

ES 86 | Coffee In the Swarm | Alecia Bennett
Project Zion Podcast

Katie Langston 00:17

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Mike Hoffman 00:59

Hello, this is Mike Hoffman with Project Zion Podcast. And this episode is called Coffee At The Swarm. I'm interviewing today Alicia Bennett a Graceland student. And I'm very excited to have her with us today. And we'll just we'll get started here as we go. So Alicia, welcome to Project Zion Podcast.

Alecia Bennett 01:21

Thank you.

Mike Hoffman 01:23

Yeah, I know, Alicia, you're a theater major. And we were talking before we started this before we started the recording. And then we, and in some, at least some reference to some of the databases at Graceland. Alecia has three minors! Church leadership, math and Spanish and then we found out that none of those are true. And I'm thinking I don't even know where those get entered into the system for sure. So, so Alecia, thank you for joining us. And you know, I knew you were a theater major. So what, and you're a senior, so yes.

Alecia Bennett 01:59

Yes, so I'm graduating.

Mike Hoffman 02:01

Yeah. So what else can you tell us about yourself?

Alecia Bennett 02:05

Yes, theater major, senior. Before this I went to community college at Sedalia State Fair Community College.

Mike Hoffman 02:14

Yeah, Sadalia, Missouri.

Alecia Bennett 02:15

Yes, I've changed my major four times. My major was marine biology because I really like sea animals but then I was like this too much science. And then I changed it to journalism. And then I was like, that's a lot of writing. And then I changed it to social work, because I was in foster care for majority

of my life, over 15 years, something like that. And so I was like, this is it social work, you know. And then at my community college, I started doing theater. It was like a semester where I was like, doing really good in my classes, but I had no extracurriculars. And I was just like, well, I get bored. So I was, I went to the theater director at the time, and I was like, "Can I help with the show?" And he's like, "Yeah, yeah!" And so I started, like, coming to rehearsals, and I was there every day, you know, I didn't need to be, but because I had nothing to do. So I got roped into stuff. And eventually, like, I joined the dark side Davis Day theater.

Mike Hoffman 03:16

I was gonna ask you, I was thinking front of house, back of house. So yes, it's called the Dark Side?

Alecia Bennett 03:22

Yeah, it's like, I don't know. It's like a theater thing. Even Tracy here says, like, welcome to the dark side, just because it's just like theater just like, you get sucked in.

Mike Hoffman 03:37

So now you're talking about Tracy Salter?

Alecia Bennett 03:39

Yeah. Trisha Salter here at Graceland.

Mike Hoffman 03:42

Yeah, yeah. So okay, so when I think of theater majors, I think of people who act, but you're talking about, like,

Alecia Bennett 03:53

Tech.

Mike Hoffman 03:53

the tech crew. Okay. So that's really what you want to do then with this? Yeah. Okay,

Alecia Bennett 04:01

I want to do crew, stage management, lighting design.

Mike Hoffman 04:04

I remember you telling me one other time about lighting design. And I think that's really cool. So yeah, so you would set up and design the lighting for like a play or something is that what you're talking about?

Alecia Bennett 04:17

Yes. Yes. So basically, how would free to play and then like, know, the blocking of the show with the set looks like and then like, design the light or like what I think would be the best with the directors comments, because obviously they always want it to look a certain way, feel a certain way.

Mike Hoffman 04:38

So yes, we'll learn how to do. That's very cool. Have you have you been able to do that already at Graceland?

Alecia Bennett 04:43

I have actually I did Lighting The Way. I did the light design for that for last November and I actually won an award for at KCACTF in January. Yeah, like a collegiate. I don't know how to collegiate theater conference that happens for a weekend in South Dakota. Yeah. What an award for my lighting design day.

Mike Hoffman 05:07

That is excellent! Congratulations. I did not. I did not know that. I know I you know, I've known about some of the theater awards over the years here at Graceland. But yeah, I didn't even think about light, that's, that's fantastic. Oh, that's a good thing to add to your resume then. I mean, yeah. That's great.

