

University of Scranton Black Student Union Interview

Interview with: Johanna Rene, Class of 2023

Interviewer: Koebe Diaz

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KD: Hi, thank you for agreeing to sit down and do this interview as a part of the Black Archives research I'm doing. Before we begin, I just want to let you know that this interview is not anonymous and will be recorded and put into the archives. The goal of this interview is for you to share your experiences as honestly as possible so that it can become a part of the University's Archives, and so that others can understand your experiences. This interview is not for publication purposes but some parts of this interview will be used as a part of a presentation I'll be making later this month. If you wish for your name to not be shared at that presentation, that is totally okay. We are not certain at this time who will be present at this presentation besides committee members of the Institutional History Subcommittee. Faculty, staff and students will be invited to attend, as well as the President of the University and other stakeholders. Would you still like to continue on in this interview?

JR: Yes.

KD: And can I use your name and story as a part of the presentation?

JR: Yes.

KD: Okay. Will you please say your name, year, your background, where you're from, and any leadership roles that you may hold on campus.

JR: Alright so, my name is Johanna Rene. I am a Junior, Class of 2023 Neuroscience Major. I believe I'm on the Pre-Med track. I'm from Union, New Jersey and...background as in culture?

KD: Yeah.

JR: So, I am Haitian from my Dad's side and I am Madagascan from my Mom's side.

KD: Any leadership roles you have here on campus?

JR: On campus I am the Vice President of the Foreign Language Honor Society and...that's pretty much it.

KD: Okay, awesome. The first question I'm going to start with to get us talking is: if you could identify a low and a high point during your time here at the University in regards to you being a black student?

JR: So, I'm going to start with the low times. I think the main low time was the election of 2020. There was so much tension going on and I know like about a month before the elections happened, that's when Father Pilarz decided to send the email about the white supremacy group that was trying to promote their stuff through stickers and flyers, I believe. And I felt kind of unsafe knowing that, you know, there are white supremacy groups around. Back home, there was not that much, or there was none that I know of. And it was kind of awkward for me because I knew that despite whoever won, the white supremacy groups might be upset if Trump didn't win and I'm pretty sure there would have been other types of, you know, issues if Biden didn't win and I felt kind of awkward to the point that I felt walking along Mulberry Street when I went to choir because I didn't want to get shot or, you know, assaulted or anything because of my skin color. I think a high point was the fact that I have friends. During that time, I had friends that knew my situation and they were offering to walk with me down to choir from Condron, or they would keep me in a safe space...if that makes sense. I wouldn't feel unsafe if they walked with me or if they stayed with me, especially during the election time.

KD: Yeah. And during that time did you find any support on campus, outside of your friend group?

JR: Not really. I didn't really find that much support on campus. They only talked about the politics and stuff. I didn't really see or hear anybody really say "Your safe with me...I don't know you but, you know, you can always stay with me" or "I'll walk with you if you don't feel safe anywhere."

KD: And in your classes with professors...you just mentioned people talking about politics...did you talk about politics in your classes at all?

JR: Not really. Now that I think about it...I'm thinking of another low time. It was not really on campus...it was a little bit off campus...City Market. Me and my friends at the time...she's black as well...or they're black as well...and they decided to go downtown and explore and they invited me along. And when we passed by City Market, there was a person...we believed that he was under the influence of drugs...but he was yelling at everyone and saying "Trump on top, Republicans win" and people passing by...he would degrade them. If there were women passing by, he would say "Oh, women belong in kitchens" or say something really sexist. And he was talking about Mexicans going back to their country. And when we passed by, he called us the 'n' word...hard R...and it was really shocking because it was the first time I've ever heard anyone call me the 'n' word and that was...I was thrown aback. And then when I tried to talk about it with a professor and a friend, they did say "sorry that happened", but I feel like that's it. They didn't want to hear anything else or they tried to avoid the conversation.

KD: Yeah, wow. And what about with anything of the support groups on campus...any of the campus offices or anything like that? Did you find any support there?

