Melinda Bowen: You know, I'm feeling loved, absolutely loved. I'm feeling very proud of the students, but more importantly I feel like the graduates got to embrace the love that this college has for them. They can carry that out to the next spot. Don't stay in our own little Pride cloud, but go out and show people who we are and that we're their neighbors. We're the coworkers, and the students sitting in the seat next to them at the desk.

Liesel: Welcome to the Magic Mountie Podcast. This is a podcast that's dedicated to helping faculty and other college employees as they try and navigate the challenging fabric of serving students at Mount San Antonio College, but everyone's welcome.

Christina: Hi. It's Christina. As the school year begins to wind down, we wanted to create a unique and very special episode for you captured by Sun Ezzell. We bring you Mount SAC's Lavender Graduation. Lavender Graduation is a special annual graduation ceremony that is conducted on numerous campuses in which it recognizes and honors the accomplishments of graduating or transferring LGBTQ+ students. In our case, we also highlight the contributions and successes of The Pride Center, Mount SAC's staff and student employees and our allies across campus and in the community.

Christina: The Lavender Graduation ceremony was created by Doctor Ronni Sanlo, a Jewish lesbian who was denied the opportunity to attend the graduations of her own biological children because of her sexual orientation. Why lavender? It is a combination of the pink triage that gay men were forced to wear in concentration camps, and the black triage designating lesbians as political prisoners in Nazi Germany.

Christina: The LGBTQ+ civil rights movement took these symbols of hatred and combined them to make symbols and color of pride and community. The first Lavender Graduation began at the University of Michigan in 1995 with three graduates. Today, over 200 colleges and universities offer Lavender Graduation ceremonies for their students. These events are so important because they provide a sense of community for minority students who often experience tremendous culture shock at their institutions. For many students, they are the payoff for staying in school. Here is a glimpse at Mount SAC's very own third annual Lavender Graduation.

Maddie: Lavender Graduation is a ceremony that is held across hundreds of campuses nationwide to highlight and recognize the successes of our LGBTQ student populations. It's been around for a few decades now. It, in my experience, is always a wonderful time, especially for those who maybe don't have families who are open to their identities or their orientations and maybe might miss out on their regular commencement. So, those students get an opportunity to come to a ceremony like this and just feel, like I said, an outpouring of support and congratulations. It exceeded my own expectations, and I had quite a hand in planning it. So, that goes to show ... Yeah, it was really great. So touching. It's really special.

Melinda Bowen: Hello everybody. I'd like to welcome everyone to the 2019 Lavender Graduation. Graduates, take a look around the room. Isn't it beautiful? Feel the support and the people that have gathered here today to celebrate your accomplishment. This is very, very cool, as we'd like to say in the 70s.

Melinda Bowen: My name is Melinda Bowen. I am The Pride Center Director, and I'm just thrilled to have you all here. Congratulations graduates. This is super neat. I want to thank Gary Chow, Board of Trustees that showed up tonight. That's pretty super. Of course, we have some esteemed guests in the front that are going to speak today. At this time, I am just thrilled to ask Doctor Scroggins, the President of the College and CEO, to come up and give some welcoming remarks. Thank you Doctor Scroggins.

Dr. Scroggins: Thank you Melinda. Congratulations to all of you from graduating from Mount San Antonio College. We're so proud of you that you've persevered and got this college degree. It's very important to us that everyone who comes to us no matter their status in life, what they'll find here is acceptance and the opportunity to learn in a safe and protected environment, supported environment, each person according to their needs. That's what education is about.

Dr. Scroggins: Education is not a process that is different from one person in walk of life to another. It's something that's individual, something that we make available to you to grow and benefit in what works for you. It's been my pleasure to be the President of the College during this period of the development of acceptance of a wide variety of opportunity for people who face challenges every day in their lives and to have a safe learning environment here.

Dr. Scroggins: The Pride Center is a visible sign of that support. It's just been amazing how quickly, Mo, you've outgrown that little cupboard we gave you over there, and we'll give you more as the resources are available.

Audience: Hip, hip. [applause]

Dr. Scroggins: One of the things I would ask you to do is take the education that you obtained here and use your voice. Your voice needs to be heard, your voice as an individual, your voice collectively, because without the voices of everyone who is here in this country, this country will not grow and evolve on the promise that we hold dear regardless of what age or position in life we are. Each person has to have value for this country to have meaning. So, would you do that for me? Would you use your voice going forward?

Audience: Yes.

