

## SE04EP05

### Pride in Panama

#### Connor Perez

H: Welcome to Noles Abroad, a podcast by Florida State University International Programs! I'm Hannah

Z: And I'm Zoe! And we are your hosts. On this podcast we'll talk about study abroad from the perspective of the students, faculty, staff, and alumni who make it an experience worth sharing. We'll also bring you travel tips and fun facts from around the globe.

H: On today's episode we talk with Connor Perez, a Class of 2020 graduate who studied abroad in the Republic of Panama. They talk about their experience being queer in a Latinx community, the role they played in creating FSU Panama's Pride organization, and what they've been up to since graduating. Let's go to our conversation with Connor now.

H: Hey Connor, how are you doing today?

Connor (C): I'm good how are you?

H: Doing so well, really excited to see you, really excited to talk to you today. Can you introduce yourself to our listeners?

C: Yeah so my name is Connor Perez. I recently graduated from FSU last year and I double majored in Interdisciplinary Social Sciences and International Affairs and I sort of minored in Hospitality and I also studied abroad in the Republic of Panama during my time at FSU.

Z: Awesome! So can you tell us why you chose to study abroad while you were at FSU and why you chose Panama?

C: Right, so I studied abroad in high school previously I went abroad to Switzerland during the summer of my Junior year I believe and that was a really formative experience for me so when I got to college and saw that FSU had a study abroad program I saw that I could do it again and also for relatively cheap comparative. So I really wanted to do it and I chose Panama because previously I already studied abroad in Europe and the other options were in Europe with FSU so that coupled with the fact that my family they come from Venezuela, and if you didn't know Panama and Venezuela used to be part of the same country called Grand Columbia, so I wanted to get a more hands on experience with a part of history from my culture.

H: That's so many great reasons to choose to study abroad and also that you had like a personal connection to the location we hear that a lot from students, or from some students, that they have a personal connection which is really a big reason why they choose to study where they do. So shifting a little bit, talking a little bit more about your involvement while at FSU and in Panama. Can you tell us about your involvement with FSU's Pride Student Union and your role and experience in setting up FSU Panama's Pride Student Union?

C: Right so ever since the first day I stepped onto FSU's campus I was involved with the Pride Student Union, even especially in leadership. I think it was the second week I was at FSU I was put in charge of an Identity Night because I had made friends with a couple of people on the board and they urged me to do this and I was like OK. And the second year I was at FSU was my first year on the executive board so I was External Affairs Coordinator for the Pride Student Union and the first summer that I was, was also the something that I was abroad in Panama. And so that was my first time being in such a leadership role because the leadership of the student unions at FSU are quite different from the other organizations because they're so involved in Student Government and Administration so it takes a little bit of a different role. And since that was my first summer doing it, I was reading over the documents that started the Pride Student Union and I had access to them. So I was reading those in Panama I was talking to some professors and some students and there wasn't a Pride Union or any organization like that on campus in Panama and since I had those documents, a professor asked me if I could help set up the infrastructure for a Pride Union there. So essentially I just kind of copied the documents and sort of altered them a little bit and gave them to the Panama administration so that the organization could set themselves up.

Z: Wow that's so cool. I think that that's really neat that you were involved in the setting up the infrastructure for the Pride Student Union in Panama. So we want to know a little bit more about why starting FSU Panama Pride Organization was important to you and why you think it's important to the queer community at FSU Panama.

C: Right. So, I think it's really important because of Latin culture really. So, growing up in an immigrant household and being queer myself it was difficult in some ways, definitely different ways than people who live their whole lives in Latin America. It's different situations, so everyone is going to experience it differently. But it was sort of like a "don't ask, don't tell" situation with my family, where they wouldn't ask about it and I wouldn't tell them about it and we would all ignore it. And that only extended as far as between the identities of straight and gay there was no acceptance of identities further beyond that per say, like asexual wasn't a thing, gender queer wasn't a thing, things like that. So I think it's really important to establish that kind of community really anywhere in the world because these kinds of situations are common everywhere. But particularly with Latin America there's a phenomenon called "machismo" which is sort of the over hypermasculine-masculinization of culture and really putting emphasis on masculine qualities and queerness as an identity doesn't really align with that. And so it's really important to have a community and a place where that's present. So yeah, it was really important to provide that and sort of bring that there, not only for myself but also for other students that are going to study abroad in the future and for the students that are just studying there in general. Which is one, important to me of course, but also for the students there. Because when I was there and when I set up the infrastructure and they're were doing their first Lunch and Learns the students were very excited to teach others about their identity and build that community and it's still going to this day so I think it went very well.

H: Can you tell us a little bit more about those Lunch and Learns or any other like events or things that the Pride Student Union has done since you left Panama?

