

Becoming First-Gen: Transcript

Sean Garrett and Scout Crowell

Sean: Where did you grow up? Could you tell me about what life was like for you growing up?

Scout: Sure, I grew up in a rural town in Michigan called Ortonville, it is right outside of Flint, Michigan, you've heard of Flint. My town, am I supposed to describe it?

Sean: Yeah just describe what school and the general environment was like for you.

Scout: Cool, my town is pretty poor in general most people don't have college degrees, some people have high school degrees, so my high school was not anything special it was pretty below average i would argue. My town had pretty conservative ideologies so Kenyon was pretty shocking to me at first, most kids at my school didn't go to college, that's just not something that kids from my hometown did.

Sean: Did you ever notice that you were different from your peers when you were younger or growing up in that school?

Scout: When I was younger not as much because everyone in my area was pretty similar to me, I definitely had less money growing up than most kids. I used to get a little embarrassed with my Goodwill clothes at school because I didn't shop at Forever 21, that was embarrassing. Sometimes after school some kids would go to get ice cream but I could never go because I didn't have the money to get an ice cream cone. So that was hard but it was never anything that bothered me, just because everyone that was around me was in the same situation. We were definitely lower income than the average family in our area though, we didn't always have electricity, we got food from our food kitchen in town a lot which most people didn't do. But I never really noticed that I was any different than anybody else.

Sean: So if there was any lesson that was most important that you learned from the environment you were raised in, what would that be?

Scout: Just because most kids from where I'm from didn't go to college or didn't get to pursue a future in that sense, didn't really change my mindset. My mom always told me that I could achieve anything I wanted to if I just work hard enough, and that hard work will always pay off. This was something I don't think a lot of people necessarily got from their parents growing up, and so I think my biggest lesson from childhood and from my mom was that you can get whatever you want from life if you work hard enough for it.

Sean: So what was your perception of college prior to applying? I know you said that not many of your peers went and it wasn't necessarily the expectation.

Scout: I remember it was a very big deal when I got accepted to Kenyon, someone told my mom once that I was a "legend" in Ortonville. But yeah most kids from my school went to either community college or not very good state schools, but usually not any college at all. So before I went my perception of college was something that not a lot of people did, I thought all colleges were the same, you just go and learn stuff. I didn't have many expectations about it because my parents didn't go to college so it was a very new experience, and I had no idea what I was getting into. I was definitely happy to be going but I had no notions about what college was supposed to be like.

Sean: What was the application process like? Were there any reasons or things that you drew you specifically to Kenyon?

Scout: It was so confusing, my school didn't have the resources we needed in order to go about the application process smoothly. We found out about the ACT over the school PA system that told us when and where we were taking the ACT, and we all knew it was important but no one prepared for it because we didn't have any prep courses or anything like that because we

couldn't afford it. In terms of the application process, it was kind of just hoping for the best on the Common App which is thankfully very user friendly. But financial aid and all of those things I was very confused by, luckily my mom is very supportive and was able to help me with it even though she hadn't done it before. But it was definitely a very stressful and confusing process, but I didn't realize it wasn't this way for everyone because everyone who was applying to college where I'm from was going through the same thing. Little did I know some people were trained to help kids in their schools go through the process.

Sean: So was transitioning to life away from home difficult for you? Or was that more of a welcome change? What were some issues you faced, if any?

Scout: There were definitely some struggles, transitioning to college and Kenyon in particular was very difficult, I actually wanted to drop out after about a week after I got here because I was sitting in convocation and President Decatur was giving his speech about the accomplishments of all of the incoming freshmen, and I remember thinking to myself, "what is an internship?" I was thinking that I had never done any of the things that these kids had done, and at the time I didn't realize there are systematic reasons for that, but I just remember thinking I must be so dumb and that they must've just let me in as a charity case. I was so confused and so anxious all the time, my first time in class I was so uncomfortable and unprepared because they knew all these words I didn't know and they would say something and I would have no idea what they meant, I just didn't have the same vocabulary that they had. I also remember being confronted with wealth for the first time, that was the hardest thing for me to deal with. I was just confused and I didn't understand, I had never met anyone with a doctor for a parent, let alone two doctors as their parents. Or parents who work in the government or CEOs or something like that. That transition was very difficult for me, I began to feel embarrassed of where I came from, I used to tell people I couldn't eat with them at the VI because I had too much homework or something when in reality I just couldn't afford the meal there.

Sean: Would you say that was when your identity as a first-gen, low income student began to form?

Scout: Yes, because before that I didn't really have that identity because everybody was the same as me at home. But once I got to Kenyon and I was confronted with the lack of diversity and the fact that I was considered diverse at Kenyon and that I was different was when I started to realize that that was a big part of my identity. Over time I began to explore what it means to be low-income, systematically what that means and all these things. Slowly I began to realize these things in my life that have systematically affected how I got to Kenyon and how I'm doing at Kenyon. That was when it became a crucial part of my identity, knowing how different I was and that I had to work a lot harder to get where I was than a lot of my peers did.

Sean: Have you sensed any changes in that identity throughout the time you've spent here?