Dr. Scroggins: Thank you. Thank you. I appreciate that. Enjoy the evening. I'm honored to be here with you.

Melinda Bowen: I'm trying not to walk like an athlete in this dress. I'd like to mention that Doctor Scroggins was the very first person that RSVP'd for this event. To have that kind of support from the President of the College is pretty profound. I think as you walk away today, graduates, the thing that I would like you to take the most is how supported you are and how loved you are. It's a pretty fabulous thing.

Melinda Bowen: I know as I travel around to different colleges, this is not always true, but it most certainly is true here at Mount SAC. That being said, I'm really excited to introduce our keynote speaker, Anne Friedman. She is an alumni, 2008. She is the CEO and National Director of Gay for Good. So, Anne, welcome.

Anne Friedman: Hi everybody. Thank you so much for having me tonight. Thank you, Melinda, for making this possible and inviting me. Thank you, Doctor Scroggins, as well. I have some big shoes to follow. This is my first time speaking at a graduation, I will admit. So, I'm really honored to be here to speak at the third annual Lavender Graduation here at Mount San Antonio College.

Anne Friedman: When I received this email a few short months ago asking me to be a speaker here, I was kind of surprised, a little shocked, a little nervous, a little scared. I really feel like I want to do right by all of you. I want to lead you down this great path that you're going down and say something that's important and that's going to inspire you to be great people and be great leaders moving forward. I'm not Ellen DeGeneres. I'm not going to be funny. I'm not that funny, but I'm honored to be here and I'm going to do the best I can to show you guys a nice afternoon.

Anne Friedman: I am too a member of the LGBTQ community. I've been married for several years to my wife of ten ... that we've been together for ten years. I came out much later in life. We have some shared experiences as being part of that same community and also being students here at Mount SAC. What likely makes my story so different is this delay in me coming out, and me going to school, and doing these things much later.

Anne Friedman: My journey I want to start with began here at Mount SAC in 2001. I was married. I was a mother of two. I was working in the early childhood education field, and I found myself here at Mount SAC. So, I started taking classes here just for my job, but I really loved it. I found that I was really missing that I hadn't got my education earlier on. So, I continued and went to school for several years taking one class here, one class there, several online, did whatever I could while I was working, being a mom and a student.

Anne Friedman: As things continued, I'd been at school for a few years, and I found myself getting a divorce. That was a really challenging time, and I had to make a really tough decision, which hopefully none of you have ever had to make. I actually had to drop out of my math class, because I just was dealing with some personal things that I needed to pay attention to.

Anne Friedman: I didn't let that stop me. A few years went by, and it was just really important. I wanted to be back here. I wanted to finish my degree. It was really important to finish what I started. I firmly believe in getting an education. So, I came to school. As you've already now heard, I got my degree in 2008. I got my degree in behavioral science. So, whether you guys are leaving here today to go straight into the next thing or you're taking a break, there's always room to grow and you can do this at any point in your life.

Anne Friedman: So, it was during these final years though at Mount SAC that I started really questioning my sexuality and questioning whether I was gay. I was pondering this idea in my head, "Have I been living the wrong life? Am I a lesbian? Is this just a feeling? Is Katy Perry's I Kissed a Girl going though my head because it's on the radio everywhere? What is making me question myself?" I started really listening to what I was hearing inside of my head and kind of just had this ah-ha moment when I realized, "Yes, this is who I am."

Anne Friedman: I don't regret the choices that I made in the past. I have two beautiful children, and I wouldn't change that for the world. But I was kind of living in the wrong life for a while. So, that lead me to here. Here I was, 38 years old, graduating from college and coming out to my parents who you can imagine were much older than that ... and my grandparents and my kids.

Anne Friedman: Now, I would hope that that was an easy thing for most of you, but my guess is it wasn't easy for all of you. It usually isn't. Some of you are lucky, and others have a harder time. I was really lucky. My kids didn't care. They were like, "Mom, we love you." My mom was glad I wasn't telling her I had cancer. She was just very happy when I said, "Mom, I like girls." So, I had an easy experience. I had a few people that were challenging.

Anne Friedman: So, things were changing for me, but I found that I wasn't feeling at home. I don't know about all of you, I at the time was living in Chino Hills. I didn't know any gay people. I think my kids knew one gay kid at their high school. I hung out with all of the gay kids in high school, so I was very acutely aware even though I hadn't figured it out for myself. I was very much a supporter of the LGBTQ community and would have wrapped my arms around any kid at their high school that was out and in the community.

