Alumni Advocates: The Difference Juniata Makes

David Corman, Marissa Gunn, David Meadows, Harriet Michel, and Brenton Mitchell

Beyond Tolerance Panel Discussion, October 11, 2012

David Corman graduated from Juniata College in 1977, Marissa Gunn in 2005, David Meadows in 1998, Harriet Michel in 1965, and Brenton Mitchell in 2006.

Good evening. I'm David Meadows, Class of 1998, and I'm the Director of Alumni Relations and Parent Programs. I want to welcome you all this evening. We're glad to have you all here and we're particularly glad to have our panelists with us. I've been asked to introduce them and I thought of a lot of different ways I could do that. They all have very impressive credentials except for maybe Brenton. I'm allowed to say that because he's my cousin! There are a lot of things that I can list off that are very impressive, but I thought I'd let them do that if they choose to do so. Instead, I'll give a sense of how they connect with Juniata and what I think of them.

I will start with Harriet Michel, Class of 1965. She is one of the most sophisticated and lovely ladies I've ever met. I'm not joking about that; when I think of her I think "she's lovely . . . and sophisticated." And you'll see that, I'm sure—no pressure, Harriet. As you saw from some of her photos, Harriet was lovely when she graduated from Juniata. You also probably saw a photo of her that was featured in a spread in *LIFE* magazine from the year 1965, when she went down to Selma and Montgomery, Alabama, with a group of students and faculty to the Civil Rights marches in that area. That's the famous part of Harriet, the one that always jumps out, but she has done so many other things for Juniata. We brought her back in 2005 to talk about that experience, and she was also the commencement speaker two years ago.

David Corman, Class of 1977, has been a delightful friend of mine for six years now, since I moved into the Alumni Office. David and his partner Bill live down in the D.C. area and he has been involved with Juniata because he was president of the JC-DC alumni group. For those of you students who don't know what you should be doing after you graduate, you should talk to David. He is a great example of a connected alumnus and someone who cares very much about the Juniata Network. David, in addition to being the president of JC-DC twice, was also the Alumni Association president. He does wonderful work and what I particularly appreciate about David is that he is always looking for opportunities to connect with students and help students in whatever ways he can. Beyond that, he understands it's not just all about career. Our alumni are very helpful with careers, and that is extremely important, but David understands it goes beyond that and has helped a lot of students in a lot of different ways.

David Corman, Marissa Gunn, Harriet Michel, and Brenton Mitchell.
Photograph by ClearBear Daugherty ’09

Marissa Gunn, Class of 2005. I remember when Marissa was a student here, working in the Admissions Office. Marissa was not quiet in any way, shape, or form, at least in my opinion. And I think some of that came from Marissa feeling a little bit like she was a token, put in publications and stuff like that. I caught a little bit of that, a little bit. But I am so delighted that that did not turn her away from Juniata, as I know it has for some people in the past. Instead, Marissa turned that around and became a change agent here at Juniata and worked at founding Plexus, the diversity retreat that is a portion of Inbound retreats now. When it started, Inbound didn’t exist, so it was quite a big deal for Marissa and her counterparts to begin something that really focused on helping people to be open about diversity, to talk about the things that were a challenge, and to look around Huntingdon and see beyond—I don’t know what I want to say here—see beyond the sea of white and the hicks and the trucks and all of the things you could be really grumpy about. In addition to having done that as a student, Marissa has been increasingly connected and has been more than happy to help our students who have interest in careers in law, and she is now vice president of the JC-DC club.

Finally, Brenton Mitchell, Class of 2006. Brenton I have known since he was a young boy because, as I said, he is my third cousin or something like that. Beyond the family ties, I have watched Brenton grow up, bigger, taller, and become this person who really for me, in a very personal way, represents a lot of the things I really care about—this all-encompassing love for people of all sorts. On his

e-mail, at the bottom where people usually put their job title, Brenton put "Doer of Stuff and Things." That's his title. That gives you a little look at the type of person he is. Brenton likes to stir the pot a little bit, but he does it in this amazingly respectful, careful, and caring way and has been a great friend to Juniata in many ways. The one that I love the most is the gift of music that he shares with so many, and especially with Juniata, over the years and in a lot of very wonderful and colorful ways.

So these are my friends here, our Juniata alumni, some of the best examples of what it means not just to be a good alumnus of the college, but a good person in the world. They're here tonight to share a little bit about their experiences. I'm glad that we can show the value of what those of us who are connected to Juniata really have to offer to each other. Before I invite them up, I want to thank you in advance by reading this poem. This is something that Marissa Gunn wrote—oh Marissa, can you believe it? This is actually something Marissa wrote to Harriet and the other alumni who had gone down to Selma in 1965. We made a collection of the writings from several students on campus about what their feelings were towards those alumni who took that chance to be there and go down to Selma and march and break the rules. Amazingly, Marissa wrote this little poem and it seems really appropriate to read it back to her and the other alumni who came back today. Even though it was written for a specific purpose, I think it suits every single one of you. Again, this is my thank you for you, written by Marissa.