Scout: Yes, at first it started out as confusion and anxiety of not understanding why my ACT score was so much lower but I knew I was good at school. Confusion about why all these kids had these really cool opportunities and knew all these smart things that I had never heard of, so at that point it was a time of confusion, then it became about understanding. In my high school we didn't learn about systematic oppression and all of these social issues, so the more I began to learn and become less ignorant towards my own issues the more my identity forms and changes. There was a point, especially in my sophomore year where my identity as a first-gen and low-income student became a source of resentment towards other kids at Kenyon and the opportunities they had. I was working twenty hour weeks at my job and everyone else just got to sit and relax but still had more opportunities than I did. It was very frustrating having to work so much harder than other people to end up at the same point. But now I am at a point of recognizing that that is okay, and the hard work is worth it and my successes matter so much more to me than I think they do to other people because I know I've spent my entire life working for these opportunities.

Sean:

Sean: I know you gave some examples already, but are there any other ways you think your socioeconomic status has impacted the way people here see you or treat you? This question is especially relevant at a place like Kenyon where the scale is so tilted in one direction.

Scout: Definitely, I remember my first full-blown realization that I'm different was the first time I met one of my friends parents. The first thing they asked me was what my parents did for a living, and I looked at them and was nervous to tell them my mom is unemployed and my dad is a truck driver, but I said it and their faces were just covered in guilt and confusion in an attempt to relate to me in some way like I'm a charity case or something like that. That's kind of a common thread I've noticed when Kenyon parents introduce themselves, they always ask what your parents do, but people where I'm from don't ask what your parents do because they don't want to admit that you're a truck driver or work at McDonalds. So that was something that was very hard for me and very forward I guess, as well as just people not understanding and not having people to talk to because it's an invisible identity and there are no groups on campus that offer support and I can't look on Middle Path and see who is poor too, it's not something you can really talk about with other people.

Sean: How do you feel that your identity has been a source of struggle throughout your life?

Scout: When I was younger it was more concrete things like not having enough food or not having electricity, going into our house with flashlights and having to keep really low so neighbors wouldn't be able to tell that we didn't have any power. But as I got older it turned into things like opportunity and connections, my dad being a truck driver doesn't give me any internships, my mom being unemployed or doing whatever she's doing at the time isn't going to give me any advantages. Also just lack of knowledge is something that I've noticed and that's been difficult, my education was vastly unequal to most people at Kenyon, which was fine before I realized it but once I realized it then it kind of hurt.

Sean: Do you feel that your identity is well-represented or well-respected at Kenyon?

Scout: Not at all, Kenyon is an incredibly wealthy place with incredibly wealthy students, and there is a serious lack of diversity in terms of different socioeconomic statuses. This is something that's been pretty difficult as someone who identifies in that minority group here, almost everyone here has parents who went to college. My parents didn't go to college, in fact my dad barely graduated high school, I don't pay to go here I'm on full academic scholarship.

Sean: I know you mentioned how parents react when they hear what your parents do or how you grew up, do you feel the same reactions from the students here?

Scout: Yeah people get very uncomfortable, Kenyon is very good about talking about race and ethnicities and other identities like LGBTQ+, but as soon as you bring money into it then people get very uncomfortable. This has made me feel incredibly awkward and sometimes embarrassed.

Sean: In terms of reflecting on your experiences so far, how has your process of becoming changed your identity and your view of the world at large?

Scout: Coming to terms with my identity as a first-gen, low-income student at first was a feeling of guilt, but its not become a source of pride. Like I said earlier, this stems from the feeling that I know everything I have achieved I have worked my ass off for. This isn't the case with everyone else, and that's okay but it's become a source of pride rather than shame or guilt because I know I am different from other people and that's fine. Everyone has a story and everyone has a reason for the way that they are, and where you come from does immensely effect where you go and how you got there.

Sean: Is there anything you wish the Kenyon community knew about you and other students that identify as first-gen and low-income?

Scout: If anything I would just say that I wish people understood their privilege in a place like this, that's been pretty frustrating for me. To not have anyone understand that the way they were

raised does so deeply impact what they've gotten out of life and how easy it's been for them. It's not their fault and it's not bad, but it's important to realize that that is their reality and that is not everyone's reality. It's not a level playing field for everyone, and I don't want people to feel guilty or feel bad for me, just own who you are and how you've gotten what you've gotten and move on. Just respect me like I respect you.

Sean: Our class has worked with Mount Vernon High School kids, how do you think you can use your identity to elicit further change in Knox County and Kenyon included?

Scout: I tend to identify more with Knox County than Kenyon College, I grew up in a similar area much more rural in fact and worse off financially actually so I always get confused when people speak so negatively about it. Because I identify with Knox County but am a Kenyon student I feel that I am an opportunity to act as a sort of bridge to let the kids of Kenyon know what life is really like in Knox County or what the people of Knox County are really like, why they think the things they do, and how their struggles are so much worse than we think. And also letting Mount Vernon residents know more about Kenyon, and to show that everyone isn't evil here and change our relationship for the better because it's been so negative in the past. I want to talk to these people and let them know that just because you come from a place like I did that does not mean you can't go far, you just need to work hard for it.

Sean: So what does being a first-gen student meant to you?

Scout: That's a bit of a loaded question, but for me it means perseverance, hard work, shame and pride, and it means overcoming obstacles that many people haven't had to face. But this all means that everything you've gotten, you've earned and you've worked that much harder. Money is one thing that has such an impact on life and opportunity, and college education as well. So being a first-gen, low-income student means a lot to me, and I've worked a lot harder than a lot of people to be where I am, and I'm very proud of that.