Anne Friedman: So, it surprised me that I wasn't feeling that. Where I found myself having some challenges was in my job. I was working in all of these different preschools, many of them religious schools and churches, teaching the music program. I was afraid to say who I was. I was afraid to talk about who I was dating. I was not using pronouns. I was avoiding and ultimately made the decision that I needed to get out of that, because I needed to be in a job where I could feel supported and I could talk about my wife and I could talk about who I was. Believe me, one of the first words that came out of my mouth in my interview at the next job was, "My wife," because I wanted to make sure I was in a place where I was being supported.

Anne Friedman: I want to tell you about something that I discovered though when I was coming out, because when I first figured out who I was, I was excited. It was almost like a kid who was just all of a sudden just turned 21 and got to go to the bars. I was in Weho hanging out with my friends. I was watching the L Word night and day until I got through the whole thing. I was doing all of these things that I thought that's what lesbian women do.

Anne Friedman: I had joined a bunch of meetup groups, which is great. I found this sense of community in them, but a lot of those is the same thing. They were going to bars. They were going to certain things. They were going to Pride. There's nothing wrong with that. There's community to be found in all of those areas, but there is more to life than just hanging out in a gay bar. There's a lot more out there for you than those areas, and there's places where you can find community.

Anne Friedman: So, I was on Facebook ... still use Facebook unlike a lot of people. I stumbled upon this group called Gay for Good. Gay for Good is a non-profit that mobilizes the LGBTQ community to do volunteer work. So, I stumbled upon this group in LA and was really intrigued. I'm like, "What's this social group where I can go out?" One of the things that I loved about it was it wasn't just about giving back, but you could go out with other people like you and it was not just lesbians, which were a lot of the groups I was hanging out with, or just the trans community or just gay men. It was all of us and our allies coming together to give back to non-profits. Month after month in several communities this was taking place.

Anne Friedman: So, this was about 2010, and within the first year I was going regularly to all these projects. The leadership approached me and said, "Hey, would you like to be a chapter leader in LA?" One of the downsides to Gay for Good is the name can be a little bit off putting to some people. People either love it and think it's catchy, other people think it means gay men. It, in fact, I'm going to tell you in a minute where it got its origins, it did start with gay men.

Anne Friedman: So, when I came on as a volunteer, I was one of the few women coming out, but I didn't let that stop me. I was the type of person, as you can tell, when I put my mind to something I'm going to do it. If it takes me eight years to go to school, I'm going to do it. So, I kept showing up and eventually ended up on their leadership team.

Anne Friedman: Shortly after that, I was asked to join the board, served many different positions. Fast forward to today, I am actually their very first employee. I'm the National Director of Gay for Good. I'm really proud to say that. One of the things that prompted Gay for Good and the founders, who I mentioned were men, it was three gay men. It was 2008. The movie Milk came out. Milk was about Harvey Milk. Harvey had this idea that if you wanted to change hearts and minds, in his case you want to get votes, you need to go out in your community and you need to meet your community. You need to get to know your community. That community isn't just the people that look like you. Those are the people that are different from you. So, get out there and get to know them.

Anne Friedman: These three men, Tony, Frank and Steve, are on a hiking trail and they're talking about this. They're inspired by this move, and they really wanted to do something different. So, they came up with this idea like, "Let's start this group. Let's get people to go out in the community and give back, but let's not do it just for giving back. Let's do it so we can change the lens through which people see us. Let's get to know our neighbors. Let's let out community get to know us."

Anne Friedman: I just had the opportunity, we were chatting just a minute ago in the front row about how it's really difficult to hate when someone's up close. If I'm standing next to someone at the Food Bank packing a box, it's really challenging for me to not like that ... We're there for the same purpose. We're doing the same thing. We are the same thing. At the end of the day, we're all the same. We're all part of that community.

Anne Friedman: As you can tell, I'm very passionate about this organization. I love what they do. I would encourage all of you to find something similar in your lives. I would encourage you to give back to find your sense of community through groups like this. It doesn't have to be the same group, but whether that be supporting HRC or Equality California or whatever it is that speaks to. You have to find that like I did.

Anne Friedman: I want to close with a short story. Last weekend, we had this opportunity to be in the Pride Parade to carry this incredible flag. What made this flag really incredible is it was made by these artists who came here from Argentina and they set up shop over at the Museum of Latin American Art for a couple of months, and they invited the community, people like you and I, to come and to create these squares with messages of hope, and love, and diversity and inclusion.

