

Studenting S2E4: Queer History: 2S&LGBTQ+ Community at McGill

Guests: Brooklyn Frizzle (Queer McGill), Margot Nossal (2S&LGBTQ+ Local Wellness Advisor)

Host: Margaret

Margaret: Brooklyn, we're happy to have you, thank you for joining us. Would you like to tell us about you yourself, your role, your group? Anything you'd like us to know?

Brooklyn: OK, quite the list. Um, I mean, I can start with some very brief stuff about me. So this is my fourth year at McGill. I study microbiology immunology, which has nothing to do with any of the work that I choose to do on campus. But I do think it's a kind of interesting fact because there aren't really many science students that go into student advocacy, campus, community building, stuff like that. So we do always like to drop that in. Not bragging, I promise. But yeah, I am also serving as the admin coordinator for Queer McGill. Queer McGill is a student service run by queer students for queer students. Of course, you know, we're accepting and welcoming of all students on campus, but that is our target audience. In terms of the work that we do, I think most students will find us useful for our range of resources and products that we offer, that's stuff like gender affirming products, safer sex supplies, menstrual hygiene, general harm reduction supplies, stuff like that alongside the largest English speaking queer library in Quebec. Need that caveat. Yeah, we also organize a whole host of like social events. We do a lot of campus advocacy stuff like that. And to the best of our ability to try to represent queer students to the university while creating as safe of an environment as we can for community building.

Margaret: Absolutely. You guys have an amazing, amazing portfolio. I remember being in first year and participating in an undergraduate frosh and just getting pamphlets and pamphlets of information. I think you guys are a really, really awesome community resource.

Margot, you're our LWA guest today. Would you like to tell us about yourself and your role?

Margot: Sure. So my name is Margot Nossal and I'm a Local Wellness Advisor here at McGill. I work under the umbrella of the Student Wellness Hub, but my role is actually in two different areas. Interestingly, the term Local Wellness Advisor was coined because the wellness advisors were local to different areas around the university. So there's like a Local Wellness Advisor in the Faculty of Engineering and one in the Faculty of Science, and Music. And then more recently, they realize, oh, like, let's target Local Wellness Advisors to communities. So interestingly, I'm local to Residences. I serve both the entire downtown residences student population, but I'm also un-local to every single 2-spirit and LGBTQ+ student across the entire university. So through undergraduate graduate, regardless of whether wherever they live, doesn't have to be in residences.

So physically, I'm located in the University Hall, which is a university residences building. But I've been seeing students since the beginning of the semester from all walks of McGill student life. And I point this out... I also like when we talk about the origin story of what my role is. It's new. So I only joined McGill in the in my current position in April of last year, like right as all the students left. Well, I mean, I want to say left campus, but nobody is here anyway. Thank you, pandemic! As all students finished their winter semester last year, I joined and then through the summer, I learned more and more about the role. And then in August, I started seeing students. So it's a new role and it really was born out of a need, obviously, to have specific care to queer students and making sure that folks had a place to talk where they might not have otherwise had a place to talk. So, yeah, I generally edit out the L in the LWA, and I just say, wellness advisor. Also I hate acronyms.

Margaret: You transcend the boundaries of localness, a global wellness advisor, But that's a new acronym.

Margot: Exactly. Universal, maybe. An U-WA?

Margaret: I like that. I think I think the vowel at the beginning makes a better acronym. So, yeah, Brooklyn, you already told us a lot about your group in your intro, but the same way Margot just gave us a lovely background of how her LWA role came into existence. What was sort of like the genesis of Queer McGill? How did it come together?

Brooklyn: Yeah. Queer McGill is definitely one of the older student groups on campus. We've been around since. I really don't want to get the year wrong. I think this I'll say the seventies. I think it was 1972, but we've been around since the 1970s on campus. Of course, we started out as Gay McGill and then became Gay and Lesbian McGill, Gay, Lesbian and Bisexual McGill, until finally settling on Queer McGill. We really kind of followed the growth of the acronym. So most recently we were Queer McGill. We've been around since the seventies and we've had kind of a hand in campus advocacy and kind of the queer community on campus since the beginning. A lot of our earlier events and initiatives admittedly really catered to the kind of cis white gay man population on campus. But we organized a lot of things like dances and meetups just to kind of foster some sense of interconnectedness and community because that didn't really exist. And so over the years, as we kind of gradually expanded to cater to more and more the queer community on campus, our services, you know what we're offering, what our goals are expanded as well. So where we kind of started as like a very social group, we really kind of, I guess, blossomed into a much more well-rounded support service for anyone that identifies with the word queer.

