MG: We thank you for joining us today with this experience and thank you for being able to share some of your experiences throughout your life, throughout the class, throughout your experience at Oregon State University. Um, so can you begin by, just, telling us a little bit about yourself—your name and, perhaps, a little bit about your background?

HB: My name’s Hunter Briggs. Um, I am currently a first year student here at OSU, and I’m an ethnic studies major with, kind of, a focus on pre-law. And, I first heard about the arts and social justice living learning community when I was applying for school last, it was, like, last summer or last spring. And, that’s why I chose Wilson as a residence hall because I saw it was an option to be in that community. And that’s what really got me stoked on it because I wanted to find a way to be in, sort of, a smaller community within the bigger campus, and yeah.

JA: And, my name is Jacq, and I’m a fourth year. I study public health with an option in health promotion and health behavior. Um, I learned about the arts and social justice classes through Charlene, and, uh, she thought it would be something great for me to be a part of, to be with, like, incoming students, and, kind of, work with them and be a part of the class and the learning experience. And so, that’s how I got involved, it was great.

MG: Yeah, that’s amazing. Um so, can you all tell me a little bit more about your personal growth and, perhaps, kind of, how that has also applied to the unique spaces you have found on campus?

HB: Uh, I think the thing that first stood out to me about the ASJLC was, just, how kind of tight-knit people seemed to be, you know, even throughout the first few classes and really, like, after about half way through the first or half way through fall term. I was coming in, that was my first term in college. I was a, you know, freshman. And, I didn’t know what to expect, college was kind of scary, it’s a big place, a lot bigger than high school. And, it was nice to just have that small group of people with Charlene to talk to
and just to learn and really transform and, kind of, I don’t know, just, open up your mind. And, like, it influenced so many of my life decisions like, you know, even like what I want to do with my future, my career path, yeah. It just, it felt like more of a kind of, like, a human connection to people whereas in all your other classes it’s kind of disconnected, especially, like, bigger classes. But, I mean, fall term we had, like, the opportunity to be in, like, a 15 person classroom, and then this past spring term we were in, like, a five person classroom. So that was really nice and really intimate, and yeah, that really stood out to me.

JA: And I would have to say, for me, my personal growth started before the arts and social justice class that I took. I would say, last year I did a lot of, like, social justice work with Charlene and kind of, like, around identity and, like, what that means to me. And I think that having that first exposure and, like, working on social justice issues then kind of, like, made a good leeway to coming into the arts and social justice class because then it was, like, in that class and with my peers, we were able to, like, learn about, you know, have, like, social justice readings and then kind of talk about those things and then, like, use art to express those things. And, like, poetry was one of the things that I really enjoyed using to kind of, like, to express, like, these things that I was going through with my head with like being a non-male person but being masculine-presenting and kind of using poetry to, kind of, talk about that was very, like, empowering, and yeah.

MG: That’s amazing, I liked how you were able to, kind of, describe that like using words but also being able to feed off each other, kind of your experiences, but I also understand that’s very individual. So, can you tell me little bit more about who’s inspired you overall? Um, it could be now or it could be, like, in the past towards this area that you are now interested in and also kind of, like, where your passion lies within that.

HB: Hmm. I, well, I have, like, my best friend back in my hometown is, like, my biggest inspiration ‘cuz he, I don’t know how he does everything he does, but he’s amazing. But, I feel like here on campus—I mean, like, for my family life, my family was never really, it’s not very close and still isn’t very close. And, I think because of that, I’m, like, constantly trying to search out or seek family people. And, I’m a believer in like you don’t always, you know, get your family. Sometimes, like, you choose—you don’t choose your family but you make your family as you go on through life. And, some of the people in this class, not only just, like, the people, but Charlene too. Like, I look up to her as kind of like a mom. And, I respect her for that. And I think she’s inspired me on campus not only to, you know, change what I was doing because I came in as a food science major. And, you know, with what some of what Charlene taught, it kind of opened, opened my eyes to a lot of stuff. Um yeah, so I’d say Charlene inspired me and then also a couple of professors I’ve had this past term too. I feel like I’ve been able to
make connections with them because of Charlene and because Charlene has been there to, you know, kind of, like, initiate the growth. But, definitely Charlene and also, I don’t know, like, people here. And then, also, just, you know, fellow students I’ve been able to connect with this year too.

