

Oral History Interview Transcript

Interviewee: Sreelakshmi Suresh (they/them)

Interviewer and transcriber: Aashi Prajapati (they/she)

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Aashi Prajapati

So, thank you for this interview. I'll get started with the first question. Can you tell us about yourself, including things like name, pronouns if you feel comfortable, year, and anything else that you would like to share?

Sreelakshmi Suresh

So, hello. My name is Sreelakshmi Suresh. My pronouns are they/them. And I have, as of *two days ago*, earned my Master's degree in entomology here at the University of Illinois in April 2024. I will be graduating soon.

Aashi Prajapati

Congrats. [*chuckles*]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Thank you. It's—it's been a progress in the making. Taken quite a while for me to get here but I'm happy of where I am.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Speaking about queer identity, as I suppose, I identify as queer and nonbinary. On campus, thinking about how I've interacted with the queer community *here*, I am the founder and president of F.U.S.E., which stands for Forging Unity, Solidarity and Equity for QTPOC, which stands for— [*chuckles*]

Aashi Prajapati

[*chuckles*]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Queer and transgender people of color. But that's all a mouthful, so we just say F.U.S.E.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And ... I can continue on, or if you have a first question, I'm happy to progress as you so wish.

Aashi Prajapati

I mean if there's anything about yourself that you think that people would like to know?

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Well, I feel like I think ... something that I often think about is how I feel like my kind of work at the GSRC—which stands for Gender and Sexuality Resource Center here at the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign campus—is kind of separate from the life I've had as an entomology graduate student and a lot of times, like, it almost feels like my lives are separate. But they are not because I am one person and—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

I always take myself fully to wherever I am.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And so being able to have spaces on campus where I can exist as myself, I think has been something that I've sought to ... pursue for myself, but also create for myself and others where they don't exist. But I think there's definitely still challenges to be able to fully be myself in both spheres. Sometimes ... in entomology too, like, there's just ... half the time, it's just not relevant, right? [*chuckles*]

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah. [*chuckles*]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

I'm—I'm obviously going to be queer. But sometimes I think ... being able to marry or merge together what I think of as, like, the two major parts of me—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Is difficult.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah. Yeah, I can imagine that. So, you talked about your profession or, like, your area of study so I guess—and this probably connects to the next question, maybe not—why did you decide to come to this university specifically?

Sreelakshmi Suresh

So, I specifically earned my Master's in Entomology studying honeybee foraging in mixed agricultural and urban ecosystems, and that is research that I kind of started in my undergrad. I have been working on researching honeybees for ... I started *nine years ago* now, so that's kind why—

Aashi Prajapati

That's a lot.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Yes. So ... I guess ... in a more ... a less confusing timeline, I guess, for years I started doing my honeybee research in 2015.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And I went to undergraduate at Ohio State in Columbus, Ohio. That's where I did my undergrad. And I originally kind of *stumbled into* doing honeybee research, I thought they were interesting, and I really needed a summer job.

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And I liked it so much, I just didn't leave. *[chuckles]*

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

I graduated with my bachelors in 2017, after which I moved to Japan, lived there for two years—

Aashi Prajapati

Ooh.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Returned to the US, became the lab manager for my undergrad lab for about a year.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And once I decided that, yes, I wanted to pursue graduate studies, I asked my undergrad mentor, who had known me for many years at that time—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And has been like a very supportive mentor. I asked him where would *he* recommend that I go? And the answer was specifically with my advisor Adam Dolezal here at the University of Illinois. And *specifically* talking about the University of Illinois because the entomology program here is incredibly famous. Everyone who's *anyone* in the field of entomology in the U.S. has some sort of connection to U of I. The Entomology Department is very *small*, but we have a lot of, like, research powerhouses in our department and there's a lot of connections—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

To the U of I entomology program across the country and even across the world—

Aashi Prajapati

Wow.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Surprisingly. *[chuckles]*

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Because when I was in Japan talking to entomologists, they're like, “oh, I know the U of I, do you know this person at U of I?”. And I'm like, “yes, I've worked for them for a year” and it was just wild. So—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

The program is ... excellent for the connections it has and its departmental strengths. So, with the recommendation of my mentor to do my own research, I decided this is where I wanted to be and, so, this is where I came.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah. *[chuckles]* And, just to clarify, what year was that?

Sreelakshmi Suresh

So, I actually moved here to Urbana-Champaign in 2020. And I remember my lease was signed February 29th, 2020.

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Only comes around every four years, so an easy date to remember.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And I actually got into graduate school, but I decided to defer for a year so that I could save money. I was working as a research technician for—as a DARPA technician actually. Still working with honeybees in a different honeybee lab. And then I transferred over to my *current* lab prior to starting my graduate school.

Aashi Prajapati

So, I guess ... there's kind of a little sub-question within that. When you did come to UIUC, were you out at the time, or what you consider to be out?

