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Chelsea Brown: Cookies, Spirituality, and Pickleball

Every Wednesday night in Whelan Hall, a door opens and the smell of freshly baked cookies begins to waft through the air. Chelsea Brown, the resident minister in Whelan bakes cookies to foster community in the building, an event that keeps people coming back. As one of the few adults in a building of budding adults, she thinks it is important to keep her door open and actively engage with residents.

“I think a part of my role living in housing is to model what it means to be a good neighbor... Like someone who shares their life a little bit,” Brown said.

This theory has served her well so far. In fact, several of her residents from last year, current sophomores at Loyola, still frequent her cookie nights. They credit the comfort they felt on campus from the beginning to her open, friendly, and trustworthy nature.

“It was just cool to have that presence, someone looking out for you. It made the transition from being at home to being so far away seem less,” said sophomore and former Whelan resident Ava Taylor.

Brown knows all about being far from home, as she is originally from Georgia. Growing up queer in Georgia taught her the importance of finding your community, a principle she continues to encourage. Because of her identity, Brown doesn't fit the typical image of a religious leader at a Catholic school. For her, that's a good thing. Her contrasting identities coupled with her down to earth tone has created a natural charisma that forces people to open up.

Sophomore Haley Garrison said that Brown is like a second mother to her, and that they have introduced her to all of their parents and significant others.

“Chelsea made all of us breakfast a few weekends ago when Elizabeth and I had our long distance boyfriends visit us. She cooked us all breakfast and met them because her opinion matters a lot to us,” Garrison said.

As Loyola is a Jesuit institution, there is a certain religious aspect to life on campus. For example, there are crosses above the door in every classroom. Despite this, students are free to choose for themselves whether they want to be part of religion. Due to this, having someone in your hall called a ‘resident minister’ can cause some misconceptions for students.

Winston Bickhardt, a resident advisor in Whelan said, “I think at first the resident minister role sounds a bit scary, it sounds like there’s someone who’s going to be super religious and might be having prayer sessions or something, but obviously we show up, like y’all play records and stuff, and it’s super chill.”

He further explained that his resident minister had little presence in his residence hall freshman year. So, he thinks it is good to have a person like Brown who is creating meaningful events like cookie night.

This is not how Brown expected her life to go. She had attended religiously affiliated schools for her entire higher academia career, but never thought she would end up at one in California. After graduating from Baylor in 2016, Brown was looking for jobs in student housing, specifically at religious institutions. She found a resident advisor position at Loyola, and hasn’t looked back since.

Working at a religious school and being in a non-heterosexual relationship may seem counterintuitive, but as Brown explains, it is quite the opposite.

“When I looked at Jesuit education, I was like this is an institution that by design, by espousing the values of *Cura Personalis*,” or care of the whole person, a guiding principle of education at Loyola Marymount, “they were compelled to include instead of exclude.”

All the core subject classes are designed to teach students holistically, and many staff positions, like Resident Ministers, are there to take care of different aspects of oneself. These values drew Brown to this school and made her feel comfortable in expressing her sexuality.

“I think the push here more was like ‘just be gay, why do you have a problem with it’ and I think that helped me come to terms with my identity, and like the goodness that exists in me, and the capability to love,” said Brown.

Like many other queer individuals, Brown experienced a lot of self-hatred and doubt when she first started exploring her sexuality. As someone from Georgia – a state not known for its acceptance – the support for the gay community in Los Angeles came as a shock to her. She found that in Los Angeles, “being gay’s kinda cool.”

In the midst of the pandemic and the highly publicized election of 2020, Brown moved back to Georgia. In May of 2019, she had transitioned to a new position as the assistant director of Student Engagement, but still didn’t feel settled into it when the Covid pandemic began.

“I was probably like this close to quitting,” she said, holding her pointer finger and thumb up about an inch apart. “It was just a tough time; starting a new job was hard. So, I was like, not happy that the pandemic hit, but it came at a time where I needed the pressure of work to like release and it released a lot of the pressure in work, and I was grateful for that, and I think it allowed me to stay at LMU,” Brown said.

Going back to Georgia from Los Angeles was a culture shock for her, especially due to the political environment of the time. She described the different atmospheres in liberal California and rural Georgia, stating that she felt “straddled between those two worlds.” She agrees that going back to the “slower pace of life” in Georgia was a necessary step for her, but eventually she was just done with working over Zoom.

In 2021, Brown moved back onto campus, and officially started her role as resident minister in Whelan. This was also the year that she met her partner, Monica. Finding her partner and accepting her sexuality were some ways that Brown acclimated back to the big city life, but the biggest step for her was getting involved in activities off campus to feel part of the greater community.

“When I moved to LA, I didn’t have a car, so I kind of had to carve out a life for myself at LMU... It was really difficult to make friends outside of LMU, I would like go on dates and it was like ‘but you live with college students’ and I was on duty for 24 hour chunks at a time, so doing, like joining a bowling league or things like that are hard because you can’t leave campus,” said Brown.

She described how that feeling has changed. “Honestly, pickleball was one of the first things that made me feel like I lived in Westchester, that this neighborhood is mine, even though I’ve lived here for seven years.”

A naturally athletic individual, Brown enjoys games of small adjustment like bowling, curling, and the quicker paced pickleball. She admits that while she has hung out with her pickleball buddies off the court, the substantial age gap between her and them makes it hard to really connect. Her friends in Los Angeles are mainly people she has met through her partner, or

people she has connected with on the bluff. That's fine by her, because she feels like she has finally found her home here.

Even though she has the rest of her life ahead of her, right now Brown is exactly where she wants to be. Despite the many roles she has held throughout her time on the bluff, being a resident minister has been the most meaningful to her.

"People'll be like 'I was talking about that in class today' and just to get to be that person who gets to be in those trusting conversations is the goal," Brown says.

Her job isn't to shove spirituality down students' throats, it is to empower them and encourage them to create meaningful relationships like this with others.