Alecia Bennett 05:24

Yes. Thank you so much.

Mike Hoffman 05:25

That's that's really cool. This is one of the reasons I love having "Coffee In The Swarm" although this is a little bit more virtual than the actual coffee in this Swarm, but that I get to know the other things about students that you wouldn't just know at first glance, so yes, great. So So you said you went to Sedalia State Fair Community College? Are you from that area?

Alecia Bennett 05:51

No. I'm from like the Kansas City area. So I specifically live Springs right now. But since I was a foster care, and I moved to Missouri, when I was six, I got into foster care when I was nine. So nine is when I started kind of moving around the KC area from like, different foster homes and placements. So stuff like that. Yeah.

Mike Hoffman 06:12

So okay, so you ended up? How did you end up in Sedalia? Was that just because?

Alecia Bennett 06:17

So it was because, yeah. Okay. So I want to Raytown South High School in Raytown, Missouri. And I, I didn't want to take another like, what was it? A foreign language course. I just didn't want to. And you need to to get into a college like, I don't know if it's the same. But in 2013, you needed two credits to get into foreign language credits to get into a university or college, whatever. And I was like, I don't want to so my college advisor who's like, we can go to community college, I look okay. But I didn't want to go to was it Metropolitan? I don't think there, was it Long View?

Mike Hoffman 07:01

Yeah, right. Right,

Alecia Bennett 07:02

Like Long View. So I was like, I don't want to go to the same college with the same people I just went to high school with, I don't. I want to leave. And so my caseworker at the time, she was like, "Well, I went to this school in Sedalia Missouri, and yeah, and they have dorms and everything." And I was like, "Wow, that sounds like the place for me." So I, I went and I visited, and I liked it a lot. And so that's where I went to school for about four years.

Mike Hoffman 07:33

Now is is that where you made your connection with Community of Christ then in Sedalia? Or was it before?

Alecia Bennett 07:39

No, it was definitely before that. It was actually when I was in eighth grade. And I was staying at a foster home near wall Walnut Gardens, which is my home church in Independence, Missouri. And I was going to church and my foster mom couldn't take me because she had to work that Sunday. So I rode the bike that she had in the garage, I rode it to church one day, and I kind of walked in. And they, they just kind of like welcomed me. And I was there for a little bit. But then I change homes and placements. And so I got disconnected from them for a few years. And then my senior year of high school, I wanted to church again. And then I remembered all the gardens and the people there. And we had connected on Facebook years ago. So I asked all of them, if they can come pick me up the church. And so my senior year is when I like started going, like regularly. And then the day before turn 18 I got confirmed that summer was all the church camps to pay for me themselves camp so I can experience that.

Mike Hoffman 08:48

And then was that your first year of going to church camps? Yeah,

Alecia Bennett 08:52

First and last year, church camps as a camper. And I've definitely gone back as like a counselor and I interned for central mission in 2018. So I, yeah, I like camp a lot.

Mike Hoffman 09:08

Yeah. Yeah. So that's something we have in common. I did not grow up in the church. And I actually got I joined Community of Christ when I was in college. And so I didn't grow up going to camps. Well, I went to YMCA camp one summer, and I'm really not much of an outdoors person. So that was a that was not a good experience for lots of reasons. But that's great that you did that. So yeah. I'm glad you got that camping connection. So so let's let's think about sort of the conditions we find ourselves living in right now. So So what's what's your take on what's going on with the COVID-19 pandemic? So you've had a cut, you had some time at Graceland, before the Covid pandemic and now you're, you're seeing what's going on with it. Now so what's your take on this?

Alecia Bennett 10:02

Um, (laughing)

Mike Hoffman 10:07

Was that was that a laugh of worry?