And in terms of advocacy, we've always kind of found our place on campus. I know early on Queer McGill really had to fight for a seat at the table. There's one story of Queer McGill occupying a Women's Day March because at the time the women's movement at least on campus was quite homophobic and not particularly accepting of lesbians. And so at the time, Gay McGill, even before becoming Gay and Lesbian McGill, was kind of fighting for a seat at the table, and I think that's something that we have. We don't want to say won, but we definitely have a permanent role in the lives of many students. And I think that, yeah, it really helps us. I mean, it really it creates the demand that makes it possible for us to offer the kind of services that we do.

Margaret: Absolutely. And that really does answer sort of our overarching question of what the administration and what student groups, what needs they meet on campus. And I think it's really interesting that your story taps into how the group itself changed and evolved and blossomed, if we're using that word to respond to student needs and to respond to the community around it. I think that's really awesome and really important. And I think that that's something in common with what you shared as well about the development of your role as sort of a response to a need.

Margot: Yeah, I would say, I mean, in response to a need also and prior to joining McGill, I was working on a pan-Canadian youth mental health project, looking at youth mental health between the ages of 16 and 25, which kind of falls into the purview of McGill students by and large. And one of the interesting things is statistically looking at how we respond to mental health concerns in queer youth. And I think when like an interesting and important distinction to make is the idea of like distress versus a mental health problem that oftentimes there's like a correlation between mental health and distress. And one thing that I talk about a lot with students when I'm talking one on one is that your distress is caused by society. You yourself are not mentally unwell. It's that we live in a society that is causing you to feel a certain way.

Right? And so, yes, statistically, we have stats across Canada and North America that say, you know, queer youth have a higher incidence of X, Y and Z in terms of mental health problems. But I think that parsing apart those distinctions is actually really important. When we're attending to mental health as a licensed mental health clinician, I'm very invested in making sure that folks who need proper and good care receive that care. But I think also in my role what's really important is making sure that folks who want affirming care is also what they're receiving. You know, it's not just like pathologizing the way that you're feeling. It's like identifying the fact that the systems is that we live in sort of contribute to these feelings too and sort of parsing those two things apart is important bit of a tangent.

Margaret: No, that's a that's a really lovely universal approach, and I think a well-rounded approach to care is always, always appreciated, regardless of what community we're considering. And then, of course, when community comes into play, we have to acknowledge your role was born sort of as the pandemic evolved and progressed. But when we discuss community, we have to acknowledge how community has sort of been disrupted in the past two years. And I was just wondering if either one of you had thoughts about how Queer McGill or your role as an LWA has adapted and changed during the pandemic and how you've tried to continue to foster that sense of community?

Brooklyn: Yeah, actually. Another service that Queer McGill offers is active listening. In the early 2000s and before the internet was super accessible to everyone, Queer McGill would operate phone lines similar to the role that Nightline and the Peer Support Center kind of fill. Now we would essentially have staffers manning phones 24-7 for whenever a queer student needed someone to listen. To find out, one of the real benefits of community and community building is the creation of these support systems for students to feel listened to.

Because a lot of the time the problems that queer students are facing are not ones that are easily solved, sometimes not solvable within any reasonable amount of time whether they're due to just the architecture of university governance or something, or the inaccessibility of health care in Quebec or, you know, especially recently, the moves by the Quebec government to restrict the bodily autonomy of trans people. And, you know, especially before the internet, before you could kind of create those links digitally. There was a lot of effort put in to kind of artificially creating those, those spaces where people could openly talk about their issues and feel heard. Because that's something that I think it is definitely neglected a lot when we talk about how to best support queer students because of course, you know, you know, tear down the system, rebuild it, but make sure that you're listening to people along the way to figure out what they actually want. You know, over the years that evolved into just drop-in active listening in our offices, and that's something that the Union for Gender Empowerment still does. We gradually phase that out with the creation of new services and especially with the pandemic, that was kind of the last nail in the coffin for drop in active listening and peer support.

