

Transcript of Interview with Amanda Swan by Paul Garza

Interviewee: Amanda Swan

Interviewer: Paul Garza

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Abstract: Amanda Swan shares her experience with being a student at St. Mary's University during COVID-19. Amanda discusses how she is a source for students as a resident assistant and also details some challenges that come along with this role.

Paul Garza 00:00

Hi, Amanda, how are you doing?

Amanda Swan 00:01

Hi Paul. I'm alright. Thanks for inviting me.

Paul Garza 00:04

Yes, thank you for giving us your time for this interview. So this interview is going to be an oral history regarding you as a student and your involvement on campus and how you maneuvered your way around being here during a pandemic. So, can you introduce yourself to the audience, please? So, who are you? What year did you enter St. Mary's? What do you do on campus? What's your involvement like?

Amanda Swan 00:27

Yeah, for sure. So, I'm Amanda Swan. I'm a second year here at St. Mary's, so I actually started fall of 2020. As far as involvement, I am the president of the Hispanic Student Union here. I am a president's ambassador, and I'm also a resident assistant, and some other things that I can't remember.

Paul Garza 00:49

Thank you for sharing. You are a busy student. So you are an RA, and you entered during fall 2020, you said?

Amanda Swan 00:58

Mhm.

Paul Garza 00:59

Okay, so being a freshman during fall 2020, how was that experience? Can you share a little bit because I know there was an option to be on campus, but everything was virtual, so...

Amanda Swan 01:10

Right. So for me, I chose to stay home that year, which actually, I feel, gave me some benefits that even the residents on campus didn't get because we were all taking virtual classes, regardless if we were on a campus or

off. So me being off campus and being able to stay home and still be in San Antonio, I think kind of gave me more freedom in choosing, like, if I could get to go to campus and just work there, but then still have the benefits and luxuries of living at home. Which, you know, as I was coming to campus just for downtime to study work in the library, a lot of the resident students who lived here are from out of town, and so they were having all the struggles of taking online classes, but none of the comforts of home. So I actually feel a bit lucky.

Paul Garza 02:05

Yes, so I think that might be something coming from you were just right out of high school, and so how was your senior year of high school?

Amanda Swan 02:15

Well, my senior year of high school was awful, but it was already awful before COVID. I was hit by truck driver, like the first month of my senior year. Um, so I had a really bad concussion, and I was kind of out of it physically, mentally for a few months. That happened in September, late September, so right before November, no, right before October, my bad. And then when COVID happened in March, it just kind of felt like everyone else was catching up to my level. I was like, I've already been miserable like, y'all can join me like... So I don't know, I didn't really feel much change. I was already staying at home most of the time.

Paul Garza 02:56

Okay. So I think that's something that might have worked out in your favor, in the end, being able to transition to Zoom because there was not much of a transition, would you say?

Amanda Swan 03:05

And actually, yeah, I'd say in terms of my recovery after my accident, it actually helped me a lot because just being able to stay home, take the time and rest that I needed, it helped me heal leaps more than it had like in those few months when I was still physically going to high school after my accident. So even though I was doing more academically demanding work within St. Mary's University, because it was online and I was at home, I was able to recharge and cater to my needs more fully, which allowed me to heal.

Paul Garza 03:36

Okay, so given that you were off campus for your first year, and everything was virtual, what, what made you interested in the resident assistant position? And how do you think your experience as a freshman during fall 2020 has impacted your role as an RA?

Amanda Swan 03:54

So what made me interested is that clearly I'm living on campus, and it had been made clear by administration around spring '21, so entering my, right before I was about to enter my second year of undergrad. Administration had pretty much made it clear that we will be returning to at least some level of in person classes that next year. So the benefits of being on campus skyrocketed. Being on campus has been proven to be able to boost your grades, your involvement, your enjoyment of the college experience, and yes, I live in San Antonio, but I also live half an hour away. So while I would have loved to live on campus, it was just simply out of my budget. It's just not cost effective for someone who lives in San Antonio to live on campus. If you have a house down the street, why would you pay thousands to live on campus? It just doesn't make fiscal sense. But the resident assistant role was for the first time ever, I believe, opened to people who had never lived on campus before. Previously, that

had been a requirement to apply. This year, or that year rather, it was stipulated as a strong preference. So I applied, and I went through the process and didn't get it. I got waitlisted. So halfway through the summer, they gave me a call. And they said, "Okay, a spot opened up. Would you like to accept the role?" And I said, "Yes, please." So I had to change a lot of my plans because it was already halfway through this summer; I had been expecting to live at home. But in the end, it's, it's worked out tremendously, so I'm very grateful to have gotten this opportunity, and now able to be in this role after having been a first year during the peak of COVID and being a commuter, at that same time, I think I really understand where my students are at. Like these residents, because I have almost entirely freshmen, have not attended school in person since their junior year of high school. And they didn't have a full year until their sophomore year. So it has been a minute for these residents. And I think for me, I'm able to kind of bring in the joys and experiences I had living at home, like just that healing sense of home, from, you know, my actual house and the things I learned and the bonding that I enjoyed with my family at that time, to my residence hall. And I'm able to welcome my residents in and give them a true hug, like I had.

