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2023

### Ryan Rivera '25-Elizabeth Moreno '18

Ryan Rivera

Elizabeth Moreno

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**Ryan Rivera:** So, can you start off by just saying your name and your class year?

**Elizabeth Moreno:** Yeah, my name is Elizabeth Moreno -- I was known by Lizzy -- and my class year was 2018.

**RR:** Nice. So, for this recording, we just want to know, like, for starters, like, how was your time here at Conn?

**EM:** I really enjoyed my time at Conn overall. I think what built the foundation of my Conn experience was the friend group I formed in the theater department and I double majored in theater and economics and I think if I had not had theater, Conn would have been probably socially more challenging for me, but I think the bedrock of that helped a lot.

**RR:** Nice. So, I guess another question could be just that ... like, for starters, are you, like, first gen or ...

**EM:** So this is interesting, but I'm actually adopted. So, I was adopted from China when I was six months, so I guess technically you could argue that I was first generation if we would fully be going by bloodline, but, my mom did go to college. I was raised by a single mother- mother in New York City. I think it ties to Conn, because, since I grew up in New York City, I had always been surrounded by, just like, very diverse, populous places in all types of facets, so, like, diversity with socioeconomics, diversity, like, racially, diversity culturally and everything and within New York City, like every city, there's always silos of, you know, neighborhoods where it's predominantly white or neighborhoods where it's predominantly Asian and whatnot and because I'm adopted by a white mother, I lived in a predominantly white area and so I do say I'm like transracial almost, but I think coming to Conn I had thought that even if Conn was predominantly white overall, like, I was very used to that and whatnot, but I think it was definitely a different type of white that it wasn't until I came to Conn where I really was I think forced to reconcile this idea that, like, I'm not white, even if I feel like I am. Which is why, I think I started with, like, theater where it transcends preconceived notions about people, really helped me at Conn and really helped me form, like, a community and it wasn't until I think the end of Conn -- and kudos to Conn's education -- that I was able to really start to reconcile what it means to be person of color through- like I was always interested in typecasting with theater and racial typecasting and why do we always cast protagonists as white actors or white actresses even when the role of the character has nothing to do with them being white, but I think it speaks to something like our- our default perception of who is the main character is always white. And then we don't cast a person of color unless the story is specifically tied to them, like, being a multicultural person. And it's- I think little things like that I was able to explore through Conn and I wrote a thesis on racial typecasting and I, like, also studied abroad in Peru and went to Santiago, Chile and had to reconcile with my race there and how, I think, every person in my group at Conn was always, asked, like, "Where are you from?" and they'd

be, like, "Oh, I'm from Massachusetts or I'm from blah-blah-blah," and, they'd be like, "That's so cool," and then they would get to me and they would be, like, "Where are you from?" and I would be like, "I'm from, like, New York City in the United States," and they would be, like, "But where are you really from?"

**RR:** Oh my gosh.

**EM:** No, like- but I think seeing- having got that parallel experience next to white people, there's no way you can't ignore the fact that someone is perceiving you differently, even if you're not- even if you feel like you're similar. And I think Conn's- like, the beauty of the liberal arts education and the small campus definitely allowed me to explore those identity questions even if I didn't realize I was slowly exploring them, because I do think it's- when you're younger as well -- younger, I'm 26 -- but, it can be- it can be challenging, I think, to want to lean into the things that make you different and explore how it's formed your personality and who you are, because I think when you're still forming your personality, you just want to be similar and fit in. Yeah, I don't really remember the question, but ...

**RR:** No, but that was, like, very insightful, just talking about all that. So, I know you mentioned, like, you know, theater really helped you, like, find your footing at Conn, so I guess my follow up question would be, like, how is it being, like, a person of color in theater, because usually in theater, there's a certain, like- only like white people.

