# “LGBTQ Ally Research in Amsterdam”

Dialogue has been edited for clarity.

Stephanie Nawyn (SN): Hello this is Professor Stephanie Nawyn. I’m the co-director for the Center for Gender in Global Context and I’m here with one of our students, Oumie Nyassi. Hi Oumie!

Oumie Nyassi (ON): Hi, how are you?

SN: I’m well! Thanks for coming in. We just met, kind of randomly at another event, and started talking and I think Oumie has a really interesting path into the Women and Gender Studies minor which ended up taking her on an education abroad program.

ON: Yes, it did.

SN: Tell me how you found us and how you got into the minor.

ON: The minor was kind of accidental, like I knew that in the future I want to work with women in some kind of way. At first, I wanted to be a pediatrician and just work in the medical field and travel and do humanitarian work with mostly women. But then I changed my path and wanted to become a lawyer and was like I still want to do something with women but I’m not what I can major in. I was already majoring in sociology, so I was just like google stuff and I came across the Women’s and Gender Studies minor and was like ok this is kind of cool and then I realized I’d already taken two classes. That’s kind of how it happened, and I went and talked to the advisor about it and just was in love with the minor pretty much.

SN: What were the two classes that you took that already had completed some of the requirements?

ON: It was my sociology classes. My sex and gender class and my youth and society class.

SN: Marvelous. What kinds of experiences have you had in the minor that have been really positive for you?

ON: This past summer I went to Amsterdam in the Netherlands and I did a study abroad there: Sexual Orientation, Gender Identity, and Sexual Politics with Ellen McCallum and Jess Travers and it was amazing! I did not expect to have such an amazing experience, but they really challenged us intellectually. I was still able to bring in my own interests of like wanting to work with women and working with refugees which was really big for me and something I was happy I could bring in. A second thing that I continuously tell people who want to go on this study abroad like you don’t have to be a women’s and gender studies student. There were JMC students on the trip with us so like you can bring in any of your own interests. While I was there we had to do a research project and my research project was on the experiences of LGBT African Muslim refugees in the Netherlands and the reason why I wanted to do that—while one of the reasons I wanted to go on the trip was to learn about how I can be a better ally for the LGBTQ community and I know that the communities I come from, like being African and Muslim, are not always as welcoming you know to LGBT people? I just wanted to learn about and explore that while I was there which is why I wanted to do that research.

SN: Tell me a little bit about this research because this is really an unusual opportunity to have right? What kinds of things did you do as part of that research project?

ON: While we were there, we were taking classes at the University of Amsterdam, on their campus, so we would have guest speakers that would come in and talk to us about like sex work like we had actual sex workers come in and talk to us. People in the LGBTQ community. We had refugees come in and talk to us. I wasn’t really sure what I wanted to do my research on, but I know that I wanted to like incorporate refugees into it. We had a speaker who was from Uganda and she was a refugee living in Amsterdam so after she gave her presentation I was like ok I’m 100% set and hopefully she would let me interview her and I didn’t get to set up an interview with her because our schedules didn’t line up but I did get to email back and forth with her and get her perspective. We had another guest speaker come in and he was in charge of this organization called LGBT Africans Out and Proud. I went to a few of their meetings because I didn’t want to just spring on them like I’m doing this research, I wanted it to be more genuine and not just like I’m doing this for personal advantage or anything like that. I went to a few of their meetings and tried to get to know some of them and the afterward I told the guy like I’m doing this research and he was like oh I know people who are great for that who are going through their asylum process. With the asylum process they have to get interviewed and asked very in depth questions so he wanted me to interview people who are going through the asylum process because he thought that me doing my project would also help them get used to people asking them questions about like their sexuality and life back home.

SN: Great! Did you come out of that research project with any conclusions or new ideas?

ON: Basically, everything I went in with it reinforced what I already knew. The biggest thing, though, was to be able to show the African Muslim refugees that I interviewed that there are people that look like us that will like welcome them in. One of the women I interviewed told me like I was really reluctant to even sit down with you because my life back home was so terrible and like the way that my people treated me, but seeing you, seeing something that looked like me who was opening the door for me was very like—I don’t know that just made me feel really good because I wasn’t sure how it would be interpreted like me wanting to interview them.

SN: You have your own African immigrant story, right?

ON: It was something that we got to like, I don’t know what the word is, bond over in a way. And I still talk to them now which is really nice.

SN: Well that’s super. So, you graduated in May?

ON: No, I graduate in May.

SN: Oh, this coming May, got it! So, congratulations in advance because I know you’ll make it. Tell me what you plan to do then and how you think the minor will help in your future plans.

ON: Definitely, it’s already helped me a lot because I’m trying to find ways to incorporate my minor and my major in what I want to do. I want to take a year off before law school—I want to be a human rights lawyer if I didn’t already say that. But with my human rights law I want to work with immigrant women and refugee women so I think with my sociology degree and bringing in my minor will be very helpful. In my year off before law school I want to see if I can intern with the United Nations or Amnesty International and what sorts of jobs are available through that and I know there is a lot of breakdowns where you can specifically work with women. That’s going to be really awesome if I can land that.

SN: Well, good luck and I think you are really well prepared, certainly, for that kind of an internship. For those of you listening, if you’re interested in finding out more about the Women and Gender Studies program at MSU, go to the GenCen website at [www.gencen.msu.edu](http://www.gencen.msu.edu). Oumie, thank you so much for talking with me!

ON: Thank you for having me!