Paul Garza 06:44

Yes, thank you for sharing. So how do you, how would you describe your duties as a resident assistant during the time of COVID right now?

Amanda Swan 06:53

Um, to keep them safe is a big one. I mean, they are adults, so there's not much in the way of changing their personal outlooks and their risk assessments in terms of COVID. But if I can do something to help them in other ways, I think one of the big ones has been helping them socially. I actually don't know other resident assistants-well, actually, no, I do know that other resi-, RA-, experiences. But when my residents reach out to me, more often than not, it's actually about a social problem than any kind of academic or roommate conflict or anything like that, like they just want advice on making friends or joining clubs, or some kind of relationship squabble. And it's like, these residents are really socially stunted, which I think we all are. But again, I think I was able to kind of have some support in that because I was with my mom at home all of last year. So like, I had that strong support system, whereas the students are now just like, thrown off the deep end on their own. So I feel very lucky that I get to help them as best as I can, and just kind of act as a guide and the support whenever they need it.

Paul Garza 08:20

Okay, so would you say, would you describe yourself as a campus resource or a resource for your residents? And do you think in your role as a student and a student staff, do you think the Office of Residence Life also serves as a resource for yourself?

Amanda Swan 08:40

The first one, I hope I can be a resource to them. I would say yes, not just because my RA role, but also because I am a academic peer coach for the TRIO Student Support Services here on campus. So both of these combined, I feel have really taught me and given me skills to provide to these students and residents that do kind of make me a resource. I mean, you know, they literally show us where every single office is on campus, where the Counseling Center is, where the Retention Center is, where the RSC is, who knows what, and just by virtue of being in these roles, I know more faculty and staff around the campus who I know can be of assistance to residents when I personally cannot be. So I think so, and I encourage all students to like just talk to their RA if they have any questions. Whether the Office of Residence Life is a resource for me, I certainly feel like they are. I think for RA's though, and, you know, especially for people in my position who are maybe waitlisted and or maybe didn't live on

campus at all last year, and now were just kind of here by some miracle. At least for me, personally, I've struggled a lot with some level of hesitance to go to the office of ResLife or my superiors within the RA position because I fear it may reflect poorly on me or my ability to do the job. I certainly feel like it's there, but that level of fear is still present.

Paul Garza 10:27

That's interesting. Thank you for sharing about how you feel as an RA during this year and during the times of COVID. So given in your RA position that you are required to enforce policies, so how does that make you feel when you have to enforce policies that are directed towards COVID?

Amanda Swan 10:50

The biggest one is, the biggest one that we are required to enforce is the mask policy. So that it can really feel futile, a lot of the times because you walk into a room, like the lounge in my residence hall, and obviously, none of the residents are wearing masks and you say, hey, guys can you wear a mask please. And they do, but you know full and well that as soon as you walk out, those masks are coming right back off. So that can really just feel like trying to empty the ocean with a bucket. The biggest concern for me personally, is the vaccinations on campus, which are fairly impressive, but still not where we'd really want them to be for like a collective amount of protection and immunity in the community. However, as an RA, we are not permitted to ask, I wouldn't want to that's an invasion of medical privacy, however, like some of the hardest situations I've had to deal with is when a resident comes to me and says, "Hey, my roommate is not vaccinated at all. They are very unsafe with COVID procedures. They, they're very flagrant. Sometimes they just have a really blatant disregard for COVID, and I don't know what to do." And I just don't know what to tell these students because Office of Resident Life can't move them or the roommate on these grounds. And as an institution, there's not much we can do or at least nothing we have done, either. So that's been really hard.

Paul Garza 12:26

Yes, I can imagine that it's tough to hold your peers accountable and also holding people that you are sort of above in an authority position accountable when it's just a lot. And it's been difficult for everyone throughout the year, so I definitely see that. Well, before we conclude this interview, one last question is to the campus of St. Mary's, what do you think is the best resource or what is the resource that you would utilize the most during COVID?

Amanda Swan 13:00

The professors, absolutely. So I personally have my favorite professor in the whole wide world, Dr. Betsy Smith, the GOAT. The most amazing person, human I've ever met in my whole life. And she is absolutely wonderful. I encourage any student, even if you are nowhere near her department, which political science which she is the chair of, what a boss. So just try to have one interaction with her. But like, even then I know that every department, every student just has, like their professors that are just always there for them, that they know care for them, and that you also connect to on a personal level. So for me, that's Dr. Smith, but for someone else in the poli-sci department, it might be Dr. Vega. And these professors, they're all wonderful, and they all care about the students. I would encourage you to really explore your department and find the ones that just get you and that you feel a true personal connection with because those are the ones that are going to help not just support you academically, but personally. Those are going to be the ones that you're calling, panicking, like, "I don't know,

like how to get an internship. I need help, like, what's your advice. I want to go to law school, but I'm freaking out, man like, help me." Like, those are gonna be at your rocks.

Paul Garza 14:24

Thank you so much for sharing about that. And I think that is important because I think professors are easily forgotten as a campus resource and kind of dehumanized throughout the semesters as we do homework for them, do assignments, but they are definitely there. But anyways, thank you, Amanda, for giving us your time and participating in this oral history of COVID and your academic experience here at St. Mary's University.

Amanda Swan 14:51

Thank you, Paul. This was so much fun.