C: Yeah so they do things differently than the main campus Pride Union since they're not like a student government organization but typically, from what I see, they still do the Lunch and Learns so they'll take time, and if nobody does know the Lunch and Learns on the Panama campus, they provide lunch and there's a speaker sometimes speaking about a certain topic and the Pride Union will be in charge of some of those. And what they'll do is, they'll talk about various identities, various struggles, and movements in Panama, abroad, elsewhere while everyone else is eating pizza. So I did one of them where I was talking about what the letters of LGBTQ stood for and a little bit of the history of the movement in the US,

because that's what I knew, and it drew a pretty good crowd. But they don't just do the Lunch and Learns, they do community building events which is very important. So I know they have a bi-weekly movie night for the organization so they get together and they watch queer movies and they have like a pizza dinner or something like that or they go bowling at the bowling alley which is very fun.

H: Also great activities. It's so cool to hear about the different things that organization has been able to continue to do and continue to build on since you helped kind of get that infrastructure started. I know also kind of from an administrative perspective the International Programs office here in Tallahassee has sent staff members to Panama to conduct like the Green Dot and the Allies and Safe Zones training so it's awesome to hear that the Panama campus is receptive to these things and that the community there is getting support and that the people who could be allies are also gaining that education and that exposure. So it's great to hear that there are people from all over that are interested in creating this community and supporting this community and it's awesome that you were part of that and that we get to talk to you now and that you were an IP student and to see how you were able to get involved and the impact that you were able to have during your semester of study broad is just awesome so thank you for sharing all of that.

C: Yeah and I mean I just wanted to touch on that it was important for me to set up the infrastructure, because the organization could have got started the summer I was there but I didn't want to lead it per say. I wanted there to be elections and I wanted to avoid some of the pitfalls with quote unquote "white saviorism" so I just wanted to set up and the outline the infrastructure and have the students who are going to stay there for more than one summer semester be the leading faces and voices behind it. So I never took a leadership role, I just set up everything, made sure everything was right with the administration and handed it over to the professor and his students.

H: That's such an important note like thinking about how actual positive, sustainable change is created and it comes from the community and the people that are there to lead it. So that's awesome that you were aware of that and that you were still able to offer the support that you could offer, but recognizing that ultimately you weren't the one to continue with the organization and that now it's continuing to run and that is just like a testament of that positive sustainable change, that it was able to be continued and sustained because the people who are there and active are the ones that are running it, so that's awesome Connor.

C: Right.

H: Alright we're going to shift a little bit again. Can you tell us what were some of your favorite elements of studying abroad in Panama?

C: So my, some of my favorite elements stemmed from the fact that I love staycations and relaxing which sounds counter to what Panama would be since a lot of what we talk about is like hiking up a volcano or hiking in the jungle and it just sounds really exhausting but I had the most relaxing time of my life. Some of the excursions were really nice. One particularly memorable one, and my favorite one, is that we went to an island off the coast of Panama and we stayed in my beach cabins and we were given golf carts so that we could explore the island and go to the various beaches. Needless to say I had a very relaxing three days of just relaxing on the beach, eating, and drinking and it was a great time. And it just there wasn't much exertion then, we just kind of spent time with everyone and it was a wonderful time. And that's all I can really say about it. We didn't really do much other than just relaxing and going to the beach but what more could you want? Another time we went into the actual Panama Canal in a boat on our way to a lake

that was connected to it where we spent the day in a houseboat and kayaked to a secret waterfall so that was just a fantastic day as well, also filled with relaxation. Just being on a houseboat swimming in the lake was out of my comfort zone because I hate large bodies of water that contain like aquatic life

H: As most as most do...

C: Pools are fine if it's a lot of water and no animals, that's fine. Oceans, lakes, not fine. But I still had a great time. But yeah aside from the excursions though, I was there during the World Cup which if you didn't know is very popular in Latin culture. So much so that we postponed starting class one time just to see the outcome of the game. Everyone was disappointed by the outcome however we had 45 minutes less of class so I did not complain

H: It's still culturally relevant, culturally important, you were still learning about Panama and their love of fútbol, it's fine.

C: Yeah it was fantastic. I personally, it's my favorite sport to watch so I didn't have an issue with it. And it was so prevalent in the culture that in one of the excursions we went to a beach, I don't even remember it because that wasn't even the subject because there was the Russia/Croatia game going on at the time and if you didn't know that was an extremely close game and was almost very upsetting for the Russians because Croatia almost won, which would be crazy, but everyone on the beach was just at the bar watching the game. Nobody was on the beach, so that was very memorable. But I also really loved the educational trips that we took, not to say that I didn't learn anything other relaxing trips but that wasn't necessarily their focus. My favorite was the educational trip to historic Penonome which was had a lot of colonial Spanish influences but it was spearheaded by one of me professors where I was one of two students in his class and so it's very we very personally knew each other from the class so it was very fun to have like my professor come and teach everyone else that was abroad with me.

Z: That's so fun we hear about that all the time that that professor-student relationship can be really close during study abroad and that's really great. When I studied abroad I also had a class, it was a Spanish class, with two students me and one other student and –

C: Yes!

Z: It was great, we loved it so.

C: Yeah my Spanish class in Panama, I was the only student in it –

Z: Really?!

