

“Café con IDEAS” is a new discussion series at Ithaca College that provides a platform for student artists of color to share their own personal narratives rooted in identity and anti-oppression. The goal of each session is to engage the audience through creative arts while sparking conversations centered around diversity.

RahK Lash, the Associate Director for the Center for IDEAS, the center for inclusion, diversity, equity and social change at Ithaca College, said that “Café con IDEAS” stemmed from trying to find an authentic way to engage the campus community around notions of equity and social change.

Lash and Jerimiah Sheppert, an IDEAS peer educator and creator of “Café con IDEAS”, were inspired by shows such as MTV Unplugged and VH1 Storytellers, which allowed artists to interact in front of a small, intimate crowd and tell stories about their writing and experiences, when creating the program.

“People go see music. People go see comedy...that’s natural. So, what if we use that same concept to meet people where they are and engage naturally?” Lash said.

Creating Café con IDEAS was a four-month process due to the performers having full creative control of what they wanted to do and share.

“It’s them themselves creating a 45-minute set and it’s somewhat time consuming. The students that we found were very cooperative and very willing to do it, which we were thankful for,” Sheppert said.

The four student performers involved with Café con IDEAS are all students of color, which Sheppert and Lash said was intentional.

“We wanted to give a platform to those who wouldn’t normally get a platform at a historically white, predominately white institution,” Lash said.

Emily Jimenez, a second-year student and performer for Café con IDEAS, said her set, titled “Illustrations of Bodily Love” was an unforgettable experience.

“I called it the ‘Illustrations of Bodily Love’ because I draw lots of body figures and portraits. I wanted to connect it a lot through mental health because those are very much two interrelated things in my life. When I know when I’m really deep in my depression, I don’t do art and vice versa,” Jimenez said.

Jimenez wanted to showcase how to appreciate your body through forms other than doing a facemask or watching Netflix. She enjoyed sharing her art with students and faculty and felt comfortable sharing her story due to the intimate space of the African Latino Society(ALS) room.

“When it comes to mental health, I am pretty much open about it, but it was definitely nerve-racking sharing my art as a person of color. But through it, I just feel really prideful in

myself... [the event] gave me a boost of confidence as an artist of color on campus and just let me know that there's people that support me," Jimenez said.

The use of the ALS room for every "Café con IDEAS" set was intentional for Lash, who said that he loved that people who would not normally enter the space were being able to engage in important conversations there.

"It was important for us to have it in the African Latino Society lounge. For me, that's a very important space... I often feel like it's taken for granted and I feel like it's my role as an educator at this institution to introduce each class to that space as well as faculty and staff. That's a huge part of IC's history, so it was intentional," Lash said.

Damiano DeLeo, a senior and performer in "Café con IDEAS" who goes by the rap name the Miserable Genius, said that performing in the ALS room was very important to him in terms of reclaiming the space.

"I've always liked and respected the ALS room," DeLeo said. "I feel like this whole thing... with "Café con IDEAS" was restoring some kind of respect onto the room and I wanted to be a part of that," DeLeo continued.

Choosing what he wanted to share during his set was very easy for DeLeo, who said he often likes to challenge white supremacy. He shared songs from his latest project entitled *Melanincholy*.

"If melancholy is sadness then *Melanincholy* is the sadness that comes with being black and brown. I'm the Miserable Genius so it all makes sense together," DeLeo said.

As the first artist to perform in Café con IDEAS, DeLeo wanted to set the tone for the rest of the series and wanted to highlight authenticity.

"I sat down and brought one of my sketchbooks... It's basically if somebody cut out a piece of my brain and put it in a book," DeLeo said. "I passed it around and said, 'consider me the art museum. When you read the book, I hope that you walk away understanding who I am, what I feel and what it means'," he said.

Moyo Odulaja, a second-year student and a performer for Café con IDEAS, said being authentic is something she wants to do in her upcoming set, titled "Empowering Black Women".

"Sometimes, you need to share a part of yourself to help other people heal... I'm going to be telling people about how I got sexually assaulted and how that has made me feel less important and less of a woman and how much pain that has caused. I'm not the type to be vulnerable but I set a goal for myself this year that I was going to be more vulnerable because there is strength in vulnerability," Odulaja said.

In her set, Odulaja hopes to empower women through song.

“All of my songs are going to be by strong black women. All of them are going to have a message...I want to be able to let all women know, especially black women, that these things make us...stronger and I really hope that at least one person can realize that in the audience,” Odulaja said.

All the performers in “Café con IDEAS” noted that Ithaca College lacks a space where students of color can voice their opinion, but through the discussion series, they are able to start conversations in a healthy way.

Elijah N’kai, a senior and performer in “Café con IDEAS” said that after his set, titled “The Whole Sum” where he talked about his experience growing up, he wanted the audience to leave with a sense of respect for who they are.

“Just do your thing. Don’t be afraid because there’s so much going on in the world... There’s no need to not follow your dreams...you have to trust yourself,” N’kai said.

N’kai noted that being able to put on the series by himself was an empowering experience and has inspired him to do more talks to incite different conversations about important topics.

“The fact that it was all in you, was a great thing... It doesn’t just have to be a performance space but it could be a discussion space where students who don’t normally have a platform have the chance to speak now...it’s freeing, everyone should share their ideas,” N’kai said.

At the end of each set, Sheppert has the audience provide feedback in order for the Center for IDEAS and Café con IDEAS to improve.

“We have the audience fill out notecards or tweet us, so we can get feedback and develop a relationship not just between students and the Center for Ideas but between students and other students,” Sheppert said.

Freshman Amir Tazi said that by attending different “Café con IDEAS” sessions, he not only had the ability to connect with upperclassmen but he got inspired to do his own set next year.

“It was really empowering...As a black man on a campus that has a majority of white students...seeing people who look like me share their passions and art made me happy,” Tazi said.

When asked about how attending the different sessions made him feel, Tazi replied by saying the intimacy of the sets made him appreciate the student artists as well as the Center for Ideas more.

“Everyone was engaged and seemed like they genuinely cared about what was being said...I’m really happy that the Center for IDEAS put this on,” Tazi said.

Lash and Sheppert said that they hope that “Café con IDEAS” becomes an annual event and a staple of the IDEAS center.

“I really like the direction that Café con IDEAS is going in,” Sheppert said. “I think that we started off very strong and it’s just amazing how students are willing to share their identities and narratives with others and the effect that it has on the listeners... We have been able to start some amazing discussions and conversations about social change. It’s been a community effort and it’s been beautiful,” Sheppert said.