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Yeah, so I have actually been—I would say I've been fully out as in, well, out as queer since ... Oh, what year was that? 2015—ooh, wait, no ... 2014. So, it's, oh wow, it's been a decade.
[laughs]

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah. [laughs]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

I didn't really come out as nonbinary, I think, until ... [sighs] I don't think I was fully out as nonbinary until 20 ... late 2020, early 2021.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

... But, in being queer, I was—I have been, like, fully out for 10 years.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

... Did I answer your question?

Aashi Prajapati

Yes. [laughs]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Okay. [laughs]

Aashi Prajapati

So, since coming on campus, are there any, like, groups or even initiatives that you have been a part of?

Sreelakshmi Suresh

So, I mentioned I'm the founder of F.U.S.E. and so that is where I spend *a lot* of my time, but I've also been part of the Illinois—or the Illini Spirit and Traditions Council, which is a council

started by the Chancellor. With students who are nominated by directors of their units—units being cultural houses, fraternities, sororities, and other departments on campus. The directors of those units nominate students to *represent* their unit and the Spirit and Traditions Council is looking to ... try to move on and establish spirits and traditions at the university that *leave behind* some of the *problematic* legacy—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah. [chuckles]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

[chuckles] That the university has had in the past. So, I joined the Spirit and Traditions Council in ... 20 ... 2022? Yes .. I—I believe that's correct. Additionally, I'm also part of the GSRC's Advisory Council as one of the graduate student representatives.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

So, between F.U.S.E., the ad—GSRC Advisory Council, and the Spirit and Traditions Council, those are kind of my *main* kind of commitments—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

On campus as related to ... kind of the *half* of my identity there.

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles] So serving on these groups or initiatives, I guess, how do you feel about them now that you've been in them for .. a while?

Sreelakshmi Suresh

... Can you specify what you mean? How do I feel? [chuckles]

Aashi Prajapati

I guess because you mentioned that those two aspects of your identity often feel kind of isolated from one another, so ... I guess, does, like, the other work that you do in regard to queerness, is that something that you are satisfied with? Is there something, I guess, like, more that .. you might be wishing for?

Sreelakshmi Suresh

So, I think what I really value about the work that I do as related to the GSRC on campus, I am fully myself. Not that I am not myself in the entomology department but I feel more *relaxed*.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And I feel more understood as a *whole person* in the queer spaces in which I interact and represent on campus. So, I really value being part of the Ad—the Councils, the spaces that I am. I think, definitely, I wish there could be more chances to have that sort of comfort within my department. There's a variety of reasons why I don't necessarily feel, like, *fully supported* in my department. I think there's an openness—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And ... I think it's not that it's, well .. I feel comfortable in my department, but I know that if I want to *relax*, I would rather go to the GSRC.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

... Did I answer your question?

Aashi Prajapati

Yes. *[chuckles]*

Sreelakshmi Suresh

[chuckles]

Aashi Prajapati

Yes. Don't worry about that. .. How—I guess you already talked about this but if there's more that you want to elaborate—how may have queer politics played a role in the work that you do?

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Uh...

Aashi Prajapati

Or what you would consider to be your own queer politics.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

So, I think, one thing that .. I have really noticed, and I think I'm—I feel really lucky to be a part of is—is in establishing F.U.S.E. So, I created F.U.S.E. the first semester of graduate school which, you know, *great* time— *[chuckles]* to start things, like, right during the pandemic, first semester of grad school. Excellent idea to completely start a brand-new student organization by yourself, right?

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

To be clear, I am being sarcastic. *[laughs]*

Aashi Prajapati

[laughs]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

... And I created F.U.S.E. actually and I'm always really open about this because, at that point, I had already had what I call three mental health breakdowns.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And so .. two of them, like one thing that I really do value about my department is that we do have two Black women on faculty that I interface with frequently and have been TAs for. But I was having, I remember *one* of the conversations I had with them, the other TA for, of course, had like left and one of the instructors was like, “Hey, I haven't checked in with you. How are you doing?” and I just, like, broke down crying. *[chuckles]* And I, first of all, I was, like, lonely. I felt very isolated because I couldn't see any place on campus—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

For like my—for me to be myself. I didn't see a community space specifically for queer people of color. In undergrad, I did not enjoy my undergraduate experience for a variety of reasons, but—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

I think also the *culture* of my undergraduate college was very toxic. And—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

It was often dangerous to be a queer person there. And so .. having a space like in undergrad, I— there was actually a student organization specifically for queer people of color and through that student organization, I met some people who I consider, like, my chosen family now.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And so that was really important for me, to have like a group of people that I could interact with, interface with and be myself. And now even like, you know, like, two of the people they're my family members, like, they're my emergency contacts— *[chuckles]*

Aashi Prajapati

[laughs]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Who get called if I'm in the hospital, you know?