Anne Friedman: So, over 3,000 people came over this period of time and wrote these incredible messages about the future for everyone to enjoy and to look at. They were stitched together into this beautiful quilt in the colors of the rainbow. More than a hundred of us got together on Ocean Boulevard just over a week and a half ago and got to carry this in the parade. It was just this beautiful sight of people coming together to spread love and light and to look to a positive and bright future.

Anne Friedman: You don't have to be a celebrity. You don't have to be a sports star. You don't even need to be an artist or a politician to make a difference. You could be that person that went over to that museum that day and wrote down a message, and that message might have been read by somebody. That message might have changed their future. That message might have given them hope or given them the courage to do something they weren't going to do. Maybe it's to go to school. Maybe it's to come out. Maybe it's to come to this graduation. Maybe it's to pick up the phone and ask someone for help.

Anne Friedman: Whatever the case may be, any of you can do that. Any of you can write these messages. You can be that person. What I really want for you is I want to remind you that one idea like the guys that started Gay for Good or the people that built this quilt, that one idea can grow into something really big. That quilt took 120 people to carry it. Gay for Good is in 14 cities around the country. We have 8,000 people on our mailing list that are hearing about what we're doing and over 25,000 on social media that are following us and that are signing up to come do these different projects.

Anne Friedman: We've worked with almost 400 different non-profits. We've mobilized thousands of volunteers. By the way, the value of that to the non-profits we've helped, we've saved those non-profits 1.5 million dollars by being of service to them. So, we're doing some really important work while out there hopefully showing positive images of our community.

Anne Friedman: So, what I would encourage is to find your people, find your community. Most importantly though, be you. Stay true to you. Just keep learning. I mean, that's why you're here. Your learning doesn't have to end today. So, please be a voice. Keep going out there and keep spreading messages of love. Thank you.

Melinda Bowen: Thank you, Anne. That was very inspiring. I just want to add how cool it was, speaking of doing good, that the moms emailed me and just said, "I saw Lavender Graduation on the marquee, and we would like to come and support your students. We are moms. We give hugs. Can we just come and give the students some hugs?" Isn't that cool? That is just really wonderful.

Melinda Bowen: I just think it piggy-backs on what Anne said, it's just the small acts of kindness that can really make a difference. So, thank you, moms with hugs and I think a daughter's in there too. That's just super cool. Speaking of super cool, I'm very proud to introduce our student speaker tonight, Aris Hernandez.

Melinda Bowen: Just a little tidbit that a lot of folks don't know. In the audience today, Aris was instrumental in getting The Pride Center established here at Mount SAC. She helped write the proposal for The Pride Center and presented it to the Academic Senate and I believe the Board of Trustees as well. Aris was also the President of Lambda for a period of time and had done a lot in the role of a leadership position. We're very, very fortunate to have Aris and very, very proud that Aris will be moving on. We're going to miss you very much. Without further ado, Aris Hernandez.

Aris Hernandez: Thank you so much, Coach. Good afternoon everyone. I am delighted to be a part of this beautiful Lavender Graduation dedicated to highlight and celebrate all of these wonderful accomplishments by all of these brilliant students.

Aris Hernandez: When Coach asked me to speak at this Lavender Graduation, I was truly, truly grateful and honored. However, I did struggle with choosing in which direction to go with in regards to my speech. I really thought to myself, "What could I tell you about me that provided enough insight on who I am, where I am, how I got here and where I'm going?" Then I realized it was a little more complex than that for me.

Aris Hernandez: I ended up writing a speech that was entirely about my struggles as a teenager and being the first to graduate from high school in my family, how I had no sense of direction, didn't even know how to enroll in college. By the way, I figured it out. Then I created a separate speech, and it was a lot more empowering. I discuss and tackled my childhood trauma head on, how I overcame different forms of addiction. Finally, how I was the President of Lambda and how that really shaped me as a person but also as a leader.

Aris Hernandez: There was just so much more that I wanted to say. That entire experience put me in a certain situation where I had to share with fellow colleagues, or students I should say, that we all got together and just said, "Hey, we need a place, something that's ours, something for support." When we finally had this place, it was The Pride Center, that's when I realized that this was the first and only time that someone like me had access to a center where I was understood at all of my intersections as a woman, as a member of the LGBT community, as a trauma survivor, as a POC, and as a first-generation college student.