Alecia Bennett 10:12

No it was a laugh of like, there's just so much and like, there's so much that could have been prevented if the people in charge would have been smarter about the decisions that they made, or the people that they are in, I guess, quote, unquote, in charge of. And, yeah, no, I just think a lot of unnecessary stuff that's happening right now could have been prevented if we would have took necessary precautions, because other countries are fine. And so it's like, oh, so we can be fine and not have to wear a mask everywhere, which I'm like, completely fine with but like, obviously, it's not the best thing. But that's I'm not not gonna wear a mask. Yeah, and wear it correctly, everywhere all the time. So, yeah, that's my take on it.

Mike Hoffman 11:10

Well, I appreciate you wear your mask and release correctly. I know. You know, I teach a couple of classes here at Graceland, but I've not had you in class. Yeah, show exactly what you're talking about. Yes. Sometimes people think they have to pull it down to speak. And yeah, and that kind of thing. So

Alecia Bennett 11:29

Just project and pronounce

Mike Hoffman 11:33

Like a good theater major would?

Alecia Bennett 11:37

Yes!

Mike Hoffman 11:38

No, that's exactly right. And you know, and, yeah, I understand that. So like, the teaching and learning experience here at Graceland is sort of affected by that. So, yeah. So besides the sides going through the pandemic right now, you know, we're living in a time with a lot of social and racial justice issues going on in the public. Well, I say the US, but it's actually there have been protests around the world in many countries about what's going on in the US particularly. So what's your, what's your take on that?

Alecia Bennett 12:17

Well, as a Black woman, Black Lives definitely Matter. There's no ifs, ands or buts about it. That is the end of the sentence. There's no "but", to me.

Mike Hoffman 12:31

Nor to me either. Yeah. You have to know that, I fully support you.

Alecia Bennett 12:35

Yeah, so it's just there's so many elements that I could talk about specially having the Black experience personally. So I just overall, it's, it's not a political issue. It's a it's a basic human rights. It's how you

treat people on a daily. It's not political, it's just that we want the same rights as everybody else. Like, that's what we want. That's all we want rights in, in like, fair justice and criminal justice systems and bringing up Breonna Taylor, She still hasn't got justice for being shot while she was sleeping. And that is ridiculous to me, because it happened in March, and we are in September, almost October. So like, stuff like that, like issues like that, like why? What is the reason? And I know the reasons because racism. It's just so embedded in like America, and just ideals. And it's harder to unlearn some things. And this is just how people been for decades and years. And so it's frustrating, like, why? Why is racism a debate? Why is ending racism a debate? Like, why? Why is it? Why are we debating this? It should just be a thing like, yes, this is wrong, what can we do to change it? And then put action behind it?

Mike Hoffman 14:04

Absolutely. So have you have you? Well, this is almost a silly question, but only silly from the standpoint that I'm sure that you could probably share with share with me like times when you have been encountered racism. I mean, you personally but and I'm not asking you necessarily to share that because that could be a really tough response but, you know, it's been my you know, your questions about why does it just have to go on and why doesn't it just the end, is really, I think, an important issue for you to raise and I appreciate you bringing this up because, you know, it's like so, you know, I am obviously for those of you that don't know me, I'm a white guy. And I'm you know, and I have over the last several years since become very attuned to my privilege. I don't have to think about the things like I don't have to worry about my race. I don't get up in the morning and think, "Oh, yeah, okay. It's not safe for me someplace." So that kind of thing. So I, you know, I, yeah, I just so with you on this, and I don't understand why it has to continue. So, yeah. And I know we have to go, you know, we have to do things about this.

15:32

It's just, it's just, it's just the white privilege of it all. Yeah. It's like, people are like, "Oh, I don't have to think about this daily. I only have to think about it when it's in my face." Yeah. And so I think that definitely plays into the fact of like, I'll just like, keep going. Because no one, you don't have to actively think about it because you are a white person.