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And not having a sort of space where .. queer people of color could come and be together as a community and not having that at UIUC was unacceptable to me.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Because not only was I— *[chuckles]* having a mental breakdown and feeling really lonely, I knew that if I, as in—as a graduate student who, at the time was .. what? 25? 26? 25? That sounds right.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah. *[laughs]*

Sreelakshmi Suresh

We'll go with 25. *[chuckles]* Then students who were perhaps, like, freshmen, coming to college for the first time, thinking about *who I was* at that point in my life, I thought it was unacceptable to not have a space—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

For queer students of color on campus. And, so, while it was definitely a massive undertaking ..

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And a lot of responsibility and *a lot* of work, I created F.U.S.E. because not only did *I* need it, I knew that other people on campus would need it. If I could help facilitate even one connection for another student to, like, find—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Someone that they could be themselves with, like that—that's all I ever cared about.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And, so, I created F.U.S.E., and it's been a really great student organization. Like I've had people come up to me a couple of times and tell me that coming to F.U.S.E. is the first time they'd ever met another queer person of color.

Aashi Prajapati

That's ... wow.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

[chuckles] Which, I think about those times and like it—like it—it breaks my heart—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

That that's like the first time and, I'm getting a little emotional, but I'm like—

Aashi Prajapati

Here are the tissues. *[chuckles]*

Sreelakshmi Suresh

[laughs] We shouldn't be so in free—queer people of color are not as uncommon as I think queer culture in the U.S. would lead us to believe—

Aashi Prajapati

Yes.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

White queer culture would lead us to believe. There are many of us, but the problem is a lot of our cultures—U.S. and minority cultures and otherwise—don't make it necessarily safe or comfortable for us—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

To be fully ourselves. And so, hearing that .. *multiple* people coming up to me and saying they'd never met another queer person of color, like, my heart breaks that it was their first time.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

But it kind of reiterated to me how important F.U.S.E. is as a space—

Aashi Prajapati

Yes.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

To exist. Where folks can just be themselves and it's a space in which the students who come know that they can .. like we may not all be from the same backgrounds, from the same countries, from the same cultures, but we all understand the intersectionality of being a person from a minority—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Both culturally and sexuality or gender orientation wise—and that is a critical understanding—

Aashi Prajapati

Yes.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

To have with another person. And the compassion that we have for each other, I think .. the compassion that students have for each other in F.U.S.E. is unique and I don't see it elsewhere on campus because ..

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

It's a space on campus where you can go and just know that people understand.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

When I talk about issues I face on campus or—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Otherwise. So, I guess, *coming back to*—

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

I think what your question was, talking about queer politics ... I— [chuckles] got off—on my little tangent—

Aashi Prajapati

No, it was very needed. [laughs]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

[chuckles] About F.U.S.E. because many of the students in F.U.S.E. are much younger than I am. So, I'm currently 28 years old so I am nearing 30 and we have students who .. are .. under .. 18. [chuckles] So—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah, some of them. [chuckles]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Yes. And ... to see the difference in the generations—because I am *absolutely* of a completely different generation of queer people—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And to see the growth in .. the—the growth in the culture and comfort—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Of students is—it gives *me* a lot of joy and a lot of reassurance because, for instance, like, when I was an undergraduate, yes, I was out to, like, my friends and people I trusted. But I wasn't completely out to, like, people on the street. I wouldn't have, like, rainbow flag pins or whatever—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Because I was afraid of being assaulted. Because it was *prior* to the legalization of gay marriage in the U.S.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And that decision, that Supreme Court decision, *really changed* a lot of the history, a lot of the social culture, and, like, societal culture around queer people in the U.S. to a degree that I feel like the students who are, like, 10 years or more younger than me—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Don't understand and—I mean, *I'm glad* that they don't understand, that they don't have to face the prejudice.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

They don't have to—they don't understand necessarily the—or like think about some of the harassment, the violence that—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Came in those early years of when I was in their shoes.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Of course, it's important that they learn their history, but it gives me hope that there are—is change moving forward. That said, there's definitely many things that need to change, like, especially if we're thinking about here in April 2024 of Florida, which—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Is officially a “do not travel” state for transgender people. And Illinois is really a great place *to be* and a place that I hope to be in long term, like, for the rest of my life. Because Illinois and Minnesota are the only two states of the U.S. Midwest—so, if we're talking about official USDA regions—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

The Heartland, Great Lakes and Upper Plains, I had to look this up—

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

For my thesis, which is why I know this. *[laughs]* But of these regions, the Midwest—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Illinois and Minnesota are the only two states in which there are *legal* protections against discrimination on basis of gender identity, sexual orientation, and gender expression.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And so, for me, like, *every time* I've applied to a job—from undergrad all the way to here—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Before I even apply to a job, I've always looked at the legalese to see if there is protection—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

For being queer. And I bring this up to people in F.U.S.E. when we've had, like, professional development or, like, CV workshops in F.U.S.E. meetings, and a lot of them are surprised that I even do this. But I think part of it is a .. reality of the culture that *I* had to grow up in—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

To know that I would be safe and had legal protection because I've absolutely had to go up the ladder and up the vine to talk about discrimination against me. I've had to talk to the title office—ti—Title IX office *here* at this university about anti-trans discrimination. And so, I always look for this legal protection and having that in Illinois is .. something that is critically important to me because—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

I .. I remember what it was like to be in a place where that wasn't even something that I could *imagine* happening. And I'm glad that times are changing but that should be something that should be federal law, right?

