's move on. And generally, like Luvina said they're just gonna say, okay great, they're neither, perfect.

**Jan**

I think that's so true. I don't think we're giving children enough credit, right for the intelligence, the perceptiveness, they have. Like I worked with a middle school camp two summers ago, and, you know, there's just such a natural ease and comfort with these issues. I think it's the adults that tend to have the hang up. And I think what Chloe and Luvina said is absolutely true, you don't have to go into the nitty gritty of details, and, you know, that's perhaps not age appropriate. But I think there is ways to talk with kids about really big issues, like consent, or racism, you don't have to talk about sex to talk about consent, right? There are ways to frame these issues in a way that children are going to organically respond to. I think we're really doing our kids a disservice if we're shielding them from these conversations. Because I think you know, if we're, if we're interested if we're truly interested in, you know, advancing diversity, inclusion, equity that I think we can't wait until your college age.

**Chloe**

I really wish it weren't weird to snap in the middle of podcasts.

**Rhianna**

Oh, my gosh, thank you so much for bringing up the receptiveness of children because that was such a theme throughout the book, um, Nicole's own twin, he at one point in time said that he never had a brother like he was like, no, you were always my sister. And at one point in time, another little kid came over to play with Nicole and Jonas after Nicole had like, officially changed her name and pronouns and uhm or not changed them but just announced them, and when her brother told the other little boy like corrected him like, oh no, this is Nicole. Like, that's her name now, the little boy was just like, Okay. And they just moved on. They just went about their lives, nothing, there was no big fuss. It was just a moment. Well, thank you all so, so much for joining me today and being a part of this episode.

**Chloe**

Thanks for having us on.

**Luvina**

Of course, thank you.

**Jan**

Thanks, Rhianna.

**Rhianna**

And thank you all so much for tuning in today. This has been the Purple Couch Clubhouse from the Ohio University Women's Center; we have been reading Amy Ellis Nutt’s *Becoming Nicole*. If you enjoyed today's discussion, check out @OhioLGBTCenter on social media or on their website which I will link and then head over to ohio.edu/diversity/women’s/center for more amazing programs and events. Until next time, folks have an amazing day and keep growing with all of us at The Purple Couch.