Aris Hernandez: So, when I was done with this speech I was like, "Yeah, this is it. This is great." But then that inspired a separate speech. Here I was like, "Yeah, maybe I should discuss more about my journey as the president. It provided me a lot of opportunity." Then I wanted to talk about my most recent battle with returning to school after an accident.

Aris Hernandez: A year ago, May 5, I was in an accident, and then I was out of school for an entire year. So, learning to walk again was difficult. Then finding the passion and the drive to finish what I started was even more difficult. I made it out of this wheelchair, and I told myself, "If I'm going to graduate, I'm going to walk up there. I'm not going to do the crutches." Although, if that's what somebody's doing, more power to them, but I gave myself that kind of goal to reach.

Aris Hernandez: By the grace of God, here I am standing before you. I stood up here, walked up here. In reality and truth, there was so many ways that I wanted to go with this. There was so many layers to my experience here that made me who I am today, so many first time accomplishments here at Mount SAC especially. It was so much that I couldn't really provide a simple speech, because my journey had been filled with so many different intersections just like my identity.

Aris Hernandez: I could share with you a list of my accomplishments. I could talk to you about the good things I've done to assist my community, my campus, Lambda, The Pride Center, fellow students, but I would much rather tell you about how much they actually helped me, most importantly how they saved me from being a statistic. I would much rather stand here and be grateful that I get to be a part of this beautiful ceremony. This is where I found my purpose and I found myself. So, it's a really big deal for me here.

Aris Hernandez: To my fellow students, to my colleagues, I want you to know that I'm very, very, very proud of you for being here with me today for making it this far. I know it's not been easy, but trust me, your work has not been in vain. This is a huge milestone. Although this feels like an end, I have to admit that in my opinion, ends are always new beginnings. This will be one of the most memorable ones. So, keep on going. You deserve this. Thank you.

Melinda Bowen: Thank you everyone in the room. Appreciate you coming tonight. Thanks.

Speaker 9: First off, I'm an alumni. Two years ago, I also participated in one of the first Lavender Graduations. It was an amazing ceremony. Just to see people doing the same thing and following the alumni's footsteps, it's just amazing. It just gets better and better every year. It's just always nice to represent the community and also support the community. It's just like family to me. So, I had to come back and see what's going on.

Sun Ezzell: I was wondering, do you have any advice for faculty?

Speaker 9: Well, I only had a few who'd just do this, I wish every teacher did this, but I feel like they just need to be an open ear and just be open to talk. You can not only be a professor to them, you could also be their friend as well. It's hard to get advice from another student, so it's always best to get it from the faculty. You never know. You never know what insight they can give you.

Speaker 11: The first semester that I was here, I was terrible. I was failing classes, because again, I had no clue how to go about school, how to go about my classes. I didn't even know there was tutoring center or a writing center. The moment that I was informed about Lambda, that's when everything changed for me, not just on a personal level but on a student level. Immediately when I walked into the office, they were like, "Oh yeah, you can get help here. Go to that center and this."

Speaker 11: I was like, "There are centers? There's different places to help you with certain things?" Everything just started to get a lot easier. Once you find that sense of community, everything is so much easier.

Sun Ezzell: Do have any advice for faculty?

Speaker 11: The whole preferred name thing has been a really, really, really big one. That really, I feel like, changed the entire environment of classrooms, because now ... especially for me or for anybody else who identifies as part of the LGBT community, it's not weird when you have to go into class and they say the incorrect name, because that's like your government name. I feel a lot more comfortable with that.

Speaker 12: I'm a mental health counselor here, and I actually work with some of the students in The Pride Center. So, I wanted to be here to support them.

Sun Ezzell: Do you have any wishes for the graduates as they move on?

Speaker 12: Biggest thing I would say is that they can tap into their supports as much as possible, that they are more capable than they think they are and that they have the ability to overcome a lot of challenges and adversities that maybe they didn't think they could.

Speaker 13: Recognize that you are enough. You've always been enough. As you move onto your next phase of your journey, just continue to keep learning about who you are and what you want to be, and you will accomplish everything you want in this world.

Liesel: Hey, thanks so much for joining us for the Magic Mountie Podcast. We love your liks, we love your shares, and we love your comments. So, please engage with our community. Download from wherever you love to get your podcasts, iTunes, Google, Rate My Professor, we're there. We want you to be back with us next week. Remember, any opinions that are expressed in this podcast do not necessarily represent Mount San Antonio College or any of its agents. We'll see you next time.