Aash Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

We should have these protections in *every* single state. And so ... I feel very strongly that ... like it's great that society is changing .. and younger queer folks don't necessarily understand the struggles or having gone through the struggles, rather, of, like, older queer folks. And that's great because we have been trying to .. change things to make sure it's better for us, but that work has not stopped.

Aash Prajapati

And you imagine that as .. something that's a part of F.U.S.E., to bring up these conversations?

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Yes. It's important to F.U.S.E., it's important on the Advisory Council, it's important when I've been on the—when I was on the search committee for hiring a current director of the GSRC. It's important when I have been on the Spirit and Traditions Council.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

The impacts or, rather, the experiences—lived experience—of being a queer person of color, is fundamentally different than that of a queer white person in the U.S. and .. having the perspective of a queer person of color and .. their views, I think, is critical to moving forward .. as a society and culture in the U.S. because the reality of the matter is that there are going to be many more of us like—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Even when I was looking at enrollment numbers at the university, statistically speaking, there should be about 3000 more queer and trans students of color than white trans, white queer students—

Aashi Prajapati

Interesting.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Just statistically. And yet, why don't we have more .. involvement in these spaces on campus? Why are students still afraid to interface with the GSRC or to go to other queer groups?

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

So, there .. If th—we still feel like QPOC students are still in the minority when the basic statistical reality is that we are the majority, there's something wrong.

Aashi Prajapati

Yes.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And there needs to be changes to be made to make sure that our voices are not as downplayed as they are and our concerns, issues, and not insecurities, but ... *[sighs]* There's a word—
[chuckles]

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

I'm looking for that I cannot remember but the things that we hold dear and find important, that they're not being overlooked so that we can participate fully in not only just life on campus—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

But our academic lives as students too.

Aashi Prajapati

Yes.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

There's no reason for us to not be a part of these groups or communities. The only reason is likely because of a lack of some sort of support. Whether that's legal, society—societal, etcetera. And, so, that signals to me that there's still change that needs to be made.

Aashi Prajapati

Yes, especially considering that the University of Illinois is, like, a predominantly white institution. That .. you know, that kind of infiltrates *every* aspect of campus, including, you know, areas that are meant to be more diverse, like the GSRC.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And that you bring that up is interesting too, because like, yes, historically, UIUC has been a PWI, but I'm—I went through and crunched spring 2023 enrollment numbers are what I'm going off of, but the university is actually 55%, like, students of color.

Aashi Prajapati

Wow. *[chuckles]*

Sreelakshmi Suresh

White students are in the minority, and yet people still don't feel that that's—

Aashi Prajapati

Uh-huh.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

The case and there's something .. that tells me there's some greater societal issue that .. the pure statistics doesn't seem to be our reality.

Aashi Prajapati

Yes.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Because it is not this, like, reality. Like if you look at enrollment numbers—pure enrollment numbers, like, that the university provides as a public institution—it is not fact that it's a predominantly white institution.

Aashi Prajapati

Okay, that—that is so interesting that you bring that up because I feel like, as someone who has not looked at the numbers but that's kind of usually what the conversation is.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Mhm.

Aashi Prajapati

So, it is interesting that if the numbers say something different, that everyone else is saying that it is a predominantly white institution.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

I think it is important to recognize that when we talk about PWIs too, we are thinking about the greater societal structure, the people who are in power at the university—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And kind of like the *generational* effect of how the university has been run. So—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

In those cases, absolutely, we're still seeing that legacy.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

It is *not* the case that it's majority people of color in positions—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Of power at the university. But if we're talking about pure student enrollment, undergraduate and graduate—

Aashi Prajapati

Uh-huh.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

It's only—it's less than 50% white.

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles] You have been doing a really good job— *[laughs]*

Sreelakshmi Suresh

[laughs]

Aashi Prajapati

Because all of your qu—all of your responses, like, go into all my next questions.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

[chuckles]

Aashi Prajapati

So, my next question was, now that I'm looking at it, originally it was “what has your involvement in F.U.S.E. consisted of?” But I feel like you've talked a lot about that, but if you want to talk more, feel free.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

[chuckles]

Aashi Prajapati

But I guess another way of, like, phrasing that could be what was—what were some of the things that you had to go through in order to establish F.U.S.E. as an RSO? What was, like, the reaction, support at that specific time?