Mike Hoffman 15:58

I think you're Yeah, yeah. So. So do you think that the the protests have helped with this at all? I mean, you know, they've been, I mean, in some cities, like, I've been gonna probably get the wrong city in the wrong timeframe. But I know, in some cities, there have been like, over 100 days of protests. Yeah. And I don't know if that's, I wanted to make an impact. But I don't know, what's your what's your perspective on this?

Alecia Bennett 16:29

I definitely think that not not backing down is definitely helping. It's also the fact that people like so definitely, like at the peak, or at the beginning of this. There's a lot of film industry would like do little stuff, or like take out certain episodes or do like doing little stuff. And just it's not. It's not. It's cool. Like I'm glad but like, this is not. It's not the not really the point like it, it is but it's not like we just want justice

for lives, Black Lives, like we don't care about the episode, okay? Learn from it, but like, it's just like, everyone's doing little things. Like, like, oh, but we did this. Okay. Oh, we did this. And

Mike Hoffman 17:28

yeah, so so it sounds to me, like you're, you know, like, you're suggesting we need to do well. Yeah, we need to do more. I mean, until, until there's no more racism or at least it becomes equitable in some way. Yeah. Or, or, you know, I may not be using the right words, but you know.

Alecia Bennett 17:52

Yeah, I mean, I don't know if it'll ever be like, Oh, no more racism, but like, definitely, just better, like, I don't even know.

Mike Hoffman 18:05

I mean, you know, I wish for you safety and yeah, you know, equal pay for equal work. And yeah, there are so many, I mean, there's so many ways of looking at this. Yeah. You know, you know, especially as you mentioned being Black, being a Black woman. I mean, you know.

Alecia Bennett 18:28

I'm also queer. I'm bisexual.

Mike Hoffman 18:30

Okay, I didn't know that about you. But all those things play into a less, or might play into I shouldn't say they do, but might play into a situation where people treat you less than. That's, you know, effected Community of Christ. You know, that's just goes against every fiber of my being and my understanding of the Worth of All Persons. Yeah, that you are worthy. I don't know if that's the right way to say it, but absolutely.

Alecia Bennett 19:06

So yeah. And this, like, also, it is harder to unlearn but like, using the N word, or like stuff like that, like, you have to check people and constantly say, "Like, don't say that. Like, yeah. And in like, everyone wants to be Black until the problems come up. Like everyone wants to listen to music, everyone wants to dress everyone wants to do all this stuff that's like derived from black culture, but until like issues come up. That's where you actually see if those people are actually there. There for the culture and the black people that gave you that.

Mike Hoffman 19:52

Yeah, so you're talking about about people of other color white coat white? Yeah, that would sort of like With black music or black Yeah, the way you wear...

Alecia Bennett 20:04

Yeah, yeah.

Mike Hoffman 20:05

I just wanted to make sure I was following you. Yeah, absolutely. So

Alecia Bennett 20:10

And I'm not saying like in black music is like, but it's like, Yeah, I don't know what I'm trying to say. Well, I said what I said.

Mike Hoffman 20:19

Yeah. I mean, it makes sense to me like it, if we're going to, if we're going, I say if we but, you know, like, yeah, like members of society, decide to to participate in those kinds of things of culture, that it follows that there ought to be respect, and, you know, equality and those kinds of things would be extended as well. Not just to,

Alecia Bennett 20:48

Yeah, so I meant what I said.

Mike Hoffman 20:55

So, let's talk a little bit about Graceland a little bit more. I mean, for instance, how has it been for you? As a Black woman to come to Graceland? I mean, is it? Yeah, just tell me about that experience.

