

Sophie: Welcome to the Pauli Murray Center's first interview of our Reflection and Revolution Pride Month campaign. We are here with SJ Willis, a recent communications and studio arts graduate from Wake Forest University. They are a multimedia artist based in Charlotte, North Carolina. Since 2020, they've been involved with [PFLAG](#) and they just recently got on the board a couple of weeks ago. So congratulations. Welcome SJ! We are so excited to have you here today.

SJ: Thank you. Thank you for having me. I appreciate the time.

Sophie: Yeah. Yeah, of course. I'm so excited to talk to you. So diving right into everything. What first got you interested in the arts? And did you enter college knowing what you wanted to do?

SJ: Hm. Yeah, I, I'd say I've been pretty creative. I feel like every kid is, you know, you doodle for class, work, and stuff like that, but I think I really stuck with it. It came out with photography. I got my first camera, it was a Canon EOS Rebel T6. I got that first camera in 10th grade and I just started shooting with my family, you know, when we would go on vacations or I would just be outside with my friends or walking around, like, I'm really inspired by nature.

So I started a lot with that, like doing landscape photos and just wanting to document new spaces that I was in. And then I got more into composition and editing and like learning color correction. And then I started doing like, freelance stuff in high school, like, just doing like creative shoots with my friends and then posting them, then people would hit me up for shoots and then I did like some grad shoots, like early on in college.

So, yeah, that's how I started. Yeah. So going into college, I definitely knew I wanted to like, at least have a studio art paired it with something else. I didn't know I was gonna necessarily, like, be just studio art. I didn't want to be just studio art. I knew I had to pair it with something. So that's why I did communications as well. And that was basically like a Media Studies track.

So I learned like about documentary production. I was watching films, writing about films, you know, critical media studies. And then I was on the other flip of that, I was doing art stuff. So just like learning how to expand my photography into sculpture, into mixed media, doing printmaking. And then actually applying concepts to my pictures.

Sophie: Awesome. So how did your journey as an artist or your kind of, I guess identity as an artist, shift as you learned more and more about these different medias in college?

SJ: I feel like it just kept expanding my mind as it kept me from getting comfortable or bored like because I feel like I got pretty good at making like pretty images and understanding like how to pose people and things like that, but it wasn't necessarily tied to like a theme. So, when I started learning about concepts in school and just like getting exposed to more artists and more styles of writing, I really wanted to try and experiment, so that's where it landed me: trying to bring my photography into the 3D realm and like the storytelling realm.

Sophie: That's awesome. So I'm so curious as to what a day in your life is as an artist and what your creative practice looks like on a day-to-day basis. Could you share a little bit about that with us?

SJ: So right now I'm actually working at Ally Bank. So that's a digital bank and I do content for them. So that's what my day mostly looks like. I don't get to necessarily like wake up and practice art, but I do try to infuse it into my day and what I do at work is also pretty creative. So when I am working on art like, right now I'm really into like sculpturing with air dry clay onto the canvases before I paint them because there is that style of like, using, using, paint, like substance or paint substance to like, build up that texture and 3D look. But I wanted to explore a different way that wouldn't like, it would allow me to mold it, you know, instead of just like putting it on while it's drying and you're trying to like sculpt it as it's drying. So that's been fairly interesting and I try to do that, you know, when I get home. But my day-to-day routine, I really just wake up. I meal prep a lot, so I have my smoothie, I have my lunch, I wake up around 7:30. I like to get to work early because I feel like I'm already awake like my brain starts going and then once I'm at work, I'm there. And right now I'm working on like stock image stuff, Getty stuff. We have a website called Conversationally and I basically pick all the images for that.

It's, it's Fintech educational content. We want people to like read our content and basically aspire to, to be able to do these things, whether it's saving, investing, retiring. So the image is like a full bleed image at the top of the article and we want it to feel authentic and we want it to feel like very, very natural. So, we have certain guidelines that I follow for those images and that's been like my main job there, like managing that process.