C: It was combined with the Spanish below it so it was me and one other study abroad person in the same room but I was essentially tutoring her in the Spanish that I already knew from the class I took to solidify it because we couldn't learn the more advanced Spanish that I was taking. But it's that or this professor taught two classes with one student each so this is more efficient and it was pretty good.

Z: Exactly, you definitely get that one on one time and it sounds like the educational trips and the relaxing trips sound really amazing.

C: Yeah.

Z: Alright well to shift a little bit, we want to know what you've been up to since you graduated from FSU in the class of 2020.

C: Right so I essentially immediately went into a graduate program in the Netherlands however most of the benefits involved with that program such as the potential internship at the European Parliament or working with the organization that trains Europe's diplomats, all of that was cancelled. So essentially I was in the Netherlands taking online class so I was like I don't want to pay for that particularly, and it wasn't as rewarding as it was supposed to be due to COVID. So I switched gears and I came back and I transferred to Arizona State University in an online program and now I'm looking for work in LA with my partner so that we can be together as I do my graduate program. I have a few interviews lined up next week so that's very good, very exciting. And so that's really what I've been up to is doing grad school which is quite time consuming. I have to do one essay a week, which is crazy. And not even just small essays, they're like ten-page papers which is pretty rough. And the program I'm doing is Social Justice and Human Rights so it's all very theoretical, what is it called? Theoretical... I forget the word, but it's fine.

H: It happens .

C: It happens, it's whatever but yeah. And then once I feel safe enough with COVID and everything I'll be getting involved with the LGBTQ organizations in LA and eventually once I finish my degree next year during the summer, my partner now going to look for work in the DC area and move out there.

H: Awesome. lots of big things on the horizon. What kind, quickly, what kind of work are you looking for, like what are you aiming to do with this degree and with the experience you've gained?

C: Right so, mostly I've been sort of fixated on city/local government. Most of my work, previously I interned with the planning department of my home county and I also interned at the Florida House of Representatives so I'm pretty familiar with local government and things like that, so that's sort of what I'm looking for most. But working for nonprofit organizations like the Human Rights Campaign, things like that, is also a goal of mine so really either of those that I get is going to be more than okay with me.

H: Absolutely. Both great goals and of course we wish you all the best. Before we let you go, we have one final question for you what advice do you have for students who are considering studying abroad?

C: Alright so my advice, probably echoed by tons of people coming from the IP office is that even if you're considering it just a little bit, I say do it. It's not gonna hurt you. Going abroad you're still learning but you're also getting an extra experience on the side of it so it's really just, it's really just positives you're gaining from it, there's almost no downsides that I can see. It will just expand your worldview, it'll help you educationally, all of the above. It's really fun, you'll get very memorable and formative experiences so I think it's priceless. But if you're worried about price, the financial situation with studying abroad at FSU, it wasn't a big deal to me because the scholarships involved with it as well as the fact that Bright Futures applies, so it really wasn't a financial strain at all when comparing it to the normal tuition at FSU. So really if you're considering it, just talking about it at the IP office and kind of committing to it is the best advice I can give because you can hear all day about how great it is and how people love it but it's another to experience it. And then once you experience it, nine times out of ten I'm pretty sure you'll agree with everyone else. I don't know a single person who studied abroad and didn't like it. Except for my partner who went to Spain, she didn't like it because of the food. Because we're both Latinx and if you don't know our food is sort of similar to Spanish food but Spanish food doesn't have the same spices so it tastes very

bland to us sometimes but apart from that, apart from that very great formative experience and of course if you're considering it a little, I think we should just dive right in and do it.

Z: Wonderful. Well thank you for sharing with us today. We loved hearing about your story and your journey and your time in Panama.

C: Yeah, thank you!

H: Thanks Connor!

H: Before we disembark, we want to talk more about Pride Month!

Pride Month is celebrated around the world. In the US it is celebrated in June, but in some other countries it is celebrated at different times of the year. Pride celebrations honor the Stonewall Uprising - a series of protests by members of the LGBTQ+ community in the 60s. Pride festivals and celebrations continue to evolve and change over the years, usually focusing on relevant activism for the current time. There are many reasons for celebrating Pride Month including celebrating LGBTQIA+ culture and supporting LGBTQIA+ rights.

Z: International Programs is celebrating this month by uplifting LGBTQIA+ voices and experiences that have been shared on our podcast and blog, as well as various resources for LGBTQIA+ students considering studying abroad. You can check it out through the show notes.

If you have a story to tell, we'd love to hear from you. Consider filling out our short student and alumni voices survey to share a bit more about your own study abroad experience in the context of your identities. You can find the link to the survey in the show notes or through the link in our Instagram bio. We can't wait to hear from you!

H: Thanks to Connor for sharing their story with us today, and thanks to each of you for listening!

Z: This podcast is a production of FSU International Programs. The music for this podcast was composed by John Bartmann. Our logo was designed by Vanessa Guirey, who also does our sound engineering. Editing, transcription, and research is done by us, Zoë Crook and Hannah Meister.

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