But in terms of, you know, creating community virtually, I know that it's something that so many student groups and the university as well struggle with. As close as we can mimic in-person interaction, it's never quite going to be the same. In many cases, people aren't going to feel as safe, you know, talking with someone over Zoom as if they were sitting in a closed room with them. But, you know, we've really tried our best to keep the community alive. We transformed as many of our events as possible into digital events. We opened virtual office hours. I really have to commend my colleagues, the coordinating team at Queer McGill, for doing everything in their power to keep a one to one transition where nothing is lost in the eye as we all go virtual. Queer McGill was fairly successful in creating a kind of community, a virtual community. And I'm very happy to say that now as we kind of transition gradually back to in person I've never seen as I get... hopefully, operative word there... that I don't think I've ever seen the level of engagement and commitment from students. People are very, very excited to take advantage of resources

that they might not have considered taking advantage of before. I think, you know, it follows the saying like, you don't know what you have until it's lost. Once all of these services are taken away, you're reminded how much you might need them, especially, you know, when, when they're not accessible. So like, we've never had as many volunteers as we do now. We've never had such like the amount of attendance that we do now. It's actually really heartwarming seeing that transition back in person and knowing that that flame didn't die over the year and a half that that we were all apart.

Margaret: That's really awesome. I had no idea that you guys were experiencing like sort of that resurgence with return to in-person. You're right, that is really encouraging to see. Margot, where are you having similar experiences? What was the transition to digital life like for you?

Margot: So I think that it's really interesting what Brooklyn brings up there because I mean, a just as a reminder, it was not here at McGill in this role during the pandemic transition. But from what my colleagues tell me is that, you know, after a short couple of weeks in March 2020 of figuring out how to do this online, things really took off, and by April 2020, pretty much all services had transitioned to online. And what's interesting to think about is the kind of service that we provide, which is, I mean, the wellness advisor both does, you know, workshops and also one on one in-person and then virtual meetings with students. The one on one meetings with students when they are virtual brings a whole new level of accessibility to mental health care that might not have been that actually was not necessarily accessible beforehand. So when we're thinking about like the kind of strength it takes to reach out and ask for help and then it's booking an appointment and walking into the Brown building and walking into a counselor's office, or whether that's walking into a wellness advisor's office. And then all of a sudden, we can do that from the comfort of our own home, and we can construct the like we can construct the world that we want to have around us in this tiny little box. I think for a lot of us in the early pandemic, that felt very oppressive, but I think for some people that was very liberating. And so I think that like it's important when we think about going back and I'm using air quotes right now, when we think about like going back to in-person, it's important to remember how the pandemic brought about accessibility to certain things and to certain folks.

And I think when we think about like, how do we foster community during the pandemic and as we hopefully exit the pandemic, the thing that I think about is what it feels like to be back in person with people and how some people have grown a lot over the past two years. You know, like with we're recording this in December and maybe we'll hear this in the new year. But by the time we hear this, or by the time some people hear this, we might have been living in this pandemic life for two years, almost. And if we think about like the growth in a life cycle of two years, you know, maybe somebody finished high school in the pandemic, spent their first year online, is in second or third year now. The person that we were in high school is not the same person we are in second or third year. And in particular, when we think about like discovering gender identity, learning more about our sexual orientation, it's a very critical time. And so when I think about like post-pandemic or like how we foster community, it's making sure that folks have a feeling of like connection and support because these are things that they might not have felt, maybe at the beginning of the pandemic. And so we have like a really special... special is maybe the wrong word, but like a very privileged piece of time right now as we can support students sort of like bring them into the fold, bring them under the wing of how do we support, you know, without hopefully losing the accessibility that was gained and not just for students who are part of the queer community, but people with chronic illnesses who aren't able to be as mobile. I think there's a lot of different people who we need to be considering as we and I'm using air quotes here "go back to normal because normal" wasn't great for everybody, you know, so.