JA: Yeah. I would say for me, my biggest inspiration for the things that I do would be my kids. Like, I have three kids—two girls and a boy. And, like, having the world be a better place for them is something that I seek and, like, is, like, my biggest motivator to, like, make sure that I’m doing social justice work and that, that, like, I’m working towards the right things for them. And then, I, I could not, like, have my success without the amazing people that have, like, supported me—my, my, my mom, of course, my children’s grandparents, my in-laws, I have, like, so many amazing faculty mentors on OSU campus that there’s too many, too many to talk about. But, I would say definitely Charlene, um, Jeff Kenny. I think that at times when I feel at my lowest and like that maybe I can’t do it, there are, those two are always people that I can go to. Just say like I feel really horrible or I feel really great, and they’re always there to, like, give me great advice. And, I think that, like, it’s those times that, like, I really appreciate to have them, yeah. And I’d have to agree definitely like students that I-, like my peers because it makes me feel human that, like, I’m not the only person who feels this way or, like, I’m not the only person who, like, has these passions and desires. So yeah.

MG: Yeah, I think that mentors and people in our life can definitely play a big role in how we feel and how we develop and just, overall, that feeling of, like, we’re not alone in this, and everything’s still growing in progress. Um, tell me a little bit more about social identities—how that has played both dominant and subordinate in different group memberships or how that has worked towards your advantage or disadvantage.

HB: Um, you know, coming into the university, I, I had kind of thought about my identities before, but never really taking time to question them. And, being, like, a white, hetero, cisgender male has kind of of given me, like, the privilege of only being able to think about my subordinate identity which is, kind of, class. And, you know, I only focused on, like, you know, I’ve been homeless in my youth and then, just, living really poor for my whole life, focusing on that mainly. And, I feel like with the ASJLC, we’ve been, we’ve been able to focus on tougher topics to talk about, or, tougher topics for white people to talk about, like white privilege and, then, race, and how it affects me or how it gives me certain advantages in, like, the American context. And, I don’t, I don’t think I would’ve been able to have this opportunity to challenge that or to talk about it if I wasn’t in a community like this. And, it’s just, yeah, I mean, I was limited before, but I feel like now I’ve been able to question it and then see what I can do with my voice or what I can do with my identities to not, kind of, like, perpetuate certain terrible system,
or, you know, to do what I do—well, do what I can do for good. And then, I really want, like—Charlene has been really good about it all term, just, like, checking everybody on their dominant identities and especially checking me for things too. Like, before we did our main project this term, we—like, a group member and I—designed a poetry in action workshop, and we analyzed a couple songs in it. And, one of the songs I analyzed was a hip hop song, and then she wanted me to check my privilege and be like, you know, hey you’re a white guy talking about hip hop and about, like, the prison-industrial complex, like, what do you know about it? So, she’s been, always been there to check me and really just help me grow in that sense.

JA: Yeah, I think that, for me, coming to OSU, I was pretty sure I knew who I was. I was a very, um, cisgendered woman who, at the time, I identified as straight. And so, coming to OSU and, like, really being able to, like, be real with myself and to, like, really not only be real with myself, but to be, like, comfortable with myself. And, like, I think that, like, within the last past two years that, like, my dominant and subordinate identities have changed a lot. I was very quiet before, and I felt very insecure presenting very feminine. And now, I don’t feel that way anymore presenting masculine. But, there’s things that masculinity in society is perceived very dominantly, and it has a lot of privilege and that was not something that I knew until within the past year and a half of, like, becoming more masculine presenting. And, like, now having these, like, social, like, the way society is set up to like treat me a certain was very, like, shocking that like now, all of a sudden, I went from an identity that had, that was subordinate and now it’s dominant and to not be something that, like, I knew. And I would, like, come into spaces that were predominantly female and take up a lot of space and not really realize it. And so, like, kind of checking that and, like, being like, “oh, what does this mean?” And like, like how do I want to, like, make sure that the masculinity that I have is a healthy masculinity and not one that is dominating or all those other qualities that I think that, like, society holds masculinity should be because I, I don’t holds those, you know? Society treated me like a woman for 25 years, and so, yeah, I don’t know. So, I think that that question is really hard because I am going through this transitional phase where I, my identities have completely switched and changed. And, um, realizing what that means is very hard for me. So yeah.

MG: Yeah, and I can also imagine going through this change, perhaps. Like, being in the class, as you mentioned, Charlene has really pushed you in some ways to kind of reanalyze some of your perspectives or some things that you thought you already knew. Um, tell me a little bit more about some of the dynamics in class, or things that really stood out to you about things that really stuck with you, or new things you learned. And you can bounce off ideas from each other as well.
JA: I think, um, honestly, for me, it was the arts part because, like, I did, like, a lot of social justice work before taking these classes, but I never, like, used art. Like, I would consider myself a very, like, not artistic person and, like, so when Charlene was like, “Hey, you should take this class--arts and social justice,” I was like, “Okay”. Like, I, yeah. But, like, taking it and having these guest speakers come in and talk about the work that they were doing--I think that, like, one of the most powerful ones was, Green?

