

An Autistic Asks Other Minorities: College, Culture Shock & Indigenous Communities

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LG: My name is Laura Gilmour and I'm a PhD candidate in educational psychology at the University of Alberta in Canada and I'm also an autistic self-advocate. In this podcast series, I will be engaging in cultural exchange with colleagues who have had past and present experiences of being a new immigrant or minority culture or some other unique experience attending university and compare and contrast with my autistic student status. Today I have with me Shallen Blanchard who is of Metis origin and who has had the experience of growing up in a remote rural area and attending post secondary as a person who lives with anxiety. She's a strong social advocate and involved in social justice work in her community and online via organizations such as Amnesty International.

Before I turn this over to Shallen, I will delve into a little geography so you can figure out where

exactly IS Regina and who the Métis people are. Shallen lives in Regina which is in Saskatchewan and is a Prairie non-costal province in central Canada. She grew up in a remote rural area in Saskatchewan. The Métis Nation originated from the Red River in the province of Manitoba. The Métis Nation are people of mixed French and Indigenous descent and are the descendants of indigenous people and fur traders. They are a distinct political group as well as an ethnic group.

I will now turn this to Shallen.

SB: Growing up on the farm in rural Saskatchewan as a Metis woman, living with a lifelong disability, I often found challenges in my daily life. One of the lessons I learned was that no one was eating before the animals ate. Now I see this as a very humble upbringing and I'm grateful for these life lessons. I can recall one time, one of my horses was born unexpectedly in the winter and I had to clean the stalls every day before school. I'm sure I smelled wonderful for my classes. My Dad raised me for the farm life. It was second nature to hall bails, clean stalls, mend fences, ride horses, heal injured horses and everything like this.

LG: That sounds quite different from being thrown smack dab into the middle of a big city and being told to survive as a student. Can you elaborate on what it was like going from the farm life to attending university in a city?

SB: When it came to university, I experienced the worst culture shock of my life up until this point. I remember not even knowing how to cross the street. I didn't understand the walk buttons. I just assumed it was for show. Did people even use them? (laughs to herself). Same with the bus system. I was unsure how to get off the bus. I watched people get up and stand at the back door [and] others pulling a long string that ran the length of the bus. It was all a puzzle to me, not to mention I wanted to look as cool as I could as a teenager. I had anxiety of making mistakes and I made many.

LG: I grew up in a rural community for most of my life, we actually moved around a lot to a whole bunch of rural communities in Eastern Canada and I was near the end of high school before I had the experience of living in a major city. When I first moved to Edmonton it was actually a novelty to ride up and down an escalator cause I had only been on them a few times in my life and since I was near the end of high school when I moved to Edmonton, I was still learning city life when I started university and there's a huge difference between rural towns with two little stoplights and mostly dirt roads and having to go across eight lanes of traffic just to walk around to the corner store and get a coffee. My memory for knowledge of science and psychology is excellent but my memory for directions and spatial things is not really an area of my strength. Sort of like you had to figure out some of the tricks with walk signs and navigating traffic and the transit system, I had similar hurdles including what do you do when you want the bus driver to stop and other rules of the bus. I think my scariest adventure was the time I failed to recognize my stop in the dark when coming home from an evening class and my family was actually driving around, looking for me in -20 weather, thankfully I at least had a cell phone. I told the story on one of my previous PowerPoints vlogs about attending a conference and ending up at an airport at 2AM because I decided to arrive early and there was this little tiny airport in this desolate little town, and I didn't realize this airport actually closed at night. I was out there in the middle of the night at a closed airport. Thankfully security let me in and basically you live and learn and plan better for next time.

LG: Shallen, are there any other areas where you felt your farm upbringing didn't prepare you for the urban adult world? Can you maybe give another example?

SB: I was handed a pile of papers some time in my grade twelve year and I was told to sign here, not fully understanding I was signing my financial freedom away to the Royal Bank. What I did know was that I was walking distance to the mall and shopping was something I knew how to do very well. I used to find shopping a comfort in my new world. I remember I had a bad day finding out I failed a class and I took a new credit card that I had just received in the mail and I went shopping. The entire card was maxed out in thirty minutes. I had no idea how credit cards even worked. I just knew it was free money and you paid it back sometime.