JR: I have not really been to the campus offices. Diversity and Equity...that is something I should look into, obviously Diversity and Equity. But I feel like I've found more support in clubs such as UCO. BSU...I went there once and when I went there I just felt safe. In a sense I felt like I'm at home. Because at home I was raised in a really diverse area, so it was like "I belong here", rather than, you know, I'm the odd one out.

KD: Yeah, can you speak a little more about your experiences in those clubs like UCO and the BSU.

JR: So, I remember when I first went there or first heard about it. I actually heard it through the Multicultural Center. So, that's actually an office...yeah. But I went to the Multicultural Center and I felt like everybody was welcoming and "Oh, welcome. It's nice seeing you here" and they wanted to get to know more about me and my friend and I was able to feel, you know, relaxed and at ease because I knew here on campus it's really awkward, especially as a person of color. People are always looking at you making it seem like you're completely different and you're not. But going to those clubs...I was able to find friends and I was able to be myself if that makes sense. Because in a regular classroom or anywhere on campus your kind of like holding back your personality because you're afraid of being too loud or the stereotypes that white people impose on you but once you're in clubs like UCO, BSU or in the Multicultural Center you're able to make jokes and people would laugh or agree. And if you discuss any racial issues or things that felt off within students or professors and they agreed it was kind of like a safe haven because they understood where you're coming from.

KD: Yeah, that's beautiful. Thank you for sharing. And could you identify...would say that could be your highpoint or could you identify a different high point during your time here at the University?

JR: I think this would be my highpoint.

KD: Yeah.

JR: Yeah, yeah. I don't really...other than like friends...because there's some people that are really accepting and welcoming, but other than that I think that was my high point. Yeah.

KD: And why did you stay at the University?

JR: Well, I stayed at the University just because, you know, the friends that I had and more necessarily because they were one of the ones that gave me good scholarships. But I think I stayed at the University just because I was able to experience new things and get to know people and a few different sides of things because I feel like once I went to this university I became a little more open-minded as to how things work or how people believe and stuff. Yeah.

KD: Thank you. So, the next question I want to ask is...so, you started here Fall 2019?

JR: Mm-hmm.

KD: How has your experience here changed or been impacted since the events of the summer of 2020? You talked a bit about the election of 2020, but I'm wondering...

JR: Like George Floyd?

KD: George Floyd protests.

JR: Yeah, yeah. Sorry...could you repeat the question?

KD: Yeah, like how has your experience here been impacted...changed or been impacted by the protests and George Floyd?

JR: So, I think since Summer 2020...like the George Floyd incident...I feel like the University really hasn't done that much in a sense of, you know, trying to be aware. Because all they did was send an email and lit some lights and...that was activism. That was their activism. I felt kind of awkward because I know this is a predominantly white school and I know people are Trump supporters and stuff and I was kind of nervous because I knew most of the people who kind of are on the opposing side in a sense, they think that the protests were too much or that they were opposed to the protests. I knew that there were quite a few people in our school that probably believed that the protests were, you know, wrong. And I felt a little awkward because I knew there was some racial tensions ever since, you know, George Floyd died. And I was kind of nervous as to if people would, you know, try to make George Floyd jokes...like insensitive jokes, in a sense. And I was kind of nervous as to if people would treat me, you know, differently now that, you know, people were saying black lives matter.

KD: Yeah. And what did you feel...what was your consensus after coming back?

JR: At first, I was like, you know, I didn't feel any sense of fear because I was happy to be back...especially since we were quarantined. But once, like I said, the elections started...you know, coming close, it was kind of like...I didn't want to be here. I was just afraid of being, you know, attacked or if, in a sense, I get attacked by a white supremacist, would people actually stand up for me or would they leave me be?

KD: Yeah. Have you experienced any forms of racial discrimination on campus, and did you report it?

JR: Not that I know of on campus. Yeah, I don't think I experienced racial discrimination. Are we talking about microaggressions and stuff?

KD: Yeah. Anything. Anything that kind of made you feel uncomfortable or uneasy.

JR: Probably walking around and I'm probably the only black person in a sea of white people. And they're all looking at me as if I'm completely different. Nothing really intense...like no one straight up called me the 'n' word on campus. And...

KD: But with that off campus encounter, did you process that with anyone? Did you talk to anyone about that?