HB: Julia.

JA: Julia Green, yeah, who painted people’s last meals in prison before they died, they’re executed, their last meals on plates. And, like, something about that, it was just so powerful and it, like, told this story, and, like, it was amazing. And, and, and starting to use, like, poetry to, like, tell my story. Like, I, I, I, I liked storytelling, I think that that’s great. But, I feel like there are some things that are so real, but really scary to say, and in poetry, you can say it. And like, you can put it out there in the world and people can hear it, but it doesn’t have to, like, be so, like, I don’t know—and, it’s beautiful. You just say, like, yeah, the dark things that people don’t want to talk about, and you can use poetry to talk about it, and I love that. So yeah.

HB: I definitely feel that same way about poetry too—like poetry and music. And that’s what we—what my partner and I focused on, like, for spring term was poetry and music. And then, just how it can be used to talk about that, the hard stuff or even just, like, your own stories and how, I don’t know, it can give you your special sort of blend to it, so it’s not formal or so it’s not so scary. But, I feel like the one thing that kind of highlighted the real dynamic of the class was this activity we did with Dr. Qwo-Li Driskill. I forget, what was it called, step in or step? ...The power shuffle, yeah. And, it’s like a completely wordless activity where we all stand in a line and then Dr. Driskill would just, they’ll read all the lines or like, do you identify as this? And then certain people would walk across the room or do the power shuffle. And, even though it’s wordless, you learn so much from other people about that or, like, how, how they see themselves or even how you see them—you yourself … It was really, I feel like it was.

JA: And I like, like, when you, depending on who crossed the line, it was like, look who’s standing with you, look who’s not, what does that mean? And that was so powerful.

HB: What was his name? Dr. Marion? Who did the theater of the oppressed?

JA: Yeah I want to say that was his name.
HB: I can’t be sure of his name. But yeah, that was like the space thing you were talking about. Um, it was like, use your body to, you know, silently create a social problem or reenact, like, a social issues and then, you’d have one person who’d come in and, like, change people. So, I don’t know, it was weird. It was like, almost the most powerful things for me were wordless completely but then also all about words like poetry, too. Um, yeah.

MG: That’s amazing. I think that’s kind of almost, kind of, like me feeling jealous of that part of the experience as well. Um, especially what you said, you can tell when you’re the space, and you just feel, like, the power shifting or kind of like that, like, different vibe of, like, I was feeling this way and now I feel a certain way because of this experience. Um, what are some of your visions for the future in terms of, like, society, racism, any like ageism, like, ableism, any other issues you might have talked about in class or things that you’ve learned about through the class or through your experience growing up, um, through OSU?

JA: Yeah. I definitely agree. I think that I envision, like, a future where people are comfortable with conversation, and that they can lean into their discomfort and not make it be so taboo to talk about differences because we’re all different, and I think that that’s what makes us all beautiful. And, like, you know, when people can come together and talk about them and have really honest conversations and appreciate people’s differences, that’s what I hope for.

HB: I feel like more communities like this or just ones like this where actually—like you said—you get to have those conversations, and you get to talk about that stuff in a real way, it’s not like scripted or, you know, kind of false or whatever. And, I mean, it holds you accountable too for your past views or whatever you think now, you gotta, you talk about it, and you’re like, “Oh well, this....” You see the flaws in your own thinking or ways in which you can improve. I guess, like, I don’t know, kind of short term vision or goal would be to just see this next year kind of expand a little bit more because it was pretty small this year because it was the pilot year of the community. But, I think it would be good because once you have communities like this—it is impossible to change, like, systems of oppression single handedly, like no one can do that. And, I feel like the only way you can actually talk about it and get people to listen is if it’s with a group of people or, you know, just a community, a tight-knit community like ours talking about it, or bringing it up, or, you know, just spreading the word to other people who either already know or may not know about it. Usually it’s like people who don’t know about it here at OSU, who are a majority of people, don’t even think about it. Yeah, I feel like just making more communities like this in whatever way. Like, you can bring what you learn from this community to your friend circle and, like, create a community there or whatever. Yeah.
MG: Can you all tell me a little bit more about some of, like, your projects or your final project in this class and how that kind of applied to, like, what you have shared with me throughout this interview, throughout this experience and, perhaps, why you chose that?