Alecia Bennett 21:13

Um, well. So when I first came to church, to church, basically and like, SPEC, I was like, Well, there are a lot of white people. And especially when I first started coming to Christ, I was like, the only Black person. And so since being at the church for a while, I've like, there's another lady that's there. And she's of African descent. I think she's from Nigeria, I don't know for sure. But, so I mean, she comes but it's like, I'm you. Sadly, I'm used to being the only person of color in a room or like, Black person. So when I came to Graceland, definitely on my hall there's a lot of minorities, because I stayed in the hall last year. So there's like a lot of minorities, but like, especially in theater, I am the only last year I was the only Black person. But even at my community college, I was the only Black person for a while as someone else game. There was two of us. So I yeah, so used to not having, but like coming to Graceland and joining DSU. I think that that definitely helped just like having, like other people like my race, and just my had similar similar experiences that I had, and stuff, just stuff like that. So yeah, I yeah, yeah. (laughing)

Mike Hoffman 22:51

So I don't I don't know if you've, you've heard this term. But you know, there is this. There's this phrase called the "Graceland experience", you know, and, and I, because I didn't go to Graceland as an undergrad, I sometimes struggle to completely understand that, did you? How would you describe your Graceland experience? If you know what I mean? I mean,

Alecia Bennett 23:18

Yeah, no, I think I get what you mean. Um, it's definitely I like it. I like being here. I like getting to know different types of people from different countries, and just like people that like, live near me, but I, like, obviously didn't go to high school with them. So like, knowing that I have these different people close to me. It's definitely a unique experience. I know that most of the things you guys do here that don't happen at other schools, mostly, like the traditions are the games and just like the little stuff like that,

that wouldn't happen at a normal University, quote, unquote, I guess you could say. Um, so I definitely, I like I definitely like being here. So I would say my Graceland experiences is good. It has been good.

Mike Hoffman 24:14

That's good. Yeah. Because, I mean, one thing I hope for is that, that it's not obvious to everyone or maybe not even the most people but you know, the Graceland whatever that Graceland experience is, it has largely been shaped by the values of Community of Christ. Yeah, that have sort of influenced the university over the years and it doesn't, I'm sure it changes over time, too.

Alecia Bennett 24:43

Yeah. Yeah.

Mike Hoffman 24:45

So what do you plan to do after you graduate? What do you hope for?

Alecia Bennett 24:51

So after I graduate in May, I would like to go to graduate school for theater.

Mike Hoffman 25:01

Any one in particular?

Alecia Bennett 25:02

Yeah, I'm actually looking at one in Oregon. It's an Ashland, Oregon. And the school is surrounded by mountains. And it's super pretty. We also have, I don't know if it's in town or near the town, but they have a Shakespeare Festival that's like super popular to many people like, when I talk to them about it they're like, "It's so cool!"

Mike Hoffman 25:28

So it's in Ashland, Oregon. Yes. Is that is that near? Like Portland? Or? No,

Alecia Bennett 25:35

It's actually like, three, three hours, maybe four hours away from Portland. It's super close to the California border.

Mike Hoffman 25:42

Okay. All right. Okay.

Alecia Bennett 25:44

Yeah, so southern Oregon. So I would love to go there. But if, like, I'll see like, maybe Chicago or somewhere on the east coast. And I know, that's mostly where theater things are. And on the west coast is mostly film things. I mean, theaters everywhere, but like, just like, just how the map kind of plays out for theater things.

Mike Hoffman 26:11

So graduate school, because you want to teach or something?

Alecia Bennett 26:17

No, I just, I want to do it professionally. I want to go into professionally. And since I changed my major about a year and a half ago, I feel like I don't know enough.

Mike Hoffman 26:26

Okay. That's fair.

Alecia Bennett 26:27

Like, I feel like I need to keep learning and making those connections and all that. All that stuff. And my personal hopes are I'm very much into manifest and I will win a Tony Award.

Mike Hoffman 26:45

So I'll archive this recording and then someday I could say I know Alecia Bennett. The Tony Award winning stage light design.

Alecia Bennett 26:57

Yeah, I definitely want to do Broadway. Maybe writing a play or just do like theater things.