> Thank for your participation in the breaking of rules
> for going and coming back
> not forgetting and not being forgotten
> for the legacy that you have left behind
> that you left it here for us to lead it forward
> We thank you.

Luke Thompson: Thank for reading that wonderful poem, David. My name is Luke Thompson. I work as the Juniata Associate for the Office of Diversity and Inclusion, and I'll be moderating the panel tonight. I think in light of that beautiful poem, I'll have the subject of that poem go first. Please, Harriet Michel, if you'd like to start your story, we would love to hear it.

Harriet Michel: I think its age. Good evening everybody. How are you? Thank you for coming out on a Thursday night to hear the four of us relate our experiences at Juniata. I took the train from New York this morning and as I came along the track I saw so many small communities by the train tracks and by the river. It occurred to me again how we can live in our own isolated communities without a sense of the greater world around us. When we were asked to come back, we were asked to think about the

influence of Juniata, past, present and future. So in a few minutes, I guess we'll expand in the questions and answers.

I came to Juniata in 1961, in some instances before your parents were born. When I came I had been an exchange student in Scandinavia through the American Field Service in 1958 and 1959, and Scandinavia, being Scandinavia, allowed me to have a very open, free lifestyle while I was there. This was the time when in Little Rock, Arkansas, Governor Orval Faubus stood in the door of Little Rock Central High School and the denied the nine black students admission. So while I was there I started talking about, thinking about, and explaining to white people about black folks because everybody wanted to know.

Then I came back to Coraopolis, Pennsylvania, graduated from high school, and was recruited by Juniata College. I basically took a test and scored very well, and they gave me a full scholarship. Your body went to the highest bidder; where you got your scholarship, the most money, that's where you went. I had no idea, really, about Juniata. I knew it was run by the Church of the Brethren, but after that I didn't know very much.

Once I got here, there was one other black student. He was African and his name was Andy Adede. There were no Latinos, no Asians, and if anybody was gay, they certainly as hell didn't talk about it. So I came into this very interesting community. Even if had I been white, because of my experience of living abroad, I'd still have been very unlike my fellow students.

When I came here, I kept being asked what country I was from, both from the faculty and by the students. They couldn't process that I was a black woman, a black girl, from western Pennsylvania. At the time there was the Ku Klux Klan, active in Mount Union. We had compulsory chapel, the dorm closed at ten o'clock, they locked the doors of the girls' dorms and if you were out after that, woe be unto you. (I see somebody's mouth hanging open.) We had chapel, as I recall, three times a week. But most important, and it loomed larger at the time, was Calvert Ellis, the president at the time. His demeanor and everything about him suggested a late-nineteenth century man. If you see the pictures, he had the wireless, rimless glasses and he was very proper. That type of personality was very much a part of the school.

It was into that that I came in 1961. I talk about Scandinavia only because I don't want people to think that I didn't have any exposure to anything before I got to Juniata. But I struggled here, I struggled mightily, because nobody really had any experience with black folks. They didn't know any, because they came from central Pennsylvania from fairly isolated communities. I fought Juniata from the day I got here. I kept trying to be myself, to be recognized for who I was, and was forced in many ways to experience what it was to be black. No guy would date me. I had no dates with any Juniata male the whole time I was here. I was actually forced in many ways to go over to State College. I used to sing, and there are some pictures up there of me in the choir.

One interesting story about the choir: It used to travel central and eastern Pennsylvania to perform, and we'd be put up in the homes of the church members. In those days we'd go to churches with the old Brethren where the men sat on one side and the women on the other. They had the white caps and didn't have zippers on their clothes, and ate shoo fly pie and apple pan dowdy for real, and they would put us up. Because I was soprano, I was among the last students to come in when the choir filed into the room. When you look at the picture, you can't really tell what I am, but when I came down the aisle, I could see those families that agreed to take students in, their mouths were hanging open and they would look at me and try to figure out who I was and whose home would I be staying in. Now they didn't say anything and to confuse things further, I had a Star of David that I used to wear outside of my choir robe, just to confuse people.

In any event, the most seminal thing that happened while I was at Juniata came in 1965. We were all blessed with the arrival of Galway Kinnell, who was at the time a noted poet and the poet-in-residence for a semester. Alabama was heating up and a lot of students started going south. After the event at the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma we had meetings and they were attended by lots of students. Under Galway's guidance, I must say, I became a student leader because I was most vexed about what was going on.