JR: I only talked to friends about that. I didn't really talk to any officials, like no...or when I tried to talk to the professor I feel like he just dismissed it.

KD: Oh...

JR: Yeah. I really didn't talk to police members because it was off campus and I was a freshman and I didn't know what to do.

KD: Yeah.

JR: During that incident, there was one lady who was there...she was walking by and she heard that the guy called us, you know, the 'n' word and she was like "Are you guys okay? Let me know if you need anything." That was not okay on his part and that was it. I didn't really know what to do in that sense because this was the first time I had ever been racially slurred.

KD: And do you think that now, looking back at...would say that now you...well, how would you react to that situation I guess is what I'm trying to say?

JR: Well, first off: I think I'm pretty sure I would have been completely different. I have pepper spray on me and I completely forgot. I completely forgot. And once we walked to where we were going and walked back, I was like "Wow, I have pepper spray". I could have defended myself, because he...after he called us the 'n' word, we turned around and looked at him and he was ready to fight and we obviously turned away because he was definitely on drugs and we were like "We don't know what he could do to us." So, yeah, but basically, I think I would definitely report it to someone if that ever happens to me again. I would definitely report it because that was not okay. And now that I know that there are people in this town that are kind of 'racist-racist' I would try to handle it differently... literally try to handle it differently.

KD: Were you not aware of any resources at the time...like your freshman year?

JR: Not really. Not really because all I thought was "Oh, well we live in a really white town" or "We go to a really white school...I don't know what to do". I'm not sure if anyone can help or understand what I'm going through, so...

KD: Yeah. And that professor that you tried to bring this up to...what was that encounter like?

JR: So, we were on our way to class and we took the elevator and he was asking me about my weekend and I was telling him "Oh, yeah, we went around downtown and then, you know,

someone kind of called us the 'n' word" and he was like "Okay" and then we both went to class. And I was like "I don't know if you were in a hurry, or if you didn't hear what I said but I literally just told you we got called the 'n' word". And I was just confused because I was like "I don't know what that was about."

KD: Yeah, I'm sorry about that. That's a horrible...

JR: Yeah, right.

KD: And in the process of reporting...saying now that you probably would report it, is that because your now aware of the option to or...like what's that?

JR: Yeah, I think I would...I think it's because I would be more aware because before I thought we were on our own, especially since we were off campus I don't think the people on campus I don't think would know. It sounds really stupid, actually, but I didn't think the people on campus could help me especially since off campus it's not school property. I didn't know if they would be able to use that as a case or anything.

KD: And do you know any stories of people who have reported any incidents?

JR: Not that I know of, or not in detail. I know...I think I know a friend whose friend who reported his incident but apparently the University deemed it as, you know, false.

KD: Oh, okay...

JR: Yeah, I don't really know the full-on details my friend was just summarizing everything.

KD: Yeah, I was going to ask...

JR: Yeah.

KD: ...if they were satisfied or not with the process.

JR: I think so, because the person that...I don't know. I actually don't know. I haven't talked to them. I'm over here trying think and I'm...I don't think so.

KD: That's fine. I have another question of your experience specifically as a black woman on campus. So, how...if you could speak a little bit about that.

JR: Right, okay. So, as a black woman on campus I think it was hard. Definitely when I first came here I was just like "Dang, there's no black people around here". Especially the fact that you're the only black person in an area. So, for example, in a classroom or in DeNaples people look at you or stare at you and they're looking at you as if they've never seen a black person before. And I feel like it was kind of hard making friends at first because I was like people usually go for people who look like them and especially making white friends...I felt like it was hard. I didn't know if they would accept me to be their friend or if they're just going to look at me and, you know, talk to their other white friends. I think it's really hard, in a sense, just to socialize and I felt like I was able to group with people of color more than with people that are

not of color. And relationships too...it's not like I was trying to pursue a relationship, but I've heard many of my friends who are people of color or who are white as well say that the guys on campus would fetishize black women or their preference would be white, which I agree. I feel like most people's preference, especially on this campus, is white and it's either blonde or brunettes. That's the diversity. And if it's not racism, it's colorism because if they do decide to look out of their race it's more people with straight hair first and then after that curlier, curlier, curlier hair and then darker, darker, darker and then the last option would be dark-skinned women with, you know, 4c hair, you know. So, I think it definitely played a factor as to trying to socialize with people because it's kind of like more people gravitate toward people that they find attractive or people that they find would be part of where they belong or what they value and stuff.