Sreelakshmi Suresh

So, when I first started F.U.S.E., it was a time in which the previous director of the GSRC, Dr. Leslie Morrow, was a staff. She was *the* staff, the *only* staff, like no office person, no assistant director, no associate director, no, like, program director, etcetera. Which I bring up because all of the other cultural houses, other than the GSRC, have those positions. Several of them have, like, an associate, an assistant director. I think BNAACC actually has two assistants and one associate, or the opposite? In any case, I feel like that kind of says something. But ... Dr. Morrow is also a person of color and so she had focused predominantly on .. beyond just, like, working by herself to keep the lights on in the center—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

To focus on policy. So, some of the previous work of the GSRC Advisory Council that was in the time of Dr. Morrow, for instance, all single stall bathrooms on campus—well, *all* single stall restrooms in the state of Illinois legally must be designated as all gender restrooms. This is a state law—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And, so, any public or private place that has like a single stall restroom that is not labeled “all gender” is actually, like, in violation of this law. Which I forget what it was, but several places on campus had issues finding funding to get the sign to just say “all gender restroom”. And so, part of the things she—part of the work she did was to raise funds or allocate funds for the departments that could not find the funding, for whatever reason, to get those signs because I know, like, as a student here, I have left a building that I’ve—sitting in a class for, to go to a different building just so I could pee because it had an all gender restroom.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And having that sign is crucial. I know that she also was part of the push to have chosen names at the university.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

That was also work that the GSRC Advisory Council did. But Dr. Morrow, when I spoke to her about .. the existence, or at the time *nonexistence*— [chuckles] of a QPOC-only student space on campus, I asked, like, what was there. And she said, like, as part of the pandemic, really, there hadn't been a F.U.S.E. for a couple years.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And, so, she said, “I would love to support it, but there's no one there” and I—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Just kind of looked around and I'm like, “I need this space” and not only do I need this space, if I'm, like, 25 with a fully— [chuckles] developed brain—

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

As I was joking out there, like my fully developed frontal cortex. Like a bunch of queer kids are going to need F.U.S.E. too.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And, so, I worked with Dr. Morrow pretty closely to get F.U.S.E. off the ground, like reserving the space in the GSRC. Dr. Morrow, who I think looking back on it, I think she paid out of pocket for us to have food at some of our early F.U.S.E. meetings.

Aashi Prajapati

She was really dedicated.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Because the university wouldn't— *[chuckles]* didn't have funding for the GSRC. Which is especially sad considering we're one of the oldest Gender and Sexualities Resource Centers, or LGBT Resource Centers, in the country at 30 years old.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

In any case, I worked closely with the previous director to have a space for F.U.S.E. to establish advertising. I, being a TA for large student courses with 150 to 200 students, I asked the professors if I could just throw a F.U.S.E. ad in, like, one of the slides for the lecture for the week.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Sending out similar advertisements and newsletters, wires, etcetera, to try to get the word out.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And, so, it was a one person— *[chuckles]* show for a while. And, fortunately, within the second year of F.U.S.E., we had an exec board. And from then on, we have had an exec board and that has been really great to have a support and to also just see other queer students grow into themselves and have responsibility and see that the work they're doing is benefiting not only themselves but their peers. I think having the chance to have professional development with your peers and actually make—or actually see that you're making a difference in your own community is important to, like, people's well-being and knowing that ... you have the self-assurance that you can make a difference and do what you set your mind to. So F.U.S.E., I have done a lot of work for the GSRC— *[chuckles]* For a long while, I kind of introduced myself as unofficial staff—

Aashi Prajapati

[laughs]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Because I—I will be quite honest, as a TA, I'm supposed to work at maximum of 20 hours a week. There was a pure—there was a semester or two where I was honestly working probably about 15 hours TA work and 20 hours GSRC-related Advisory Council, Spirit and Traditions Council—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

F.U.S.E., etcetera work.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Where it was fully just a part time job unpaid—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

For me. Because I *really* care about having spaces for queer people, for queer people of color on campus.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Which is also why all the directors of the cultural houses— *[chuckles]*

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And the director of the UP Center all know me by name— *[chuckles]*

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Because I just kept on showing up. I was eventually on payroll staff.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

But I've taken a big step back this last year of graduate school to focus on my thesis.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

But to see the growth and having many interns, for instance, has been really great to know that, you know, like, I took a step back because for myself, but also knowing that .. we are all in good hands. There—there was some help here. Did I answer your question?

Aashi Prajapati

Yes. *[laughs]*

Sreelakshmi Suresh

[laughs]

Aashi Prajapati

Something interesting that you brought up actually in regards to the previous question. Actually something that the former director said that there hadn't been, like, another F.U.S.E. in a few years. So, I did a little bit of background research—

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Uh-huh.

Aashi Prajapati

Prior to this interview. And prior to F.U.S.E., there was an organization called Colors of Pride that started, God, I can't really remember when, but they had been on and off for a couple of years. But they did exist like prior to, like, the 1990s, and they went into, like, the early 2000s. So, I know that F.U.S.E. is exclusively for queer people of color, so it's—it's an affinity space. And when I looked back at the archives for Color—Colors of Pride, they did face some criticism in terms of kind of dividing the queer community, at least on campus, in terms of like, “Oh, why are you making this into specifically people of color? When maybe it should just be for all queer people?” Has that ever impacted F.U.S.E. at any point, since its creation?

