

SARAH BALDWIN: From the Watson Institute at Brown University, this is Trending Globally. I'm Sarah Baldwin.

For part three of our student spotlight series, we talked with Luna Floyd. Luna is a public policy concentrator at Watson. Her work and research have focused on LGBTQ rights, homelessness, and fixing our country's broken foster care system. It's heavy stuff, but Luna approaches it with a clarity intelligence and passion that might actually give you hope.

I know it did for me. Luna has been accepted to Harvard Law School through its Junior Deferral Program and will enroll in fall 2021. We started by talking about the work she's done for different advocacy groups and how her own life story affected her course of study.

LUNA FLOYD: I did a lot of homelessness activism and especially advocacy for young mothers in high school. And then coming here-- like, I grew up very low income and that kind of economic diversity is very rare here. And it was something that I wanted to look at in context of moving away from the South.

So I interned at the National Law Center for Homelessness and Poverty, where I really found that my kind of activism skills that policy had been giving me, like the ability to write a memo, and I was lucky enough to put together an outline for the homeless youth handbook for DC. It's kind of a really readable like question and answer kind of legal advice for homeless teenagers that goes state by state.

And it's actually up now. I put together the outline and figured out kind of what needed to be in the handbook, and then the lawyers at Baker McKenzie put together the legal information. But yeah, and that was just incredibly rewarding. I experienced family homelessness as a child. And so it's something that's kind of hugely important to me to be able to work with people who are going through those kinds of things that I have gone through.

And that's something that continued over the next summer when I got the Krieger Internship Award at Lambda Legal. And working for youth in out-of-home care, which mostly refers to youth in foster care. And there's a lot going on in the foster care sphere right now, especially with regards to LGBT inclusion. And every improvement you make to the foster care system cuts down on the number of homeless youth.

That's almost a one to one ratio. So yeah, I spent a lot of time researching different child placing agencies. Kind of state by state, you know, most of those foster care stuff plays out at

the state level. And realizing that dozens and dozens of child placing agencies openly say you cannot-- you can't foster with this government licensed contractor if you are LGBT.

But the folks at Lambda Legal are doing an amazing job. And I'm actually-- I actually decided to stay in that field after graduation. I'll be a paralegal at Children's Rights working on class action lawsuits for LGBT foster kids, unaccompanied migrant minors. And they also focus on the overprescription of psychotropic drugs for foster kids.

SARAH BALDWIN: I want to go back to Washington for one second, and then have you talk more about what you will be doing. When you were in Washington, did you speak directly to youth who were experiencing homelessness?

LUNA FLOYD: No, I spoke to service providers, so people who work with homeless youth every day.

SARAH BALDWIN: And what kind of legal things do homeless youth need to know?

LUNA FLOYD: A lot. There's a lot out there. When can the police stop you? Can you be detained just for being a minor without a guardian around? What kind of government services can you qualify for? What kind of government services can you qualify for if you're a parent? If a homeless kid reads that and thinks to just grab their birth certificate on their way out the door, like that makes such a huge difference moving forward. So being able to put that information together in ways that would be understandable and readable-- that was probably one of the most rewarding things I've worked on.

SARAH BALDWIN: That's amazing. And how are you getting-- how are they getting that into the hands of youth?

LUNA FLOYD: It's-- right now it's an online-- it's a web page, because laws are changing all the time. That way it can be kept better updated. So it's searchable and by subject area. So kids can click on whatever they need to click. I believe it's also like mobile optimized. So it's easy to access on a cell phone, because most kids are going to have access to cell phones.

SARAH BALDWIN: How do you see policy being able to sort of rectify these discriminatory practices?

LUNA FLOYD: Absolutely, right now it's kind of about the intersection between law and policy. Because-- I mean it all goes back to like the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and kind of whose rights get in front of other people's rights. I actually just wrote my capstone on this as well.

SARAH BALDWIN: Tell me more about that.

LUNA FLOYD: It was-- it's just kind of an overview of how the child welfare system is being influenced by larger controversies over religious freedoms and how that affects children.

SARAH BALDWIN: So how does-- like how does that play out in a child's life, in a child who needs foster care who might be lesbian? How does that play out? What happens? They don't find a home?

LUNA FLOYD: In a lot of cases yes. If we're talking about just foster care, LGBT youth are more likely to be institutionalized or put in a congregate care situation. They're less likely to be put in a foster home with parents. And if we're talking about adoption, thousands of kids every year age out of the system without ever being adopted. Kids who are eligible for adoption.

And those kids-- half will go straight into homelessness, 3% ever get a college degree, ever in their lives. Something like 70% of girls who graduate, who could get out of foster care at 18, are pregnant by 21. So essentially aging out of foster carers is a really, really negative experience for a lot of people. Because you're not really an adult when you're 18.

You still need somewhere to go home to. So-- but we have studies showing that LGBT folks are six, seven, eight times more likely to adopt, to foster, to be involved with the child welfare system, and to take children who are considered less desirable, which is a terrible system. But they're more likely to take kids with disabilities, kids who are older, kids that the system tends to marginalize the most.

So by actively shutting LGBT foster parents out, and this happens a lot in the south where these big religious ministries are going to take over a lot of the child welfare space, especially-- the example right now is Miracle Hill ministries in South Carolina. They handle-- they almost exclusively handle foster care for about half the state. And unless you are a Protestant-- a straight Protestant Christian, you can't foster with them.