KD: Thank you. Do have any direct experiences or anything like that that you'd like to share or that you're comfortable sharing?

JR: Of people...?

KD: Of the social aspect, the dating aspect...as a black woman.

JR: Dating boys? Not really. I don't have that much experience. Obviously, I don't talk to them because I'm shy, but socially...friend-wise...I feel like sometimes it's difficult. I remember one time I was in class...Chemistry class...and the train was passing by and I looked at the person next to me and I don't know what's going on and it sounded like something fell over it and I looked at him and he looked at me and I was like...the next time we had class he was on the other side of the classroom and I was like...wow. I must have scared him...I must have scared you off. And I think maybe going into public places like DeNaples or Leahy to get food...you walk in and you see people looking at you and it's just really awkward because you're like "what did I do wrong?", "are my pants zipped up?" or something like that. But people are probably just [unclear] because you look different than them or different than their friends, so...yeah.

KD: And if you could say one thing to an incoming black student, what would it be?

JR: I would say definitely find a place of safety, in a sense. Go to the Office of Multicultural Diversity and Equity, join clubs like UCO and BSU because definitely you will feel more at home or you'll feel like you belong in that certain group or certain area. Also, beware of your surroundings. Beware of who you hang out with. And just be safe in general. In this town, there's lots of people who are white supremacists, who are just racist in general...racist in general and you don't want to be found walking around and they accuse you of doing something wrong and then you're the next person on the news and then, you know, your family is mourning for you. But I think, in a sense, just be safe. Don't, you know, go to places you feel like "maybe I shouldn't be here" or "maybe I don't belong here." Other than that, you know, I think the school is pretty good, in a sense of there are people that are willing to be your friend. It's not all the time that you'll feel alone, but just, you know, survive. Survive.

KD: And is there anything else, any stories, anything you want to say to the Archives just to let people know about you and your experiences here?

JR: Oh, there's one story, I think. Sorry, I don't know if...

KD: No, absolutely, go ahead.

JR: So, in choir, there was this one song. We were singing a South African song and it's a tradition...a choir tradition to sing songs from, you know, different cultures and we were singing a South African Christmas song, I believe. And when we were singing that, I saw a few people look at me as if I was going to start dancing to it and I was like...it was freshman year. One of the two black people in choir...and the other one I feel is...he's light-skinned, so it's kind of...not white-passing but he doesn't look as dark as I am. And when we started singing it...when we started learning it, people were looking at me as if I was going to start, you know, start dancing around or like, you know, jiving to it as if I know the song and I'm like...I'm as confused as you are. I don't know what they're saying. Or when we have to sing a song that was more in the Caribbean aspect, more like...the music says 'Jamaican'...'bright and Jamaican' or something like that. And I feel like people were looking at me like I was going to start dancing to it and I'm like...the song is nice, but I don't know these songs. So, it was kind of like I feel like sometimes people assume that just because there are things that are like, you know...they're stereotyping, basically. They think that because it's a South African or a Caribbean...I'm going to start, you know, thinking that I know the songs and stuff or I know what they are and I'm like "no, I don't. I don't know. I don't know." But, yeah, I think there are some people that do stereotype in a way. Even when I go to the bookstore and stuff, I know people usually discriminate...stereotype thinking that black people would steal things from stores and stuff. So, when I'm at the bookstore, I make sure that my backpack is down and I make sure I'm looking around so it doesn't seem like I'm going to try to steal something. It's just the stereotypes because you know white people will stereotype and they will put that on you because of the color of your skin.

KD: Yeah, it makes socializing and just being around on campus harder.

JR: Right. Yeah.

KD: Thank you.

JR: Yeah, of course.

KD: Is there anything else you'd like to say or share?

JR: No, I think that's it.

KD: Alright, thank you.

JR: Of course.