Brooklyn: If I could cut in. I absolutely agree, I think, honestly, the stress of the pandemic, the stress on our communities, on the medical infrastructure, all of these things, I think in my experience really bring the cracks in the foundation to light. I think something that we're really hearing now is that students don't want to go back to normal. We don't want to go back to the way things were pre-pandemic. I think a lot of excellent measures have been put in place by the university in terms of promoting accessibility, especially for students with reduced mobility, students who, for whatever reason, find the traditional university experience of, you know, going to class in person, waking up for lectures, traveling to campus, you know, inaccessible. And we find that a lot of students are quite worried to lose those accommodations that they have been granted, you know, under these special circumstances.

And I think as a community, I always like to think that common goals really, really build communities, that common causes are great for people to rally around. And we've seen, you know, yeah, as I mentioned, I do believe that the pandemic has brought quite a few issues to light. And I think that as a community, we've really been rallying around making changes and making improvements where we can. Now that everything is kind of being reassembled, we want to make sure that it's reassembled in a way that was better than it was before and not the same. I think a lot of the difficulties that were brought into play by the pandemic, especially for queer students, things like accessing communities but also accessing health care. I know that over the past year and a half, gender affirming health care has been so incredibly difficult to access when all of the doctors, all of the conditions are taken up by COVID patients, especially when we were really in the core of the pandemic. There's no room for, I think, what is commonly treated by the medical community as kind of an elective treatment. You know, things like hormone replacement therapy, top or bottom surgery, whatever, all of that kind of fades into the background when you're dealing with a global crisis and we as a community have really had to rally around each other to find solutions.

I remember early on in the pandemic we were assembling like spreadsheets of clinics that still had doctors that still offered HRT use. We were taking notes on our experiences at different clinics or CLSCs to make sure that people could access care and do it safely. We were recording not only safety for students as members of the queer community, but also COVID safety. I think that beyond just the community, marginalized groups in general were rallying together, especially when those marginal identities intersect, not just queer people, but queer disabled people, queer immunocompromised people. And as a community, we really had to support our own and take care of each other. And that manifested in so many beautiful ways. Mutual aid is one that comes to mind. Montreal has a very vibrant mutual aid network. Actually, the Milton Park Mutual Aid was established by students who wanted to take care of their community. I think so many people think of students, especially students living at McGill as kind of passing through Montreal. Like Milton Park, is often seen as kind of a temporary community for a lot of people that you don't really give much thought to. But for students, for however long they're on campus, for however long they're in Montreal, this is their community. These are their neighborhoods. And I think it's been really beautiful how people have rallied together to take care of each other, whether it's mutual aid, doing grocery deliveries, taking donations of clothes, prioritizing marginalized groups in need of support and all doing this in a kind of chaotic, disorganized, non-hierarchical way over Facebook groups has been so, so eye opening to how much students care about each other and care about their communities. I think one of the most dangerous misconceptions is that students only care about getting a degree because that couldn't be further from the truth. For so many students, this is their home, and that's why it's so important to make it as accessible and accepting as possible for them. And I think that's something that we strive to do.

Margaret: I think that's a really beautiful summary of the work that your group does, and I think that both of your points speak to sort of how the pandemic not only opened people's eyes to the barriers to accessibility, but also really had those those moments of sort of beautiful adaptation within the queer community and sort of the McGill community at large. And I think that that's a really, really important point to focus on. That this hasn't been sort of as a single point issue. It hasn't been uniquely good, uniquely bad. It's been so, so multifaceted and so complex for so many people. And sort of speaking to like the communities that you serve, there's longstanding communities, but what would you what would you say to like a first year student coming into McGill, wanting to know how to get in touch with resources, services like how would you serve that community best?