For instance, like a Jewish woman who just wanted to mentor a foster kid was turned away. So yeah, if we let more LGBT parents take on these children, the number of children waiting to be placed in homes is going to go down. And the foster care system, the number of parents in the system is declining in most states. And the number of children who need foster care is increasing. And they attribute that a lot to the opioid epidemic. But this is not the time to limit children-- to limit homes for children-- over what's honestly like a different fight.

SARAH BALDWIN: Did you know coming into Brown that you wanted to focus on this type of work?

LUNA FLOYD: No I came in thinking I wanted to do international relations. Not that I really knew what that was, but public policy really stood out to me as a way of solving problems and making change. We kind of don't consider any problem impossible. And that appealed to me.

And I also tried really hard to not bring my background to Brown, to not bring my experiences of poverty and homelessness. But you know, that doesn't work for very long. It's not something that you can shove down forever. And as I gained confidence at Brown through my first and second years, I started to understand that-- honestly to understand that what had happened was actually homelessness.

Because the definitions can get a little weird. And also to kind of use that as a strength, and say, you know, I know what this is like. This is something that I have personal and academic experience in, and now professional experience. And a place where my voice really matters. Almost no formerly homeless kids get to do this, get to work on-- I mean, get to go to an Ivy League, get to work on this kind of advocacy. And it's been really confidence building to say that this is a space that I can take up.

SARAH BALDWIN: Was there a moment, whether it was in a classroom or in a conversation with friends, that you felt like you could let your past come with you?

LUNA FLOYD: There's a positive answer and a negative answer there. In my Intro to Public Policy class, we were talking about homelessness, this was my freshman Spring. And I remember saying something that kind of made everyone turn to look. I don't remember exactly what it was, but it was something like specific about homelessness that I don't think the class would have considered if I had not brought it up.

And you know, I felt terrible. I felt so self-conscious and-- but afterwards the professor emailed me and said that what I had said was really insightful and that I had a bright future in the field. And that was really heartening and really encouraging. And then the negative experience-- the next year, I took a class on homelessness.

And it was really-- it was very hard for me to be in a class where it was it felt like homeless people were being treated like public health problems and not people. And-- but that class also included a lot of community engagement, where I got to spend time at a soup kitchen over near Federal Hill. And at first, the people at the soup kitchen were kind of like, ah, you know, another Brown student, whatever.

But I told them a little bit about myself and they-- you know, they were so proud of me for getting my degree. And kept trying to feed me. It was it was very-- very sweet. But I think that class I had to stand up for myself and I had to push back on some of these ideas that were being put forward. And you know, there's nothing like a trial by fire. When you have to say something or you have to live with yourself not saying something.

SARAH BALDWIN: So you said you're going to work for Lambda this summer?

LUNA FLOYD: No, Children's Rights.

SARAH BALDWIN: Children's Rights, I'm sorry.

LUNA FLOYD: For the next two years.

SARAH BALDWIN: For the next two years. But then you're going to Harvard Law School? Can you hurry up and do that? Because I think you are very clear and sensible approach to this. And we need people like you. So what are you going to-- how do you envision your time at Harvard Law School?

LUNA FLOYD: Honestly, I'm not totally sure yet. It's kind of a-- it's a new experience. No one in my family has had any experience like that. So in a lot of ways I don't know what to expect. But I'm really looking forward to working in their housing advocacy clinics. I'm looking forward to connecting with other public interest lawyers and thinking more about where the law is useful and where it isn't and how we can engage communities more in the practice of lawyering. Because right now it's kind of seen as something that's so separate from community organizing. And it doesn't have to be.

SARAH BALDWIN: Tell me what you-- what most surprised you about your time at Brown and what you'll miss the most?

LUNA FLOYD: What's coming to mind as for something that surprised me-- it was before I got here. Because a few months before I arrived on campus in 2015, the Sony email hack happened. And a lot of emails about Brown were released, including one where, you know, the Sony CEO's daughter more or less made a large donation and was given special treatment and then was admitted.

And I remember being surprised and also very not surprised at that. That that evidence was there, that that's-- I was going from a trailer park in Alabama to a place where things like that would happen. So that was very shocking for me, I think. I don't think-- I mean, me right now,

not shocked about that at all. But as an 18-year-old, that sort of money didn't look like a real number.

And the thing I'll miss the most-- how excited everyone is. If you stop any Brown student on the street and tell them-- and ask them what they're working on, what they care about, they'll be able to tell you. No one-- everyone here cares about something so deeply and so profoundly. And I just-- I really love being around that many people who want to be here and care about what they're learning and care about how that learning will impact the people and structures around them.

SARAH BALDWIN: Luna, thank you so much for coming and sharing your stories.

LUNA FLOYD: Thank you so much.

SARAH BALDWIN: This episode of Trending Globally was produced by Dan Richards and Babette Thomas. Our theme music is by Henry Bloomfield. I'm Sarah Baldwin. You can subscribe to us on iTunes, Stitcher, or your favorite podcast app. If you like what you hear, leave us a rating and review on iTunes. It really helps others find the show. For more information about this and other shows, go to Watson.Brown.edu. Thanks for listening. We'll be back soon with another episode of Trending Globally.