It's cool another way like to expand my, in my, in my queerness, my blackness. Like I really try to get involved with our ERG groups. We have pride ERG and Black African American ERG and we have ERG's for all different underrepresented groups. But I really try to pour into those and practice my program-building skills and my organizational skills, and then I get to take photos a lot there too. So like that's been my biggest role.

Sophie: That's so cool. I love that. So kind of going back in time a little bit to your time in college. Last year you presented a mixed-media installation titled "Mind and Flux" as part of an honors candidate exhibition. And I just wanted to learn a little bit more about this installation and your process putting this together.

SJ: Definitely. So, "Mind in Flux" really is the embodiment of myself and my experiences coming into my transness and I basically was creating, creating, this parallel between the spectrum of gender and the spectrum of nature. And I feel like not even creating it just kind of like making ties between the two because I feel like they, they already exist, you know, you think about the seasonality of nature. You think about even like the growth of a tree, you know, coming from a sapling, you're rooted down. You know, I think about like, like therapy terms like grounding and then coming up and more expansive things. And then think about trees working together as a

system. Like, I've always been super fascinated by nature, like, not necessarily in a scientific way but just in a spiritual way.

And I wanted to like, pay homage to that and also pay homage to my experience specifically to college. When it was like my freshman/sophomore year is when I figured out I was trans. And that's when I was like telling my friends and just going through really like depressive times and not knowing how to put words to the things I was feeling.

So, that's always been when I rely on my artwork and visual aids to kind of explain my emotional state. So, with this project, it was all Black queer folks, all my friends from the Winston-Salem area, some of them were in school with me. Some of them were in surrounding areas. And I really just wanted to honor their experiences as queer people, whether they were lesbian, gay, trans, didn't matter, just part of the community.

So I, I just took them out in nature and I had them interact organically and I also posed them to kind of portray the spectrum. So you would get very dark feelings, you would get very light euphoric feelings and I would, I would accentuate those in post through the editing. So like if it was a more depressive feeling, I would, I would cause like a shadow among the eyes so you would lose the pupils. You know?

Or it would be like very, very contrasted photos where you would kind of lose the body within the trees that they were posed in, and that kind of like emulated this, this like depressive or like ruminating state. And then on the flip of that, I would utilize the sun and water a lot to show feelings of tranquility and fluidity, peacefulness, contentness.

So there is this one photo that I have of Omar posing like this and the light is kind of coming through the back and you lose this part of his face here in the sunlight. And that for me just like shows like I like, I, "I am the sun" and when you have constant like that in nature to ground you like, I guess like none of the other stuff, none of the worldly stuff matters.

Often times, I would go on campus at Wake, I would go on to all the trails, you know, or I would, I would leave and go to the mountains, visit my friends that were up in school in like Asheville/Boone area. I would go see them or just be by myself and those were times where I could really like sort my thoughts. And really just like, talk to my anxieties.

Sophie: That's so, so beautiful. I'm wondering what the general reaction to this art was. Did people get it right off the bat? Was it very relatable for a lot of people that came to your exhibit?

SJ: I definitely got a lot of great feedback and a part of the Honors process for making the exhibit is that you get feedback throughout. So that was a very beautiful process for me, like just like hearing, hearing feedback on my work in different stages. But when I got to the actual show like there's an artist statement. So people get the general gist before they walk in.

But, it was in a mezzanine space, a loft space. So you walk up the stairs and I had video projections on the stairs of a waterfall, you heard water sounds, wind sounds, and then you also

heard my voice doing poetry. That was just like kind of just like free thought, you know, and I was talking about the themes that were portrayed in the work.

So, it was a very like encapsulating space. And I wanted it to feel like the viewer was kind of walking up into my mental space, you know, and then going through this journey with me and then getting, getting to this like peaceful state and like the piece wasn't necessarily stagnant. It was like, it was like, because I had the last photo was like a large photo of my three friends standing there. So it's like you have like your Past, Present, Future and then you have like the water projected over it. So still like honoring the fluidity even though you feel comfortable in your transness. I feel like a lot of people did get that, one person in particular came up to me and like, gave me the biggest hug and I never had received affection from them before. It was a professor. And like, even, even my friend Bea told me, like, like they're not one to come up and do that sort of thing. So I just felt really honored that my portrayal of my queer experience was resonating with other queer folks. And that was my biggest goal. Honestly.