We interested a lot of people in going down. Originally there were about a hundred of us, including faculty, who were supposed to go. Calvert Ellis was not happy with that. I was over twenty-one at that point, so he really couldn't keep me from going, but he insisted, and I understand now, that the rest of the students had to have permission in order to go. A lot of parents, understandably, did not want their kids to go and become involved in that. I was shocked that my own parents did not want me to go.

But go we did. Fifteen of us finally went. You can see in the Unity House, and there's certainly enough evidence around in the library too, that we were attacked by very large men on very large horses. The photographs that were taken, and that layout in *LIFE* magazine during those three or four days in Alabama, really forced Lyndon Johnson to come out and give the speech where he used the phrase "We Shall Overcome," which then led to the Civil Rights Act.

When we came back to campus, they were not necessarily happy to see us. We were not greeted as heroes. There were a lot of people who thought we were stupid for going. They didn't think it was our fight, and they couldn't understand why we would put anything at risk. Some people asked why we would put Juniata's name out there like that. But I will tell you that in my lifetime, taking a stand against injustice, so publicly, was one of the most important things that I have ever done. Being at Juniata and taking that trip to Alabama with those fifteen people was a character builder. It changed my life because I have spent the entirety of my life—I'm now seventy years old—working at trying to achieve equity, parity, and justice for everyone.

Since I talked about the context then, I want to come to now. I've got to tell you that I hate to be a wet blanket, but I worry that here we are, forty-seven years later, and there's voter suppression right here in your state. We're not talking about Alabama and Mississippi now; you have a state legislature that is trying to suppress the vote. You have the Supreme Court that is now hearing, yet again, a discrimination case, on reverse discrimination. You have divisions of class, race, gender, ideology, and religion like never before.

I will say to you, if I don't say anything else, the obligation that you have—every one of you sitting in this room, whether you are a student, a faculty member, a parent, or somebody who just dropped in—please vote. This is the most important election in thirty years. We have a stark choice as to whether we're going to go forward and continue to build a world of inclusion that values diversity, or whether we're going to give into the forces of fear, of people whose world has been turned upside down and want to go back the way it was. I said this at graduation two years ago and I'll say it again: the United States will never, never be what it was before. June Cleaver is never coming back. Black and brown people, gay people, Muslim people are here to stay, so the challenge for all of us, every one of us, is to try to figure out how to live in this world where all of our differences are valued and not despised. Thank you.

Thompson: Thank you, Dr. Michel. It sounds like the rest of the panel has a lot of work cut out to top that speech, but I think we'll continue with the seniority thing. David Corman, if you'd like to continue.

David Corman: Thank you Harriet, and I'd like to be dismissed now. I've always been told I'm a late bloomer, so I feel I have a few more years to reach the level of passion and accomplishment that Harriet has. Thank you very much; you're an inspiration. I'll start off the way Harriet did, by talking about when I first arrived at Juniata. My experience was the exact opposite of hers. I had not traveled or studied abroad even when I was in high school. I actually grew up about forty-five miles south of here in Fulton County and my neighbors were the people that David Meadows was referring to: the rednecks, the sea of white, and the pickup trucks. My father had a pickup truck.

In high school my experience with diversity was the scandal of scandals: the arrival of a Catholic family in the school district. There were African-American people in the county, but not in my school district. I occasionally saw them at the grocery store in McConnellsburg during our weekly grocery shopping. So I came to Juniata from a very homogeneous group of people and experiences. Fortunately, I was blessed with parents who grew up in an ethnically diverse coal-mining town in Somerset County. Thanks to them, and I give them credit, I came to Juniata looking for an educational experience. I wanted to learn more about the world and I really wanted to learn more about myself. I think that was probably the one thing I focused on the entire four years that I was on campus.

Harriet mentioned earlier that when she was here, if you were gay you certainly never talked about it and nobody ever knew about it. Unfortunately, in the decade from when she was here to when I was here, nothing along those lines had changed at all. There were individuals on campus who were not afraid to be who they were at the time, and they had a very limited group of friends. I have to give the Juniata student body at the time credit because there wasn't any outward malice toward them.

At the time, I didn't identify myself as being gay; like I said, I was a late bloomer. I was sort of in a discovery phase of my life, but it didn't stop me. I was actually approached by two of the gay individuals on campus who inquired if I would be willing to revive a language house that had gone dormant. They wanted to revive a language house that was French and they came to me because I thought when I came here that I was going to be an interpreter. French was the language that I'd studied in high school and they were French students. One of them had actually spent a year abroad in France and had returned. The other was an exchange student who was coming from France looking for four people to get a quad over in East Houses.