HB: Um, I, well, the first, or the two projects—we had a final project the first term, which we presented to, like, a group of the founding people of the ASJLLC. And then, the second term we had, like, our more, like, our event, our campus event. And, for both of my projects, for both of them, we, or, I focused on the prison-industrial complex, mainly because, well, it’s affected my life. Like, I’m 19 now and my dad’s been in prison for 15 or 16 years of my life. And, he just got diagnosed with terminal cancer, so he’s gonna die in prison. So, I, I just, I kind of wanted to think more about that. And then, just how it’s set up to, you know, kind of cattle herd people into this system. And then also to recognize the different aspects of it, how class plays into it, how race plays into it, education, everything. And, yeah. I didn’t really focus that much on really how other, how it, how it appealed to me. For the first project we did, it was a poem I wrote. I, I performed it at the, your event, the speaking justice event. And, I could—that’s where it was kind of started, my interest in it was started with Julie Green when she came and told us about the plates, or the, I forget what she called it, yeah her exhibit. And then the second one, I wanted to go in and kind of question it a little bit more. And that’s something that I want to keep doing, and I’m, I’m also thinking about doing it as, like, a career, getting into law. And, hopefully this—well, it kind of has to do with a PIC, but also like detention centers along the border and then all over the U.S. Um, yeah, I don’t know if that answered your question.

[00:20:45]

MG: Yeah.

JA: Um yeah. So, one of the projects that I worked on last term for mine was with poetry, and, you, like, talking about masculinity and what that means to me, and, like, how this, like, new, like, how this new identity of like masculinity and power and privilege, like, what does that mean for someone who identifies as, like, a lesbian? And, like, how does that kind of, like, how does that fit into society? And kind of, like, resisting those, the bad, I guess, identities that people think of when they think of masculinity. And, I think that just in general for me, that, like, one of the things that, like, inspired me was social justice and then I tried to use it for the most is story telling. Like, I really think that when people do something as simple as telling stories that they are connecting with people and that they’re letting people know about their lives, but they’re also letting people know that there’s people out there just like them. And so, like, making sure that, like, I’m being real with myself and, like, telling my stories and,
like, talking about, like, what does it mean to be a lesbian, like, what does it mean to be masculine, what does it mean to have those identities and be a parent, and, like, what does it mean to be a nontraditional student? And, kind of, like, really talking about that, and it was—and how like.

MG: Um, and so the second part, I guess, would be, like, what does being an activist mean to you? Like, being a student at OSU and also kind of like how do you take that out to the community, to the places you’ll go after graduation?

HB: I was going to say, given my personal identities, I don’t really know what it means for me to be, like, an activist yet. I can’t say that I’ve figured out really how to be an activist, but I do think that, like you said, being an artist, you definitely are an activist with art. And, you know, even with poetry or with music, you can be an activist with that. And, I know countless, like, hip-hop artists, they, they use their voice or they use their poetry to talk about real problems and to talk about real struggles. And, I feel like that’s probably one of the most effective ways, you know, to be an activist, is through music. And, just ‘cuz, you know, everyone, a lot, everyone likes music—I don’t think I’ve met one person who doesn’t listen to music or like music. And, I, I don’t know, yeah. I feel like that’s one path I want to go down, I want to explore more is how to be an activist through music just ‘cuz I don’t really know, I don’t, I don’t have the definition for what an activist is yet. But, I’m still, I’m still working on it.

JA: Yeah, I think that, repeating what you said, like, I feel like there’s, like, this thing where people say, like, “activist,” and I don’t really, I too don’t really know, like, what that means for me. But, I think that a lot of the work that I do is, like, advocacy, and I guess that that could be that same. And, and, like, I want things to be better for myself, like, I want things to be better for queer people, I want things to be better for gender nonconforming people, I want things to be better for people of color. And I think that, like, having that, like, desire and passion, and, like, going out there and doing it and, like, questioning the system, and being like, “Why is there only a man’s bathroom and a woman’s bathroom?” Like, you know, like, where do people like me go? You know, like, so, I think that like—and, not being quiet about it. Questioning the system and being persistent and, like, wanting answers and, like, wanting change. And so, I see that in the future. Like, I’m, I’m in the process of applying to law school, and I don’t really know, like, how I want to use that, but I know that I want to use that to be an advocate for people who the system, the society has been set up to silence. And, yeah.