LG: (laughs) credit card companies like to lure in students as they see them as people they can suck in for life—"start 'em young!" Thankfully now high schools are starting to teach students a thing or two about financial planning in some areas at least. Still a lot more could be done for this. Is there anything else on campus where you were just expected to know something that came easy to your classmates and not to you?

SB: I also took advantage of the "attendance is optional" rule, or so I perceived it as such. Being in such a huge lecture hall made it easy to sleep in on those 8 a.m. classes.

LG: That's a good example of an unwritten rule or a case of "I shouldn't have to tell you." For instance, when I started university, I didn't realize that if you were leaving the classroom to use the washroom that you didn't raise your hand but just slipped out quietly. I think people in intro English 101 thought I had two heads when I asked to go to the washroom by raising my hand (laughs).

LG: You've told me you identify as Metis and you also identify as being from a remote rural area and living with anxiety. I am wondering how has being different in some ways semi-visible and in some ways invisible played into your experience into the social world and how you see yourself and how others see you.

SB: I have dark hair but fair skin and blue eyes. I recall having a hard time fitting in. I identified as Metis. However, I was "too white" for the Natives and "too Native" for the whites. I found myself changing my personality to fit in with whichever crowd I was hanging out with at the time. I really didn't know who I was or where I fit in. My Caucasian friends would be asking me "Why do you talk that way?" "Why do you have that accent?" "You sound like an 'Indian' they would tell me." My native friends would get upset with me for hanging out with people that weren't native.

LG: I am Caucasian and I can't really speak to race dynamics or politics. I have had the experience, and sort of a difficult position in both being autistic and a researcher in autism, so I can relate to parts of this experience. For instance, some self-advocacy groups for autistic adults I've tried to belong to are uncomfortable around researchers or academics, and this has created some awkward situations even if some of the skepticism is due to abuses of the system in the past. And it gets especially awkward and "fun" when these groups involve non-autistic colleagues and I feel "stuck in the middle" in a sort of hand-in-the-cookie jar way. Which term would these people like me to use today? Do they want me to say, "person with autism" do they want me to say "autistic?" Am I autistic or a researcher today? Total identity crisis.

Anyway, moving right along, I have one final question. What do you think is needed on campus to be more inclusive and supportive of students coming from unique backgrounds? What may have helped make things easier for you?

SB: In general, we should be learning a lot more about life and how to survive in this world in our grade 12, grade 11, grade 10 years, more so than what's being provided. What I knew was farm life. And if you put me back on the farm, I'd thrive. But, if you put me in the city at that point, I had no idea what I was getting into. My Dad was a farm boy himself, and he passed down all the information that he was able to give me based on his life experience. And I'm happy for that, and I turned out to be a good person, I believe, because of my Dad's teachings. I know that growing up where I did and where I went to school, it helped me a lot, but that was also a big change with going to university because my culture as an aboriginal person I didn't have anyone to share that with when I went to university, I found.

I think I could have been a lot more well prepared for university if my small town would have included classes on going to university secondary schooling, providing day trips to the city, and having the kids participate in hands-on living. Possibly a buddy system with second year university students.

LG: In my case, I was fortunate to come from a family with a medical background who were able to help me navigate resources and learn the gradual and lifelong learning process of self-advocacy. In addition, as I was in mostly education and psychology courses, the majority of my instructors were understanding and positive but realistic about neurodiversity. And 99 percent of people gave it their best even if it seemed we were speaking two different "languages" at first. However, I recognize the barriers faced by individuals who grow up in remote rural areas and whose families do not have the education to access resources or to help their students launch into academics or other non-rural roots. And I see the need for more of that type of outreach as well as diversity projects in metro centres for students who are already on campus or at least living in the city. The "arms" need to reach beyond the university educated, high income, metro families to make university accessible and really I think Shallen's story gives a great example of that and shows this doesn't just apply to students on the spectrum.

It was a pleasure engaging in conversation with Shallen and comparing and contrasting our experiences. Being respectful and inclusive towards those who think and act differently from you—and taking the time to assist somebody who needs additional explanation on something that "everyone knows"—will help all diverse students and faculty and not just autistic ones.

You can find more great content on the stairway to STEM website at www.stairwaytostem.org or by searching for the YouTube channel for Stairway to STEM. Thanks for watching, and bye for now.