Margot: So I think it's a really good point, actually, that a lot of first year students are coming to McGill, and this is like the first time that they're not at their home, they're not living with their family. Perhaps they get to be themselves for the first time. They get to sort of reinvent themselves in a lot of ways. And I think that it's a very unique time in life when you get to be that person for the first time. And some students are coming to McGill and they have been out for years and this is just who they are and their families are very supportive. And for some students, that's quite the opposite of the truth. And I think that while I'm very happy to support the first group of students, and I obviously continue to support them. I think that when we focus on the second group of students, it provides a ... we - Queer McGill and the wellness advising team - really have a unique time to like, bring them in and tell them that they're loved and tell them that they're accepted. And I know that that sounds kind of smarmy or like shmoozy or whatever. But I really do mean it because I think a lot of students have come to the point, maybe they're 17, 18, 19 years old, and they've literally never said out loud a thing about their sexual orientation. And this is like the first time that they get to say this out loud or they've never met another queer person or they have, but they didn't know it because they were from a community where this is not a thing that you're allowed to talk about, or they come from a country where being out is equitable to being persecuted for it.

And they come to Montreal and Canada, where this is like a thing that is not persecutable and on the contrary is by and large accepted, especially in our like privileged community of McGill. And I've got to say that like, I think that we're very lucky to be in a community where like being part of the 2-spirit and LGBTQ+ community is accepted is, you know, embraced and is celebrated. And that's not the experience for everybody. So in answer to your question, like what do we do with first year students and how do we make sure that they are welcomed? I think, I mean, Brooklyn, put it really well when you said how many opportunities students have to plug in, whether it's through events, whether it's through, you know, like one on one peer support. And that's another thing that I really wanted to highlight from like from a wellness advising perspective. I get I have the privilege of meeting with students one on one, but also the Wellness Hub has peer health supporters, many of them who identify as queer and many of them who participate in a lot of different programming around the university.

So I think like I just don't want to speak only for myself. I want to like, like lift up my colleagues too, because there's a lot of really awesome peer health supporters who are doing really excellent work in the workshop work that they do, in the one-on-one work that they do at the Healthy Living Annex. Even like a greeter, for example, at the Wellness Hub, you know, a person who does a good job there – and I've got to say all of them are doing such an amazing job. But a person who does a really good job there will make a person who might be accessing health care for the first time and like, for example, a student who's never accessed health care but is looking to speak to a doctor about hormone therapy, for example, when they're greeted and their gender is respected. And, you know, like assumptions aren't made based on what they look like. And that's what our peer health supporters are doing. They're very good at making sure that

they're providing good care. That feels really good. And it's sort of like a non spoken and a nonverbal way of letting this person know that this is your community. You are accepted, you are loved. So I think that that's really important and I'm proud to be a part of that, you know?

MargaretAbsolutely. And I think you, you know, you sort of cut yourself down there saying that it's smarmy or cheesy. But I think that for a lot of queer kids, like hearing someone older than them happy, healthy and live, telling them that they are loved and they are appreciated can be life changing. And so I think that that that is such an important message, especially to get to younger kids or people that, as you mentioned, haven't experienced this kind of community and acceptance in their life previously before coming to McGill.

Brooklyn: Absolutely, absolutely. Um yeah. I think 100% there are so many students coming to just at university in general, but McGill, in our case, never having explored their gender, sexuality, never feeling comfortable to do so. And I think a lot of, for example, the social events that we organize, these kind of networking - I hate the word networking, it feels so like entrepreneurial. But, community connection events, I will say, are designed to let people explore their gender or their sexuality. This is kind of a bit of a granular detail, but something we at Queer McGill do is check ins. We ask people's name and pronouns every time that they come into the space, every time that they that they access one of our services. Of course, if they're comfortable doing so, to give people an opportunity to test out new pronouns, test out new names, to explore themselves and to give them the space to do so. Because quite often, you know, as freeing as university life can be, you know, moving away from home, the amount of liberty that affords at the same time, it can be quite constricting if you're if you're in the process of exploring your gender.