Sreelakshmi Suresh

So, in—in speaking about the history real quick, so I think that you did uncover like the—the OG— *[chuckles]*

Aashi Prajapati

[laughs]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

F.U.S.E., but there was actually an iteration of F.U.S.E. that was called *Infusions*—

Aashi Prajapati

Oh.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

That was shortened to F.U.S.E.—

Aashi Prajapati

Uh-huh.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

That I stole the “FUSE” part from and then made an acronym for.

Aashi Prajapati

[laughs]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

So that's actually originally where F.U.S.E. came from.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And that was what existed right prior to the pandemic, which is something that I heard along the grapevine directly from Dr. Morrow.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

But, in regards to discrimination on cam—or criticism on campus, I .. will be honest and say .. I don't think so because I am, at my age— *[laughs]*

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

I'm very careful with the company that I keep—

Aashi Prajapati

Uh-huh.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And I have been .. trying to do some sort of .. I—I hesitate to say activist work but speaking up for myself and for people like me for a full decade.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

In—in some capacity. And so ... I work really hard to be myself and to stand up for myself and people like me .. no matter which space I'm in and, similarly, I tend to only be in or I *choose* the spaces that I spend my time in to make sure that I feel comfortable and supported, or to at least be able to speak my mind. And I think also ... *[sighs]* certainly I could interpret some of .. issues, in terms of, like, campus legalese about student organizations and whatnot. But I think also, again, kind of just having been doing some sort of speaking up for a couple of years, knowing how to navigate kind of systems that I am used to being built to exclude me and people like me. So I .. I think I also kind of see adversity and I'm like “I don't care, I deserve to be here.”

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles] Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

[laughs] But I think that is definitely something that I had heard in undergrad and part of the reason why F.U.S.E. is an affini—affinity group, that we ask to be students of color only, is I had several experiences with the .. equivalent of F.U.S.E. in my undergrad where—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

There were, for instance, white queer students who came. And I very distinctly remember that we, we as in the 10 to 20 members, suddenly having to explain almost every other sentence to

the one or two white people who are there. And them being uncomfortable speaking up and us having to backtrack and kind of .. explain everything. And I remember those sessions being *so* draining for myself and for my friends and family who were there—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And I didn't want to experience that again. In a space that was *supposed to be* supportive.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Of queer people of color. And, so, what I have tried to do for F.U.S.E. especially, to make sure that, like, I think it is important that the greater queer commpun—community understands why F.U.S.E. is a critical space and also why the greater *campus* community understands why F.U.S.E. is a critical space. And so .. while we have our general member meetings are for members only, kind of an affinity space, what I have done is, I have given, similar to this—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

But I have been open to giving several interviews—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

To students who are interested in the point of view of students of color on campus. I know there was .. a student in the journalism school who—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Interviewed me. There have been people from the Daily Illini who've talked to me, I've been on the panel for a .. professor in the theology department, I think? Talking about queerness and religion. And so I make sure my name is public and to try to make sure that anyone who has

questions about what it's like to be a queer person of color, people who might question why there's a queer person of color only space on campus, that I and other execs on F.U.S.E. feel comfortable explaining and being a resource to those people so that the general members in our general meetings—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Are able to exist in that space and be themselves.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

So, I guess the public facing persona of F.U.S.E. *is* partially kind of existing as a resource for the greater queer *and* campus community.

Aashi Prajapati

Yes, yes, I love the unapologetic part of not having to explain, you know, why spaces like these are needed. So, my— *[laughs]* following question was how do the identities you play—you hold play a role in that? I noticed that you talk a lot about queerness and specifically race. Are there other identities that play a role in the work that you do? That maybe other people might, like, overlook?

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Hm ... I bring it up in some—well, I mean, I—I do bring it up in spaces like F.U.S.E. pretty frequently but I know sometimes, like, speaking to colleagues in entomology or elsewhere, like I'm a first-generation immigrant.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Where I was—I've been in—I've lived in the US since I was two years old so— *[chuckles]*

Aashi Prajapati

Same. *[chuckles]*

Sreelakshmi Suresh

[chuckles] Yeah, I'm—I'm fully American. But I very much remember and recognize all the struggles of being a first-generation immigrant and not having money and facing prejudice and racism growing up. Being an immigrant to this country. So that is definitely an important part of my identity. I think—this is more of a lighthearted subject but— *[chuckles]*

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

In F.U.S.E., people very often— *[chuckles]* actually forget that I am a professional biologist.

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

[chuckles] Which I—I guess on a broader picture, it kind of, again, highlights how, unfortunately, I feel so separated from the two parts of my identity. Kind of being a biologist and being a queer person, but like .. people—like when I'm in a queer space on campus, people forget that I'm a biologist. And when I'm a biologist, sometimes people forget I'm queer and I'm like—

Aashi Prajapati

[chuckles]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

“Bro, I'm right here though.” *[laughs]*

Aashi Prajapati

[laughs]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

“Like, there ain't two of me.”