I was advised by my friends that my reputation would be questioned if I actually said "yes," if I went and stayed with these two individuals in the same quad and shared the same bathroom. I really didn't think about it that much. I thought, "Well, what does that have to do with anything?" I was really interested in learning, and learning more about French, and they even came to me with a deal. They actually acknowledged, "You are going to experience difficulties if you say yes, but we'll make sure you have the French exchange student for a roommate." I thought, "Well, that's good, because the two of you were a couple." I wasn't quite there yet.

So I agreed. I actually didn't experience what it was I had been advised I might experience, but what I did experience was an excellent opportunity of understanding not only people with a different lifestyle, but also who they were as individuals. They weren't just gay people. The French student wasn't just a French exchange student. These were individuals, individuals with feelings, with their own dreams and their own goals. Unfortunately, their relationship didn't last through what was their senior year and I was exposed to the turmoil of a relationship ending. I was exposed to somebody from a different country and a different culture who wasn't really interested in helping me learn French or helping me learn anything about French culture because he wanted to learn about our culture.

It wasn't the experience I thought it would be, but it wasn't the experience that everybody advised me it was going to be, either. I learned from that that as an individual, I'm the person who determines how people perceive me. It's much more important to me as an individual to understand how it is that I understand myself and how I perceive other people. I have to give Juniata credit for that. I said my parents sort of pre-wired and programmed me to be curious and to not judge other people, but being at Juniata gave me the challenge to understand who I was as an individual.

I have to say that the time I was at Juniata, it was blue jeans and flannel shirts. We were much more interested in addressing the issues of gender inequality at that time. There was a different vibe on the campus and that was where the focus was. I have to say that there were some very interesting traditions on campus at the time, some that I wasn't really interested in. I was also in the concert choir and didn't really experience what Harriet experienced, but it certainly was still very much the case that when you were going into other people's homes, they were mostly Brethren families and they were concerned about what was happening with Juniata College and its Brethren traditions. What people were thinking about and looking for were significantly different. I don't think they were as dramatic as they were for Harriet.

We'll fast forward here to a couple of touch points with my Juniata experiences that have had an impact on my life. What I have felt and have discovered is my passion for connecting people with each other in ways that are meaningful, not only to them, but to the larger community. Like most people who are in a phase in their lives when they're very focused their careers, I was pretty much focused on where my career was leading me, and not very much on whether it was the career that I wanted. But I got to a point in my life where I felt there was not very much happening to me except a career. I didn't have a relationship that lasted, I didn't have any outlets outside of work, and I thought it was important to change that. I didn't feel like I was a whole person and I knew that wasn't who I was as an individual.

I thought, "I need to volunteer. Pick an organization that you're clear with, something you can get behind," and Juniata came to mind. I had a wonderful experience here, and some of my best friends and my longest friends in life were people who I met here at Juniata. When I decided to come out, it was my Juniata friends who I came out to first. So I thought, "I'll give back to the institution that gave me this opportunity to start discovering who I am and gave me this wonderful support group."

So I decided to volunteer. It took about two years for the college to realize that I was serious about being a volunteer. Once they discovered that it was for real, next thing I know, I'm invited to serve on Alumni Council and asked to step up and lead a regional club. When I made that decision, I told myself I needed to start going and doing things. There was a club in the Washington D.C. area and I thought I needed to actually start taking advantage of these opportunities to see what is happening with Juniata and what its alumni are like. My experience had been very much focused on my friends. I dutifully came back to my class reunions every year, and in between I donated money to the college, but that was it. I didn't do anything else.

So I went to a picnic in the fall, outside of Sharpsburg, Maryland. It was just a small group of people, an interesting mix of people, and a lot of them were from the fifties, but I was struck that there were also people from other decades there. A group from the fifties, including the host, asked the dreaded question: "Are you married?" I thought, "Well, if I'm going to be perfectly honest and I'm going to get

involved, I need to actually say ‘no.’ And I need to say ‘no’ with explanation so I don’t need to start embarrassing myself and everybody else by having them ask additional questions.” So I said, “Not in the traditional sense.” And without skipping a beat, the host, I think from the class of ‘56, looked at me and said, “Well, where is he? Bring him along the next time.” The pregnant pause came after what she said, not before. I was like, “What?” Some of her friends who were with her looked and said, “Well, yeah. You should bring him along. We’re a family, Juniata is a family, and everyone is welcome.”

At that point, I realized that I really did have a family. I had a much larger support group than just my Juniata friends. I actually had, and could tap into, a much larger network of people from Juniata who had had a variety of experiences, but because of their experiences here they knew more about what it was they wanted to do with lives and more about who they were. They wanted to make sure other people understood it was okay to have the same aspirations, to have different aspirations, to have different opinions and ideas and to actually just be different. But at the end of the day, we’re all included because we’re part of a family.