Sophie: How did it feel for you to walk through it the first time for yourself? I know it takes a lot to put these pieces together and you know, it like the back of your hand. So, you know, everything that's coming. But how did it feel for you to see yourself and everything that you went through right there?

SJ: It is very satisfying. It's very satisfying and honestly brought me into a very like out of body state, you know, like I'm so glad my friends are taking pictures because I feel like I was just like floating through the evening. I most enjoyed it, honestly, when no one else was in there because I feel like you could like really appreciate like the, it wasn't circular, but it had, it had like a a circular movement to it. Like you could appreciate the whole space at once. So yeah, I just felt, I felt like I did my past self justice.

Sophie: I love that. One of my favorite quotes that I saw written in your artist statement for this was: "The annual rotation of seasons mirrors that of queer expression as it is a process of constant cyclical development and release." I just felt that that was such a beautiful way of putting it. Could you expand a little bit more on this feeling of release and development? Not only in your own personal journey but then through your art?

SJ: Definitely, definitely. Yeah. So like I said, nature has played a big role in my life since I grew up. As well as like being in North Carolina. So I'm like three hours from the beach, three hours from the mountains. And that played a big role in how I spent my summer times and just like how I processed the world.

So for me, like the other, the other part of that is that I grew up training in Taekwondo. So that is the practice of mind, body, and spirit and we're constantly barefoot and that, that practice has instilled so much discipline in me. I recently just started again actually. I stopped when I went to college and I started again. So I've been really grateful for that but being able to like learn how to ground myself through physical activity and through spiritual practices and like, you know, meditative breathing.

I feel like that is really what I was trying to get back to when I first got to college. So, when I say, like, cyclical movement, like I've always been who I was gonna be if that makes sense. But sometimes you have to like rediscover yourself and each season is like, each season is like, it brings new challenges, but like, you're, you're, you're still you if that makes sense. Like I feel like if you, you, like when I was trying to get to my answer, like I had to come back to myself to find it, like, if that makes sense and I could only do that through the isolation that I found in nature.

Sophie: Yeah, absolutely. So you've given me so many examples of this specific exhibit and I want to kind of branch out a little bit more into your general art and just your general kind of feeling when you do your work. So, how do you use imagination and creativity to kind of resist and reject transphobia and oppression? You know, we see it a lot nowadays. Do you do any specific work that either is emotionally rewarding for yourself or you purposely kind of put out there to send a message?

SJ: Yeah, that's something I struggled with for a while. Especially like, like when like, like always having to say something, you know, like, especially being, being Black and queer, like I live it every day. So, like feeling the pressure to like, make my art meaningful or make it, make it like, make a stand or something is something that I really struggled with. And I feel like now I'm at a place where I like come to my art more intuitively.

So I feel like flow states are the best thing for my mental space. Right now. I've been doing like lots of finger painting. I got these wood rounds that my computer is on. These are some cedar wood rounds that I want to start doing some like electric sculpting on and mix that in. So, I'm really trying to do things that kind of expand on the things I was learning at school, but really feed it into my passions.

Sophie: I love that. And I think you being true to yourself is just enough of a message like you going into your fullest self and doing the things that you love is just moving yourself forward as an artist and a person and making you a beautiful person in this world.

So shifting gears a little bit, I wanted to touch on your kind of queerness and how that plays a role in your life. So what does specifically Pride Month mean to you? And where do you see the intersection of the arts and the queer community kind of come together the most for you?

SJ: Yes. Yes. For me, Pride Month has always been a joyous month because it's my birthday month and it's summertime. So I'm always in a good mood around this time of year and I feel like it's only been accentuated as I've come into my queerness. Like it's just, it's just like six months in the year, a great marker of time.