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah. ... Sorry, just collecting my thoughts. So, I guess one—the last question I have, but of course at the end, if you want to say anything else, you're more than free to. *[chuckles]* But at least the last question I had was where or how do you see yourself in the larger queer culture here on campus or maybe, like, the UIUC history?

Sreelakshmi Suresh

So. I mean, I definitely feel proud of creating F.U.S.E.— *[chuckles]*

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah. *[chuckles]*

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And establishing F.U.S.E. So, in ... So, I—I think, as QPOC, like, it can be hard to kind of, like, talk about yourself. But I've learned through many years—and also through lots of therapy—*[chuckles]* to talk about the accomplishments that I've had and, through part of my work at F.U.S.E., like, I was named one of the special mentions for graduate student leadership, which is a campus wide award.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

The—I was also named outstanding graduate student of the year for Diversity, Social Justice and Equity? And F.U.S.E. also won the outstanding RSO award—

Aashi Prajapati

Ohh. *[chuckles]*

Sreelakshmi Suresh

From DSJE for last year for 2023.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And I also, apparently, was the outstanding advocate for the Gender and Sexuality Resource Center last year.

Aashi Prajapati

That's— *[laughs]*

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Thanks. *[laughs]* Yeah, it's—they—they all gave me very fancy awards that are, like, made out of glass.

Aashi Prajapati

Ohh.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And [they mentioned?] this because I have them at my desk in the lab, right in front of my window. And at certain times of the day, if they work as a prism and so there's, like, rainbow against—

Aashi Prajapati

That's very ironic. *[laughs]*

Sreelakshmi Suresh

[laughs] It's really—it's really pretty, I really love it and I'm like, “I don't care what my straight colleagues think” —

Aashi Prajapati

[laughs]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

“You're gonna have rainbows”—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah. *[laughs]*

Sreelakshmi Suresh

“In the lab”. *[chuckles]* But, so I see that F.U.S.E. *has* made an impact. In the greater campus community, with official recognitions from different campus units from larger campus units as well.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

But I think what I'm most proud of and the recognition that I *really* care about most, is talking to members of F.U.S.E. who, for instance as I mentioned before, have never met a queer person of color before.

Aashi Prajapati

Wow.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

I've had students who come to F.U.S.E., who are only out as queer *within* F.U.S.E.—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And have said, like, “you know, if you see me outside of campus, like, I—or outside of F.U.S.E., please”—

Aashi Prajapati

Uh-huh.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

“Like, just don't say anything”—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Because F.U.S.E. is the only space in which they feel comfortable being themselves.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

I've had students, like, say that, like, they've never really talked to someone about, like, faces—or facing like racism and homophobia at once.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And knowing that I .. helped create a space, specifically F.U.S.E., where people could have those connections within their community and build a community. Like, that's what I really care about, and that's why I've—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Done the ... several dozen— *[chuckles]* hours of work that I've done for free—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Over my semesters here. Beyond just having, like, in a written impact, I guess.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Helping create connections for QPOC on campus, I think, is what I'm most proud about and what I think is the greatest accomplishment of F.U.S.E.

Aashi Prajapati

Yes.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Because it's only here as a community organization for the community members.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

But beyond that too, I know that we are part of the history of campus.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Whether we've won awards or not, whether it be being a Registered Student Organization, being a voice on advisory councils, being a representative on the Spirit and Traditions Council headed by the Chancellor. F.U.S.E. has a history here and that cannot be taken away and is part of the university legacy.

Aashi Prajapati

Yes. And then that—that just made me think about something else. Where do you hope that the university from here on out will go when it comes to queer students, but specifically making spaces for queer students of color?

Sreelakshmi Suresh

So, I know—I think immediately of some of the issues that have occurred, in terms of *other* student organizations bringing into campus speakers who are very openly anti-trans and or anti-queer and or anti .. or ... *are* racist—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

I almost said anti-racist and I'm like, “hold on”—

Aashi Prajapati and Sreelakshmi Suresh

“That's not right.” *[laughs]*

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And I understand that, like, part of the university creed and part of RSOs is they do have the ability to request whomever they want to come to campus. But the fact that *my* money—so every student who's enrolled at the University of Illinois, undergraduate, graduate—pays student fees that are usually around \$300 dollars, thirty of those dollars go to the student—*[sighs]* SODA or SORF? But it's a general fund—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

For all RSOs. Who—all RSOs are able to request up to now \$5000 a year annually—

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

From this fund. And it makes my blood boil to think that I have been paying over 3 semesters times .. Wait, no. *Three years*— *[chuckles]* equals, quick math, so that's what? 8 sem—no. 6 semesters. 6 semesters times 30. So, I've paid \$180 to help facilitate bring—bringing into campus people who don't think that I should exist.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And I don't think that the university should be allowed to approve speakers who come to campus, who directly violate the university's Code of Conduct as a public institution of Illinois.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Sures