From that point on, it gave me more clarity in what I was doing with my job. I went to Washington, D.C., about twenty years ago. I would like to say it was career related, and it was, sort of, because I felt like I was being pigeonholed in an administrative job in Harrisburg, but the real truth of it is I moved to Washington, D.C., because of a relationship that actually did not last once I got there. What I found was a whole new world of people who were different from me, who were culturally different, who looked different than me. I rode the bus to and from my jobs and it was like, “Great, I’ve never had this experience.” I would have to say this was probably the most important thing I would take away from my experience in Washington, D.C.: a sense of a global community. It actually made me feel like it was okay for me to be different, too.

So I become a lot more involved. I decided the work I was doing—mostly for companies that were contracted by the federal government to manage public health communication programs—made sense because it matched my POE. It was helping other people, but it wasn’t really hitting on all the key points, like, “What is my passion?” This wasn’t my passion. When I volunteered and started becoming involved with Juniata in a leadership role, I discovered what my passion was and that was providing opportunities to help people connect in ways that are important to them, in ways that make a difference.

That would be my challenge to you. If you’re not involved, it doesn’t have to be with the Alumni Association, it doesn’t have to be with a specific organization on campus. Think globally. When you leave here and go someplace, think about the community there. Think about what impact you can make and in the process, I know you’ll discover more about who you are and what you want to be.

Thompson: Thank you, David. Upon hearing that story, I'm amazed at some of the very similar threads that occur in some of the Juniata experiences. I hear of students having them today. I think we are all encouraged by the message to not only focus on your career, but also to focus on some other things, too. To focus on ourselves. I think it's a good time to flash forward about thirty years and we'll start by hearing the story of Marissa Gunn, Class of 2005.

Marissa Gunn: David and Harriet make this seem a lot less intimidating than it actually is, so I apologize if I seem a little bit nervous.

I came to Juniata in 2001 from Lancaster, Pennsylvania. It wasn't as far away from home as it may have been for some other African-American students. I came at a time when probably everyone, and even myself to an extent, had kind of assumed we had progressed so much further than where we were, for example, when Harriet was here. In Lancaster, it was pretty diverse but I was still kind of used to being one of one or maybe two black people. It wasn't anything new to me to come to a place where I was going to be one of the only black people, so it didn't really cross my mind when I decided to come to Juniata. I wanted to be a veterinarian and Juniata had a very strong science program. A lot of students were graduating and going on to medical school, so it seemed like a good idea. My dad made a lot of funny comments about coming out here to the mountains and whether I'd be comfortable, but I sort of just assumed he was trying to be funny. So when I got here I thought everyone would sort of feel the same way about it that I did. No one would be surprised to see me, or think that I was so vastly different from everyone else.

To some extent, that was true. I played soccer my freshman year and I arrived a little early for training. I was the only black person on the soccer team and that wasn't an issue for me, but I did feel pretty early on as though people weren't sure how to approach me. I could see friendships forming around me a lot more quickly than friendships seemed to be forming with me. Still, people would do things, trying to reach out, trying to bond with me. I can't remember the number of people, of teammates, who would approach me when I was off to the side or no one was talking and they would start a small conversation about classes starting and things like that.

Then, so many people would tell me about this person, Denique Connor, who I had to meet. Denique at that time, I think, was a junior and she was just the one other black girl on campus. So rather than form a connection with me with soccer or being freshmen or anything, people thought, "Well, I know how to make her feel comfortable. I'll tell her that there's another black girl on campus and she can be friends with her." And I did become friends with Denique—she was wonderful—but that's one of the things that really stuck out to me.

Another thing that stuck out to me is that one day we had a soccer game kind of close to my hometown, and I told everyone that my family was coming and they were bringing Baby. I explained to a

number of people that Baby was my cat that I really loved, and my parents brought her on a leash, but so many people thought that I actually had a child. I can't help but wonder how many people wouldn't have paid attention to what I actually said and just maybe came over and saw my cat that I love so much.

But classes started and very quickly that was how it would be for a lot of people. No one was rude or mean to me, but it was just very clear that I was one of a few. It was also very clear pretty early on that Juniata was right at the beginning of a real movement of sorts. I don't know how I came across this, but I found a document that clearly expressed that the school wanted to recruit five African-American students for the class of 2005, and as soon as I read it, I could think of all five of us: myself, Alcione Frederick, Karina Ridgeway, Chrissy Harmon, and Paul Berry. We had all seen each other around. All the girls were in the same dorm, in Lesher, so we knew each other, but it was just so strange to read something like that.

Their goal was five and they met that goal, so I'm sure people were cheering and celebrating somewhere, but it felt strange to me. First of all, it felt pretty meager; five is not that many. Maybe it's a product of the time I grew up in, but even for me at that point, it was like, "Why is this such a big deal? Why does it have to be a separate effort to get more black people here?" Once I got past that and realized that not only was I the product of the effort, that I was also being recruited into the effort, I struggled even more to figure out what I was supposed to be doing here.