And, for example, it is not the easiest to get your name changed at McGill, for example, or to get your pronouns used regularly by people who originally knew you as a different pronoun. I think the university is making great effort, great progress. But at the same time, a lot of what we do at Queer McGill is advocacy, advocating for students on a case-by-case basis to university administrators, support staff to get them the help that they need. Because I don't believe that it's a problem of people in power or employees at the university being uncaring. I absolutely don't think that's the case. But students at McGill, university students, despite being technically adults, I don't know that every student sees themselves as an adult and I don't know that they're always treated as one. But it can be incredibly difficult advocating for yourself, especially when you're not fully sure of your identity and not fully sure of how you see yourself or what you picture, you know, for yourself five years in the future. It can be really difficult to say, I need you to use these pronouns or I need you to use this name when you've only been identifying with those labels for a few months and they might change. But at the same time, even if those identities are kind of transient, that doesn't make them any less valid. That doesn't make them any less real. And so we really do our best to build kind of adaptable structures where, you know, you don't have to identify with the same name or pronouns every time you come in, where you can just spit them out in a check in, and you know that is what everyone's going to be using for you. I think those are a lot of the ways that we try to support students who are exploring their identities.

That being said, I think there are also plenty of students coming to McGill who already know who they are, that have known that they were trans or queer for years, but have never really had the ability to do anything about that, have never had the ability to transition until coming to university. I think one really big demographic we see are first year students coming to McGill, knowing that that they want to transition, that they want to change their name, that they want to undergo any kind of gender affirming medical treatment. And they want to access that now because for many students, if they're coming to McGill at 18, they could have known that they were trans since they were 14 and have waited four years in maybe a home that doesn't support them, or a community that wasn't safe for them, where they couldn't

take the steps that they need to take to, you know, live as their true selves. Which sounds like it's coming from a queer self-help book from the nineties. We have plenty of those in the Queer McGill library. Side note: CaPS has donated so many, like queer in the workplace books to us that takes up a solid like fifth of our library is queer self-help books from CaPS. Which does go to show that I think Student Services in particular does go a very long way to support queer students and kind of always has. Well, not to say always, but has done so for far longer than many other organs in the university.

I think when it comes to students who already know who they are and really want to take steps to affirm that identity, most of what we do for them rather than, you know, creating malleable, adaptable spaces that conform to them is that advocacy again, working to get them the care that they need. Whether it's... I remember at one point we were keeping a spreadsheet to see what day of the week people were most likely to get an appointment at the Wellness Hub because students didn't want to, you know, didn't want to wait weeks to start the already long process of HRT, for example. And we really do what we can from outside of the university administrative structure to advocate for students to at least, you know, get them in rooms with the right people that can support them. I know we've been meeting with McGill IT and I know that they none of us are McGill IT, that's kind of neither here nor there. But we've been meeting with them for probably two years now, trying to work on fixing Minerva, fixing myCourses to make it more, to make it simpler for students to change their name, change their pronouns and have people at the university use them. Um, so it really needs to be a well-rounded approach when it comes to - and I know it's a very long way of saying this - but it really needs to be a well-rounded approach when it comes to supporting first year students because there's no one kind of queer student that is entering university life from the first time. Some have no idea who they are, and some know exactly who they are. And no matter what, everyone is going to need something slightly different and some different kind of support. I think that's frankly why Queer McGill has kind of become this, you know, blob monster of different services to support queer students, because that's the kind of diverse array of support that that queer students need just based on their own identities in their own individual experiences.

And I do think that, you know, the more, the more that we listen to queer students, not just as students, but as adults, as people who are suffering real circumstances. That's incredibly vague, but that are dealing with a society, a community, even an institution that doesn't support them and to take their issues seriously and adapt to meet their needs.

Margot: My role is the identified 2-spirit LGBTQ+ role, but what I find really interesting is that like by virtue of having that on the Wellness Hub webpage, people are like making wellness appointments where they might have never made a wellness appointment for, you know, and I don't know how that fits in.

Margaret: I think it fits in really well. I mean, Brooklyn, you were talking earlier about that spreadsheet that you guys were keeping in the beginning of the pandemic to highlight like queer-supportive health care, and I think that so many queer youth are used to navigating situations in which they don't see themselves represented. There is not generally in Canadian public health like queer-targeted services under provincial health care. And so I think like being able to go on the Student Wellness Hub website and see there is not only an acknowledgment that you exist as a student body with needs, but there's a person for you to talk to. And there's, I think, both Queer McGill and the Local Wellness Advisor role or the "Universal Wellness Advisor" role, I think they both serve this really important role of pointing people to where they need to go and being that first place of access, regardless of whether or not you want to do that through the administration or through student engagement, it's really hard to navigate and you get through that first step.