Mike Hoffman 27:06

Just sounds like it sounds like the theatre has you, you've really gotten into this. It's like not just I was thinking you know the beginning just lighting and staging and how things look, but yeah, writing a play? That's really cool.

Alecia Bennett 27:22

Yeah, no, I, I love I love musicals. I love just theater in general, like walking in this shop area in like, when I talk about it, I know that I'm passionate about it, because I just get so excited. Like, I'm just like, I love it all. It's stressful. But like when it's done and put together, it's like the best feeling. And everything works in getting a light cue, right? When you're stage managing, and it gets called perfectly. You're like, wow, that was perfect. Love that. Okay. So just like that type of stuff that it just reminds me of like, yes, this is, this is what I do. This is this is my passion. So yes, I love theater.

Mike Hoffman 28:11

I'm glad you found your passion. I think that's, that's what that's that's a really important step. I think.

Alecia Bennett 28:18

It's taken a while, but I'm here.

Mike Hoffman 28:23

You know, and those things, sometimes those things change your life too. So you can see where the adventure takes you. So yes. It could be some angle out there or something. But I hope you win that Tony. That sounds really cool.

Alecia Bennett 28:38

Thank you.

Mike Hoffman 28:38

So I, you know, our listeners include Community of Christ members, predominantly so so if they're do you have a hope for Community of Christ? You know, as you leave Graceland and go out into the future? Is there something you would tell the leadership of the church?

Alecia Bennett 28:59

I've actually had like conversations with people and like Central Mission area, and just more diversity. And the church and the leadership and, like, I don't know if it's the apostles or it's like, one of the but like, in the like, the leaders, I don't know how things work in the church, like, really, but it's like, there's no African I mean, African American, like, there's no Blacks from America in this in this position. I think it's the apostles, but like, just that alone. You're like,

Mike Hoffman 29:37

Yeah, the Council of Twelve Apostles. They have leadership around the world. So yeah, there are people of color in the council. Yeah, yeah, there's the African American population is not well represented in the church.

Alecia Bennett 29:53

Yeah.

Mike Hoffman 29:54

You know, and I say that I you know, it's like, I think That's what you were trying to say.

Alecia Bennett 30:01

Yeah.

Mike Hoffman 30:01

You know, I don't mean to put words in your mouth, but

Alecia Bennett 30:03

Yeah, yeah, cuz I don't, I don't know the technical, I don't know.

Mike Hoffman 30:07

That's no, that's yeah. I've worked for the church for 30 years. So, you know, I think I finally have caught on. And I say that I don't mean that as a, I think for most church leaders, we would want more diversity in the area of Christ. Yeah, it's what it's sometimes difficult to figure out how to,

Alecia Bennett 30:31

How, yeah, how to get the people in? Yeah.

Mike Hoffman 30:35

Yeah. You know, and it, there's just there's, it's always it's always local or contextual. I mean, yeah. And also, it's like, you know, like your involvement with Campus Ministries, you know, here at Graceland has been good for us. So we appreciate that.

Alecia Bennett 30:59

Yeah. But so that, I mean, just that's what I just like more diversity. And not only like, Black people but Hispanics and just, like, just different. Yeah, different types of people represent the church. So you hear all different types of voices and experiences.

Mike Hoffman 31:21

Yeah. So is there anything else you'd like to share about yourself Graceland the church or future? Anything else?

Alecia Bennett 31:31

No, I think I just told you everything. (laughing)

Mike Hoffman 31:35

But um, yeah, no, I really something else. Alecia, is a great to speak to today. So yeah, really appreciate this. And, and thank you, Alecia Bennett, from Graceland University, a senior majoring in theater. And she will be winning her Tony in just a couple of years. Alecia, thank you.

Alecia Bennett 32:06

Thank you so much, Mike.

Mike Hoffman 32:08

All right. I'll see you around campus.

Alecia Bennett 32:11

I'll see you soon. Thank you so much.

Josh Mangelson 32:22

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