As I said, I wanted to be a veterinarian. I came to Juniata, I knew what I was getting into, and I was a student like everyone else, but I would get e-mails to come and get my picture taken. I would be asked to meet with other students, African-Americans and other minority students coming from other cities, and talk to them. Just asked to do all kinds of things that seemed all fine and good, but my roommates wouldn't be asked to do them, wouldn't have to take time out from studying. Also, why were they assuming that these other students wanted to talk to me?

When I came to Juniata to see the campus, of the people in the Admissions Office, no one I met with was black, there was no black student who came to talk to me, and no one mentioned it or asked me, "Are you going to be comfortable here? Is this an issue for you?" It didn't bother me, and it didn't seem strange to me that that didn't happen, but I did feel a little uncomfortable with this assumption that someone else was going to want to see me pop up out of the blue. It would be very obvious to walk around this campus and not see very many black faces, but then all of a sudden we just happened to have you have lunch with Marissa Gunn or Alcione Frederick. Not everyone necessarily is looking for that.

Some people are, and I think it's definitely a great effort, but it took me a long time to really get on board with the movement. I felt very conflicted. I felt forced to focus on something that I never really focused on before, that I never expressed an interest in before, but the more time I spent here, the more I could see why it was so important. A lot of very uproarious things happened on campus between 2001

and 2005, and I could see why it was important for Juniata as an institution both to be thinking about these sort of things and also to be talking to students and getting students involved, getting students active, and getting students to talk.

I remember one summer I stayed here and I ended up going to a party over at Mission. I was with a friend of mine and we were on one of the upper levels, standing on the balcony, people mingling and chatting. A guy standing with a different group of people, but very close to me and speaking very loudly, was very inebriated and proceeded to tell a very racist joke. I don't know whether or not he said it because I was there. I don't know if he just didn't notice me—I really don't know—but I went inside. I didn't make a scene about it, but I said to my friend, "Yeah, that was a little weird."

It turned out that another student overheard me and this student didn't say anything to me about it, but he took steps to, in his own little way, correct that wrong. He basically pulled a prank on the other guy. I wouldn't condone what he did, but I think the fact that he did act made me feel like, "Well, there are some people here who care." I don't necessarily need to feel like no one understands, or no one cares, or that the only people who care are people who look like me. This is someone who years later I saw at a party wrapped in a Confederate flag as a toga, so a lot of people can surprise you in a lot of different ways.

I was here at a time when I think a friend of mine was actually called a "nigger" and a "coon," and these are things you would not assume are going to happen in 2002, in the 2000s, but they still do happen and so we still need to be aware of them and we still need to be talking. I'm glad for the responsibility that Juniata placed on me and I can tell you when I graduated I was very exhausted. I had become part of something I had never anticipated that I would become a part of, to come back and have students tell me about the pictures they've seen and about programs they've heard I have been said to have started, but in retrospect I never would have thought I would have been given credit for those sort of things. I never would have thought that the legacy would have come down that way, and I'm glad it did, but it was very exhausting.

When I left Juniata, I took a year off and went to AmeriCorps and then I went to Howard Law School. That was not my effort to sort of make up for the fact I went to Juniata. There are a number of reasons I decided to go to Howard Law, which I think everyone knows is a historically black college. I remember on the first day, we had an orientation with all the first-year law students and there were a number of non-black students there. There were enough that it wasn't like, "Oh, I didn't happen to see that we weren't all black." In any event, this intro session was led by some third-year law students who began to address us and tell about the legacy of Howard and what we could expect in our law school careers. They mentioned, "All of you should look around and relish the fact that the people sitting around you look like you, and you should know and recognize that when you graduate from this institution and

begin your law practice, that's probably not going to be the case." I think that was well-intentioned, like you shouldn't take this for granted. You may feel more comfortable, you may feel you're surrounded by similar people now, but that won't always be the case.

That's a fine message, but what struck me was that they just ignored every single person in that room who wasn't black. They addressed one group of people and completely ignored a separate group of people. I didn't say anything about it, but it really made me uncomfortable and I think part of that came from the time that I spent here at Juniata. It wasn't just about making non-people-of-color think about people of color differently, or think about issues of culture and difference differently. I think it was really about getting everyone to think about these things differently because it's everyone's responsibility to create a world in which there is equality and justice, a world in which people are living together peacefully, no matter what our differences.