Margot: Because the flip side of that, of course, is that, well, you know, you scroll through on mcgill.ca/LWA, you scroll down and you see Science, Engineering, Music, Arts, 2-Spirit LGBTQ+... Like ideally in an ideal world, if we look five, ten, 15 years on the future, it shouldn't be that I'm the only person that can provide the kind of care that I'm providing, ideally. And I mean and to credit my colleagues, my colleagues can also provide very good care to queer students. I think what's important is that, as you pointed out, it's the identification and like the feeling that like this is a dedicated space. I've had actually students book appointments with me and then email me and say, "Am I allowed to talk about anything?" which I find so endearing. Because my answer is, "Of course, dear. You can talk about absolutely anything you want." Because I think that people's understanding of what it means to receive mental health care is very like structured. Like I had one student asked me, like, "What is therapy?" And I said, "Well, you know, like in cartoons, when there's a person with a clipboard and then like somebody lying on a couch, that's like one version of it. But my version of it is like, whatever conversation is going to lead to making you feel more well, you know?" And so I think like if a student can see an acronym on a web page and they feel seen, great, let's do it more, you know?

Margaret: Absolutely. It's a huge first step, and I think that that's an important part of advocacy is recognizing the moves that have already been made, appreciating them, but then also still continuing to listen to the student body and move forward in really cool ways. And if you wanted to speak to that, you can go ahead.

Brooklyn: I'll try and make it quick for the sake of time because I do want to say I think McGill, as an institution, has made a lot of great first steps. Has made, you know, things, of course, like your position as a wellness advisor dedicated to queer 2-spirit students, I think is so admirable and so respectable as an institution to put that effort in. That being said, I think something that people forget about, as I mentioned, I think a lot of great first steps have been made. I think people forget about second steps and third steps and the follow up that needs to happen because as much as students will appreciate and value having a wellness advisor for them, I think end game.

Of course, students, there shouldn't just be one. There shouldn't just be *a* clinician that students feel safe going to, *a* doctor that students feel safe going to. Students should feel safe. Going to doctors should feel safe, talking to their professors, not to the one professor in the faculty that that we know as a community is safe. Because that's part of what we do at Queer McGill in terms of advocacy is keeping track of safe people in the institution, keeping track of the administrators, the professors, the support staff that students can go to and that we know will listen and treat them with respect and get them what they need. And these are not always the official, you know, administrative governance channels. It does not always look like going to the website, finding an email and going through the steps that are laid out for you. We've had to kind of find creative solutions to quite a few things.

But I think what's really important to remember with how many action plans and task forces the university has assembled: follow up is important. Because it's one thing to dedicate the resources to studying student needs and to, you know, writing reports about what students want or how we could help students. It's another thing to do the damn thing and to follow up with those plans because they're exciting. A lot of what the university has put together is exciting. And I think we as students, we just hope to see those kind of changes before we graduate. If a task force is published for us based on our input based on things that we have contributed based on our, you know, our emotional labor for lack of a better word in terms of consultation, we want to see those results before we leave. Because this is a community that matters to us, that matters to students and we want to see it improved. We want to see it a safe place, not just for us, but for everyone around us as well.

Margaret: Absolutely. I think it's a really good point that you bring up that it is exciting and that actually sort of tips into that sort of last curiosity I had. I know we're pushing time. But yeah, my last question was really like whenever we talk about diversity or the 2S and LGBTQIA+ plus experience, there can be a lot of this story of like sort of Sisyphus pushing the rock, it's very like this hard, laborious experience where we're always pushing for change. But I wanted to know, like Margot, like in your LWA role, what really excites you about the work you're doing? Like what do you find rewarding? What makes you happy about showing up to work Monday through Friday?