HB: Well, it’s like what you said with being a slacktivist, too. Like, how do you make that line? Or, I know we talked about it in class.
JA: Yeah, yeah. Like, what is the line? Yeah. And I think that, like, something like even slacktivism, I think that that’s, like, just another word to, like, kind of like, say, like, how big is activism gonna be for someone when, like, maybe not everyone wants to be like me and be out there and ask the questions and being in those really difficult conversations and question people. But that doesn’t mean they’re not an activist, you know? Maybe they just feel comfortable being on Facebook, and, like, telling people, be like, “Hey, read this article.” And like, you know, and I think that, to me, that’s activism too. You know, if someone wants to share my work, that’s great, you know. So, yeah, yeah.

HB: Sort of a little “like” or, like, a “share.”

JA: Yeah.

MG: If there were any thoughts or, like, things that you would want to share with, with your peers, with people in the community, people outside of different universities—as we hear in the news there are lots of things happening at different institutions as well—like, what would be something that you would want to say about social inequalities or things you’ve learned through this process?

JA: Yeah. I definitely agree with the question part, and definitely, like, question oneself because, like, power and dominance aren’t just held up by the people with power, they’re also held up by the people who aren’t in power, you know. Like, the way society was created was to make this power. And I think that, like, not only questioning other things, but then, like, question, like, yourself, and, like, how you present, like, how you show up in certain spaces. And like, do you step back and do you feel like you can’t talk or don’t have a voice, and, like, why is that? And like, yeah. And, and, and for people to, like, realize that social inequities exist, like, it’s a real thing and to not ignore it. And that, like, it’s uncomfortable, and it’s okay to have those conversations because without them, nothing with change.

HB: It’s like Charlene— you’re wearing one of the bracelets now— but she made, the orange ones she made, it says, “Change the world, change myself.” So, like, you can only change the world through changing yourself, which goes into that. And then, I think earlier, you said something about, like, people need to be more comfortable with being uncomfortable or talking about uncomfortable things because, or uncomfortable things, because I don’t know, like, society’s made it so easy to be afraid about talking about certain, like, real things. That’s why people believe that they don’t exist, or that, like, white privilege doesn’t exist. And, if that fear was just, you know, kind of taken away, and you’re like, “okay, we can talk about this uncomfortable thing” then I feel like a lot of progress would be made. But, yeah, I don’t know if the one thing I’d want to say to other universities or to other people, I think, yeah, I guess that would be it— be
comfortable with being uncomfortable, I guess. Or, don’t be afraid to change yourself, or change yourself. I don’t know.

MG: Um, kind of just as a closing, to kind of wrap up a little bit about kind of the things we have talked about, personal growth, the space, a community, if you could describe in a metaphor what your experience has been like, what you describe it as?

JA: Yeah, I would have to say for me, it was first introduced in one of my queer studies classes with Qwo-Li. They wrote a piece of—it’s like the double woven basket, and in Native American tradition, it’s two completely different baskets, but they have the same rim, and so the one on the outside is a different design than what’s on the inside. And, I would have to say that, like, for me, that definitely represents my past and present. That, like, I started and came into OSU as a completely different person who was very shy and timid saw OSU as only, like, I’m gonna get an education and then leave. And, it’s changed so much, that, like, the inside design and who I am now is completely different, like my goals, my dreams, my desires have changed so much. And so, for me, it would be that double woven basket with, like, just two completely different designs that make one person.

HB: That was really cool. Um, I, it just popped in my head. I think one of my favorite sayings or one of my favorite quotes of all time was a quote from Bruce Lee. And, he says that “one should aspire to be like water because water is always moving, always changing, and it takes on the shape of whatever it’s in.” But, I feel like that’s kind of superficial. Like, if I’m like water, then I can’t, then I’m just being whatever surrounds me. I feel like, yeah I don’t know, this is off the top of my head, but like, like water, I guess, because water is always changing and always moving and it’s powerful. But, people don’t usually think of water as being that powerful, but it’s like the silent kind of powerful. Sneaker wave.

MG: That’s amazing. I’m really excited just to, kind of, have had this opportunity to, kind of, hear some of your stories and, kind of, have you all share some of your growth with me. I think it’s also really inspiring just to, kind of, hear how you have grown from coming into OSU or coming into the classroom and beginning to see yourself change and recognize that as well, as maybe a few months, a few years have gone by. I think it’s really just amazing to, kind of, see that kind of growth in a person. And, I honestly, like, wish that whoever sees or hears these stories will also be inspired in the same ways. It’s also understanding that each person is very individual, has their own goals. I think that overall, like, you all should be very proud of yourself. And, thank you very much for sharing this space and this time.

HG/JA: Thank you.

[end of interview 00:31:18]