Things like that happened a number of times at Howard and I often felt I had to give my non-black friends some permission to be upset about things that they might hear. They often felt like, "Well, I chose to come to your place, so this is what I signed up for." I don't think that's appropriate under any circumstance. I don't think anyone should ever feel, "I decided to come someplace where I'm different, so I should be treated like I'm less than others, or like I don't belong, or like I don't even exist." Not everyone agreed with that, but it's something that has definitely followed me from Juniata on through the rest of my life and my career.

Now, I am a lawyer and I work for a non-profit in Washington, D.C., where many of our clients are either children in foster care, families that are trying to get their family members out of foster care, or families trying to adopt children out of foster care. D.C. is a very interesting place to be. It's probably still one of the nation's most segregated cities. The median income in D.C. is extremely high—I think it's over $100,000—but if you're poor in D.C., you're dirt poor, and if you're poor in D.C., you're more than likely black. That has had some interesting implications for the child welfare system because even though the city is becoming more and more diverse, I think a lot of people refer to D.C. as "Chocolate City." They've been talking a lot about how it's not going to be so "chocolaty" in the years to come because of the people moving in and a lot of the gentrification that has been happening. Regardless of how you feel about that, it interestingly has not had a lot of impact on the demographics of the people and the children who are entering foster care. I don't think anyone thinks that only black children get abused or neglected, yet pretty much only black children are entering foster care in the District of Columbia, and that is a whole separate issue.

Something that has come up more and more often is youths who are placed in foster care who identify as LGBTQ and they're placed in foster homes, often times with a stranger. There are some efforts being made to have children placed with other family members, but a lot of times they're placed with

strangers, people who have volunteered to become foster parents. They have to get their own license, to take all kinds of classes about how to work with children in foster care, many of whom may have emotional issues, behavioral issues, all kinds of things. Apparently, one of the things they don't necessarily train foster parents on is that fact that some of the youth who come in to their home looking for guidance, support, shelter, and solace might be gay, bisexual, trans-gender, what have you.

A lot of youth are finding that not everyone is accepting of that, and they are struggling with being torn out of their homes, from the families that they love, disregarding whatever terrible thing that happened that got them placed in foster care. They're separated from their families and now are in some place where they feel rejected or unwanted, where they feel they are not accepted. That is something that I don't know that a lot of people paid much attention to before, but it's definitely something that my organization, as well as the Child and Youth Services Agency in the District of Columbia, is really trying to work on. I think that if it were not for the experiences that I had here at Juniata College and knowing what it feels like to be different and to feel alienated before then, I don't think I'd necessarily have the same appreciation for a client of mine who is experiencing something like that as I would otherwise.

I think ultimately the take away is that this isn't about forcing one group to understand another, or one group to reach out to another. I think everyone needs to be thinking about issues like race, culture, and religion. You should be aware of people's differences and accepting of them. We don't have to like each other, but we certainly have to respect each other, and hopefully we will be open to the fact that we might like each other, too.

Thompson: Thank you, Marissa. I think something I know I took away from hearing you speak is that diversity and inclusion, getting to know other people, it's not all about sitting around a campfire and singing "Kumbayah," which some people still think today. I think we all appreciate the work you did to start Plexus and to start the African-American Student Alliance because they've grown so much over the last few years. We hosted a reception over at the Unity House for alums, panelists, and students, and I was talking to several students who were discussing how much they appreciated being a part of Plexus and how much it meant to them, so thank you. Now, the best for last. Let's hear from Brenton Joo Mitchell, who graduated just a year later.

Brenton Mitchell: If you would just join me, stand up, take a minute, and stretch out. Take a minute, stretch those legs, get that blood back in the lower body, because I want you to pay attention to me!

While that's happening, I'm going to get started. First of all, I want to say thank you to the people who preceded me this evening. I feel humbled and honored to be here in the midst of the work that you have done and are doing. Thanks to all of you for being here and to Rosalie Rodriguez in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion and to the Alumni Office for having me. It's great.

My work is in understanding, and since the day I was born, I have been trying to understand. I have tried to understand who my mother was. I was born July 25, 1983 and on that day I was placed in the care of Lutheran Social Services in the southern part of Seoul, South Korea, and for the next three months lived there until I was adopted into a white family and came to the United States. I went to Minnesota and then eventually moved to Pennsylvania, where my family is from. Throughout my childhood, some of the other things I tried to understand are: why I had to take a bath, why I had to go to school, and why my parents wouldn't let me have Fruit Roll-Ups, when everyone else in school had them. I was pissed.

Then, as I got into high school, it really got to understanding how to relate, what I could do to relate to people, and what I could do to get them to relate to me. That was such a huge focus for me that at times I had to sacrifice the relationship I had with myself. I have distinct memories of having buddies from the football team over on my back porch, drinking Red Dog. Anyone remember Red Dog? Gross beer, don't drink it. I was just sitting around and listening to them tell stories, tell jokes about "niggers" and "spics" and calling our Arabian teammate a "sand nigger," and in that moment I understood what it meant to sacrifice and silence what I believed in for the object of maintaining the status quo and keeping things cool. That's still a powerful, powerful force I try to reckon with on a day-to-day basis.