**EM:** Yeah, no, that's a very good question. I mean, it was- it was really hard. I will spoil my outcome and I'm not in theater anymore and I do think theater has made enormous strides in pushing past racial typecasting and whatnot, but I think for me it was very challenging because I never felt like I looked like the prototype ingenue for a Rogers and Hammerstein musical or whatnot, because I'm just not white and I also think what was challenging as well is as someone that's transracial, where I'm culturally white, I don't speak any Asian languages I'm also not Asian enough to, like, play Asian roles, so it did- I think it exposed- theater mimics and tells stories based on what we think life is and I think theater at its best can bring- can break our perceptions of what stereotypes are and add deeper nuance to our assumptions, but I think theater at its worst, when it gets really commercial can just play into preconceived notions because it's easier for very wealthy white audiences to digest and it comes through that filter. And so my feeling of not being able to kind of fit into any particular prototype exposes how binary our thinking can be about anything that deviates from what we think is this, like, norm which is technically- usually like a hetero cis white man or woman of, like, upper middle class. And I think theater has made a lot of strides. When Hamilton came out, I think that was so hopeful for me. I think when Hadestown came out, seeing the main character, Eurydice, played by someone that -- I'm pretty sure she's, like, Filipino and Mexican -- but she's, like, mixed and honestly, kind of looks like me a little bit, so that was enlightening and encouraging to see, but it- I think in a career where your worth and your business is you it can feel really challenging for people of color or people that don't have as many roles open to them -- it might be because they're older or whatnot -- like, to detach their self-esteem from that and not feel demoralized by the fact that they're facing this insidious type of rule-out already of- yeah, technically you are

qualified for this lead role and you have all of the, like, emotional work that happens before with theater when you're doing a lot of character work, but we just know that the audience won't be able to receive, like, Hermione as a Asian person or when -- I don't know if you know Cursed Child, but I think when Hermione was cast as a Black woman it was so much backlash initially. It's like that in itself- that in itself, that backlash, exposes all these preconceived, you know, racist assumptions that we have if we- because nothing about Hermione's character is exclusive to having to be a white actress. But it shows that we view any sort of baseline character as white initially. So, candidly, I left theater organically because- also I wanted to make- I wanted to have a higher ceiling in income and I wanted my work ethic to be correlated to an outcome in growth and kudos to everyone that does stay in theater, but I also think that we need to acknowledge it is- because it doesn't generate a lot of revenue, it is a very privileged art form to participate in and at the same time we have to understand, like, whose stories are being told, because it is such an expensive art form to produce and I- after pursuing it for a year and having, honestly, minor success and it was fun, I think I realized every play and every musical I've done has been a white man, like, going on his own passion project. And what attracted me to theater and what I loved about Conn theater is that it boldly wanted to examine and create stories that broke that perception. And so, I don't think you can view the two tied- you can't view theater without examining finance and socioeconomic privilege and, yeah, the two are tied more that you would think. So, I'm actually now in finance, but ...

**RR:** Now, it's interesting how you mentioned the thing about Hermione, because recently with the Little Mermaid, yeah when they cast her, Halle Bailey, yeah. I just- it wasn't related to Conn, but I found that interesting, that point. My last question, because I don't want to keep you here for too long, just, like, what's your connection to Unity House?

**EM:** I honestly I feel like I didn't start to use Unity House until my senior year, which is sad in some ways, but also I'm glad I, like, found it by the end and I was part of -- I forgot what the acronym is, but the Asia club -- at the end and I think even now sitting in Unity House it's a safe place to actually feel a sense of pride in the varied backgrounds that make you different. That sounds really basic, but I do think if you don't have that safety and a community of other people kind of reconciling through it in a similar environment, like they're reconciling it through the broader Connecticut College environment, it can be incredibly difficult to actually want to take that first step in understanding your identity and I think it you don't do the work, unfortunately, that comes with, like, embracing the things that might not be spoken about as much and celebrated as much because they're less familiar to the mainstream or whatever the mainstream might be at Conn, then it ends up turning into shame and so I think Unity House for me allowed me to -- I don't know -- take more ownership of my story and then also understand that other people's stories and their differences are different, but they're still going through the similar arc of owning it and it- it can actually be a catalyst for community and connection rather than, like, a burden that you have to hold in. So, I think Unity House is definitely the grounding center in kind of doing that exploration.

**RR:** Nice. So, that's all my questions. Thank you again for, like, your time. This is very insightful.

**EM:** Thank you for doing this. I think this is very important.