Margot: I'd say that by and large, 99% of what is very exciting about this role is meeting with students. I have, I think I used the word privilege before and I'll say it again because I really do have such a privilege to meet one on one with students who are going through some tough times, but also some really beautiful times in life. And like my, my job is to sit there and talk them through it, you know, like in whether that's good or whether that's bad. I feel very lucky to be the person who gets to, like, walk that path with them because I think that like when I think of like clinical health services, we sometimes think of it as like a transactional thing where like, I am the "holder of knowledge" and I'm using air quotes here. I am a holder of some knowledge, but I am not the holder of the person's life. You know, like sometimes people say, like receiving mental health care, like you have the care and I am now receiving it. But in honesty, that is not how it works. I think I'm very lucky to be the person to walk along that path with them towards whatever that looks like. And so, you know, like in going back to what you're saying, like what excites me about this job? What excites me is that these people that I'm working with, while some of them are having some pretty rough times, what excites me is the really cool futures that they have. I think that I mean, part of... there's a technique called motivational interviewing, and it's sort of like looking down the future and seeing like, what's up? And I think that sometimes when people are in their really worst times, it's really hard to see the future. And I think, you know, like for just the average student, it might be hard to see the future. For a student who is, you know, questioning their gender or, you know, newly saying out loud things that they've held in their heart forever, the future seems almost unattainable. And so what I find to be like, really cool is helping show them that future is there. It exists. Let's figure that out together. I guess, like one of the things is I don't get to see that future with them, but I know it exists. You know they're going to go on from McGill and be the cool people that they're going to be and change the world. And I say that kind of glibly, but I also mean, like, McGillians have kind of changed the world if you look at what some alumni have done. And like the students who are listening to this right now, that's, you know, five, ten, 15, 30, 50 years down the future. So like way to go, in advance!

Margaret: Absolutely. And even if it's not the whole world, it is like your individual world. We all have our own worlds around us that we can impact and influence and change in beautiful ways.

Brooklyn: Yeah. No, really. I think as a student activist. God. Sometimes life can get so cynical. The wheels of governance are rusty and they move slowly. It's not always about waiting for attitudes to change. Sometimes it's about waiting for systems to rebuild themselves. And that is a long, long process and something that requires constant, constant pushing. Because it's all too easy for McGill staff with already too much on their plates to you know, forget whatever some student has been periodically emailing them to fight for. Whether it's, you know, IT who I'm sure have a lot on their hands and may not be prioritizing, you know, for example, the occasional email they get from a student asking them to recode my courses so that they're their preferred name can be the one that is displayed. But that kind of stuff really matters to students, and it can be so difficult when this work becomes intergenerational. When you know, I'm in my fourth year, I've spent all four of those years - no, not to pat myself on the back - but I've spent all four of those years fighting, whether it's with Queer McGill or SSMU to improve the lives of students. God, I'm sorry, I'm not going to like canonize myself. And it can get really difficult and really

disheartening when you don't see results in your lifetime at McGill. But looking back, especially looking back at Queer McGill's history and what we've accomplished over the years, the way that *we* have changed, the small differences in students lives, that is what really keeps me going. Knowing that even if I can't reshape the system in the short time that I'm here, at least I can make a difference in the lives of one or two students. At least we as an organization can improve the lives of a handful of students and make McGill a safer space for them, a space that they can identify with, that they can call themselves McGillians without feeling some resentment. And I think that that kind of fuel is necessary, you need those small wins to keep your energy up to fight for, you know, the big shake ups, the structural changes. You hope that that one day if you keep fighting and if you train the next person to fight as hard as you do that those changes will come and that someday a queer student, a trans student will just be able to go through their life at McGill without ever having to worry about it, without having to fight. And that's what at least keeps me going is that kind of that dream that one day one day someone will actually be able to just go to McGill and get their degree and be done with it without ever having to fight for their identity. And I do think we're making progress, however slow, and I hope one day the only way that I would consider really getting involved in alumni affairs would be to someday maybe see those changes and be proud of an institution that that has not always accepted me, but that I truly believe can. If given the proper time and effort.

Margaret: I think we've had a really, really lovely conversation today, and it's been such a pleasure to talk to you. Brooklyn, thank you.

Brooklyn: Thank you so much!

Margaret: You as well Margot, I really enjoyed the long chat with both of you.

Margot: Lovely meeting both of you as well. Great meeting.

Brooklyn: Really, it was great conversation.

Margot: Thanks.