The other part of understanding high school was that I used to be much heavier, and I can remember approaching girls and wanting to date women, but being told, "I like you, but we're just too good of friends"—pushed into the friend zone. So I tried to create my own story of understanding, and that was to adopt a physical appearance because I wasn't physically attractive. I changed my diet, lost some weight, and around that time was when I applied to Juniata. Unfortunately, I didn't get in, but enrolled at Penn State-Altoona, and thanks to my girlfriend at the time, who understood that there was more to me than just my physical appearance, I was able to get on the Dean's List for two semesters. That gave me the courage to re-apply to Juniata and I'm sure, to this day, I would not be sitting here without her guidance and tutelage, so I'm very grateful for that.

I was going through this very interesting time. I was in this new body, slimmer, getting attention from girls who I never thought would give me attention, and so my understanding became, "Oh, what am I going to do with this attention? Am I going to go out? Am I going to hook up with you? Am I going to try to understand how I can hook up with you?" My focus was about understanding how to do things, understanding and exploring what it was like to be hung over, what it was like to play rugby, what it was like to sing in the concert choir. (It says something about that organization that three out of the four of us sang in that organization.) That was a very "me-focused" time of understanding.

During that time, I also began to understand how my race influenced how people perceived me. Like Marissa, I would get e-mails on a weekly, sometimes daily, basis asking if I could come participate

in a photo shoot. Before that, because I was so focused on wanting to relate to other people, I didn't want to acknowledge how my race could be influencing my relationships with other people. It was really during my time here at Juniata that those seeds began to grow and bloom. I think a large part of that is due to part of what I had always been told about Juniata by my grandparents, who are with me this evening—Rex and Dottie Hershberger, thanks for being here. I always said I wanted to go to Penn State. I grew up in State College and always wanted to play football for Joe Paterno, bleed blue and white. But they always said, "You want to go to Juniata because Juniata teaches you how to think, not what to think," and during my time here, I think, that was confirmed for me. It was confirmed for me that this institution places value on critical thinking, on thinking about our thoughts, not just regurgitating them on a piece of paper. Whether that was in our communication courses with Dr. Grace Fala or Dr. Donna Weimer, I've had lots of opportunities to think about how I thought about the topics that were being taught in class. I think that has given me so much in terms of relating to other people, in terms of being able to do the work that I do now.

After I graduated from Juniata, I served in AmeriCorps, had a great experience, learned a lot about direct community service, and then returned to Juniata to work in the Community Service Office. I eventually got into Residential Life and worked with Rosalie Rodriguez in the Office of Diversity and Inclusion. I say "worked" because one of things I came to understand about myself at that time was that I was not ready for a professional job. I was not where I needed to be, so I said goodbye to Juniata, packed up, and did a little world tour of Australia, New Zealand, and South Korea.

While in Korea, I understood a little more about my past and got to go to the adoption agency where I lived and got the names of my biological parents. That was the first time in my life I had taken the opportunity to be in an area where most people looked more like me than not. Obviously, it was a very empowering experience for me. From that, I returned to State College, Pennsylvania, and was working at a wonderful outdoor shop called Appalachian Outdoors when my friend came in and said, "Hey, I got some ideas for you. . . ." And one of them was World in Conversation, a program at Penn State University, where I currently work. My role with World in Conversation is that I work with our team of undergraduate facilitators, about twenty-five of them. I help to train them and manage their work throughout the year.

I see connections between the four of us speaking today. I wrote down a certain word for each of us while each person spoke. For Harriet it seemed like "advocating." You're always advocating, whether that's through your work in Alabama or your work now, encouraging people to get out to vote. David, I heard your work as "connecting," bringing people together, encouraging people to be themselves in those connections. For Marissa, you talk about "representing," representing yourself, representing ideas, experiences with people. For me, the work that I do now and feel so fortunate to be doing brings all of

those things together. We have people who are advocating, we are advocating for understanding. We have people who are understanding voices, and voices of the majority as well, and are connecting people, bringing people together.

So for me, it's a wonderful blessing to be part of that work. They want me to go out and connect with people I have connected with before, who allow me to think about human perspectives I hadn't entertained before, and that allows me to be here, to advocate for World in Conversation and to advocate for each one of us to take the time to understand the things we don't understand.

Thompson: Thank you, Brenton, and thank you for the nice remarks. The connections we make, the advocacy that we do—we can learn so much from just being ourselves and just having a little fun in college. We have about ten to fifteen minutes, and we'd love to open up the floor to questions.