So for me, Pride Month means vibrancy, it means community, it means being, being, being at peace, like and actively searching for that peace. And that may, that may sound counterintuitive, but I feel like you have to, especially after college, like you kind of have to, you have to work harder to structure your days because since so much of my day is taken up by like regular day

work and while that work may be fun, like it's not, it's not innately what I'd be doing. Like, I don't think anybody would be necessarily at work if they didn't have to be.

So for me, it's really just tapping into my community and now being back in Charlotte, I'm trying to like, go to like the pop-up events, you know, all the things going on. And then like Juneteenth as well is in this month. So, I just feel really proud in my blackness and my queerness at this time and I try to just bolster that up and keep it, keep it going.

Sophie: Absolutely. Kind of going on the same note, this year's theme for our pride campaign at the Pauli Murray Center is "Reflection and Revolution." Bea actually came up with that. So, how do you feel that your art has kind of helped you, fully as a person now that you've experienced everything, reflect on your own experiences? And at what part of your life do you think that you've grown the most through this intersection of the arts and your queerness?

SJ: Well, I definitely think I've grown the most at college, like, I feel like my four years at Wake were the most pivotal of my life. Like, and just, that's just because of the people that I met, the professors that I met, and like the opportunities that I had to expand myself, like within my leadership skills and within my artistry, like, just like, just like things that I never thought to look up, you know, you don't know what you don't know. So just the amount of exposure that I got to you know, different artists and ways of thinking and ways of thriving in life is on, on, like, incomparable.

I've met, I've met like lifelong friends during my school experience and I'm sure other people have similar experiences at school and obviously, like, just like, biologically, it's such a, such a pivotal time. Like I can feel, I can feel the lobe, the frontal lobe forming, you know, like. I think it's also a time where you get to decide how you spend your time for the first time. So that, that's something that really, really changed me like, like, like, yeah, I just had to come into my independence a lot during that time.

Now I feel, I feel, I feel like I do use like college and high school as like markers because it's good like chunks like four-year chunks of time. But now it's interesting because like, I'm not like, I don't necessarily have a plan to go to grad school right now. Like I do, I do like, wanna be a professor eventually and be able to teach art stuff, but like, that's not my goal right now. My goal right now is like to take a break from academia and really just just be happy, like, and sustain myself. So I don't know if that answer your question...

Sophie: No, no, that's perfect. My next and kind of final question was: what does the future for SJ Willis kind of look like? If you want to expand a little bit more about you doing your little finger painting and carving, like, becoming your fullest self. Staying out of academia, no more essays for a while. What's that, what's that look like for the next 10 years? What are your dreams?

SJ: Honestly, I really, have been into, like, planting. I have a tomato plant, I'm growing some potato plants right now, and I have some ivy and stuff. That's been making me really happy, like getting into other hobbies that will sustain me in my lifetime. Like, I want to own land. So that's

something I've been thinking about a lot. Like just like how I'm gonna get there, like how I'm gonna save for it, things like that.

I think I've been thinking a lot more practically recently. And then I also have been just like, you know, working, working on my mental health. I feel like school, like when I finished with my four years at school, like, I really just needed a break, a pause and I feel like I've achieved that.

Sophie: That's so awesome. Do you have anything else you wanna share? Where people can find you and learn more about your work?

SJ: Yes, definitely. OK. I will share, I will share just some stuff about PFLAG. PFLAG is a group that I've been involved with since 2020 and they really work around advocacy and education. It's a national group, but I'm a part of the Charlotte organization right now. And I really just have found like so many, and this is, this is getting into what I want, like I just want to be more involved in the community, you know, like, how ever I can do that. Like, I used to volunteer a lot growing up. So I really want to get back into volunteering and I have, I have been through work. And I want to do it more through PFLAG as well. PFLAG just offers so many great educational tools and I really, they really value the arts as well. So I hope to implement some of that in my time on the board.

Sophie: Awesome. Thank you so much for your time. Thank you so much for meeting with me and talking about your experience with becoming your fullest self through art and all the beautiful things you're putting into the world.

SJ: Thank you!

Sophie: I hope you have an amazing time growing your plants and having fun. Thank you so much for joining us.

SJ: Of course, of course.