Fre—free speech should absolutely be allowed but when it is, I think, student's money that they are unable to choose—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

[Are?] going to bring in these sorts of people, I don't think that should be ... something that is acceptable to the university. I think that's definitely something that needs to change first and foremost. That ... if students are .. paying to a general fund—and not donating because we cannot opt—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Out of paying these fees, students should have a direct say in what the money that they're paying .. should go to. Because I don't support people who come to campus and say that I shouldn't exist.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And I should have *a choice* that *my* personal money is coming and paying that person to come here.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm

Sreelakshmi Suresh

So that's definitely something that I think needs to change. There is ... *[sighs]* other things on campus, too, that I think could work to change. A positive thing is having chosen names on

campus, having chosen names on diplomas. And I think one of the biggest things that people need to realize is that when you have accommodations for one group, it—it might have been with the *intention* to help one group but, in reality, you'll likely have positive repercussions in many other fields. Specifically using the example of chosen names, it is something that is extremely popular. Perhaps it was pushed forth with the thought of transgender students being able to select their true names in the university systems. *However*, thousands of international students, who perhaps have chosen a name for themselves that is not their name in their home country, now can also have the name that *they choose* in the university system. And when you have—and similarly, if you have all gender restrooms, if there's someone who needs assistance in a restroom, if you don't just label it one gender or another .. You can have multiple people, you can have families, go into a restroom. When you *have* accommodations, even if it is for perhaps one group, you will have positive repercussions and support from many other groups that were not the target of creating these changes. And I think that is one of the most important things to think about when moving forward and asking or demanding change at the university. Because while we might push forth for change for a certain group, the reality is a lot of these changes will benefit many more people than the target.

Aashi Prajapati

Yes. That was a really great— *[chuckles]* answer and I *definitely* agree. I guess before we end this interview, is there something that you wanted to mention that you might have not gotten the chance to? Something—I guess, some parting words. *[chuckles]*

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Um. *[chuckles]*

Aashi Prajapati

Sorry, that's a big ask— *[laughs]*

Sreelakshmi Suresh

That's always hard. *[laughs]* Hmm. I think .. I guess, two cents as the old queer— *[laughs]*

Aashi Prajapati

[laughs]

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Is, I think, also, a lot of QPOC are used to being—excuse me—excluded or downtrodden or used to people not supporting them. But I would also strongly encourage them to remember to support themselves and not assume that the answer is “no” before they even try something.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Absolutely exercise caution, like don't go to, like, a really horrible sundown town in Texas—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

For fun. *[chuckles]* But when you're thinking about asking for accommodations, for name changes, or if you're thinking about speaking up about trans-exclusionary language in a class, don't automatically assume that there's *no* support to help you.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And to make sure that you are pursuing support for yourself and speaking what you need to say for your own truth.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Because I think that is something that .. I've realized in my life, mostly through lots of therapy—*[chuckles]* but also just lived experience. No one, or very rarely, do people invite me and give me .. like, an invited space to speak my mind. If I don't .. say what I need to say for myself, no one will allow me to say it.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And so, I always hope that younger QPOC, even when it's hard, even when it's just, like, you feel like you're going to throw up and you are really worried, that you feel empowered. Or you feel that you are able to at least take the chance to stand up for yourself. Because even if you're—you feel like you're only speaking up for yourself and you're only one person, I guarantee that there's going to be other students in the exact same scenario, who are not confident about speaking up. I have kind of gained a reputation for speaking up for QPOC, for queer people. And doing a lot of diversity and equity work in my department in entomology because if there is things that

happen—for instance, requesting the entomology graduate students to volunteer at a Harry Potter club. I realize, like, you know, I don't think a lot of these people realize how that's feeding into transphobia.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And so, sending a reply-all e-mail— *[chuckles]* to everyone and CC'ing the department head—

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

About the issues with participating in such an event. And I assumed people were going to be mad at me, but I did it anyway. Because it mattered to me to speak up and I had other grad students come up to me privately, at a later time, saying like, “Oh my God, thank you for sending that e-mail. I wanted to do it but, like, I was scared to.”

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

And those students were white too— *[laughs]* so it's ... I—it—it always just really hurts me to see QPOC, especially, who assume that they will never get a chance to speak their own truth or speak up for themselves. And they exclude themselves from doing so before anyone else can do it for them.

Aashi Prajapati

Mhm.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Just because someone else is trying to take away your voice doesn't mean you should give it to them.

Aashi Prajapati

Yeah. ... Well, that was a beautiful way— *[laughs]*

Sreelakshmi Suresh

[laughs]

Aashi Prajapati

To end. Thank you so much for your time again. I really appreciate all that you had to share and your willingness to share it all—

Sreelakshmi Suresh

Mhm.

Aashi Prajapati

Even if, you know, some of that—some of it might have not been positive but just thank you for being vulnerable.

Sreelakshmi Suresh

[chuckles]

Aashi Prajapati

So, I guess I will now—