

Liz Norell - You are listening to Tiger Stories, a podcast from Chattanooga State Community College. This is the place to share the stories from our community, with our broader community. At Chat State, we believe every member of our campus, students, faculty and staff belongs here and because we know that belonging matters, we are excited to share the stories of those who make up the unique, diverse, and supportive community on our campus. You will often hear people on this podcast talk about Chat State as having the feel of a family. We are so proud to be part of an institution that welcomes people from across the community to come here and pursue their dreams. We hope you will enjoy hearing our stories and maybe even some day, you will want to share yours with us too. I am Liz Norell and I teach political science on the main campus of Chattanooga State. As Tiger Stories continues to grow, we are introducing some new voices as hosts. And today, I am excited to be joined by a co-host Nick Mansito who you will hear in future episodes as well. Nick teaches English in the main campus of Chattanooga state and he joined me for this conversation that you are going to have today. You will hear more from him soon. Without further ado, let's get started with today's conversation. You want to tell us about yourself?

Tae Wilmoth - Yeah, I am Tae Wilmoth. I am an Asian American, half and half. My mom is Korean. She is a first generation immigrant. She came straight from South Korea. And I am 16, a collegiate student. This is my junior year, and I am a transgender male.

Liz Norell - How did you decide to come to Collegiate High?

Tae Wilmoth - When I heard about Collegiate and the program the, dual enrolment program where I get to graduate high school with my associates degree. That sounded really appealing to me, so here I am now.

Liz Norell - What is it like to be a Collegiate High student at Chat State?

Tae Wilmoth - It is very different from pretty much any school around here, you get treated with the responsibilities of a college student and you are held accountable for the things that you do. It is a lot more free but you are taking on the lot more mature responsibilities, and your push to kind of explore everything and your options and to take on what you think you can and you get to make all those decisions yourself, but you also have your advisors too to help you along with that.

Nick Mansito - So you mentioned your advisors have you formed any new relationships here?

Tae Wilmoth - Regarding?

Nick Mansito - Anyone in general actually?

Tae Wilmoth - Anyone, yeah, I have, I am in the Symphonic Band here. I play the flute and I almost did a music major and I got really close with our band director, Professor Hartline. He is amazing and he has been really supportive of me following what I want to do. I also have met a

lot more people that I have similar interests with. There is a community of LGBT people that, it is bigger than anything I have ever seen. And to be able to connect with people and talk about these issues that I deal with personally and things that we see around us, it is really nice to hear and it is nice to be able to relate to someone. The second school that I ever went to, I started to play around with my identity more and try and explore it. And it was hard to do well, being terrified of everyone and not knowing if who I talk to would be safe in general, and so throughout, over about 2 years, I realized that I was not a girl, I am a guy and I identify as a man, and I can now say that that's who I am now, and I had a scare at the end of my freshman year before I left where someone tried to out me at school and I think if there is anyone out there, I think whatever force there is, that it happens so close to the end of the year and nobody cared and that nothing happened, because the school could have not released my transcripts to Collegiate and I would not have been able to come here and that was really terrifying moment. I have seen it happen to people where they do get out and they do get punished for it, where they be by their own parents or by the school or both and just the whole community. It is really sad and I am thankful, but I did not have to experience that, but I really do feel for everyone else.

Liz Norell - I mean it is hard enough for people to navigate questions of identity and who am I and how do I fit into this world, but then you add on those cultural expectations and religious expectations, peer pressure and being a teen just sucks, and you know, it is no wonder that this population is so vulnerable to violence, to suicidal ideations, to so many things, and I am sad that you had to go through that, but I am so glad that you are thriving here.

Nick Mansito - Yeah, I echo with Liz. I am sad that you had to go through that but I am super happy that you have expressed it here. So other people can hear that, because I don't think that probably the general population as much as they try to sympathize right, I don't think they understand like the level, and even I don't, the level of paranoia and fear that you are just consumed by all the time. So I am sure people will tell you this. If they haven't, they should have. I mean, you are amazing. I think that's, I commend your courage and your bravery and your honesty and your will to stand up and be like this is who I am, so yeah, I commend you for that, because I don't think the general population really knows what you have gone through, right.

Tae Wilmoth - Right, being here is terrifying and saying the things that I have just said, is terrifying, but I am doing this because I know that there is people out there that need to hear this and need to hear that they are not alone and that they have people who support them and I hope that this encourages other people to become more confident in themselves and be more confident in exploring who they are.

Liz Norell - I love it.

Nick Mansito - Yeah, it is fantastic.

Liz Norell - What was it like that very first day? You are on campus. You are a high school student, you are going to college classes, what was that experience like?

Tae Wilmoth - It was daunting.

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Tae Wilmoth - It was just like you talk about taking college classes and being on a college campus and finally being treated like an adult, and it's all that I wanted and it is all that a lot of these kids wanted, but then when he actually get to do it, it's startling, because it is a lot more than you think it is, but it is also a lot less. You are just treated like a person and not talk down to you which I think is one of the best things about being here.

Nick Mansito - So you feel more welcomed here than you did in the private school?

Tae Wilmoth - Oh, yeah, for sure. There is, it is a lot more diverse. Where I came from, I believe I was like one of five Asian people in the high school, and I was like one of the only mix kids in the school, because I am half Korean and half white.

Liz Norell - What is the experience that you have had here with teachers at ChattState?

Tae Wilmoth - For the most part, they have all been just really accepting, really nice and just really down to earth. I have had a few, not so great teachers, but not everywhere is perfect, so it is really nice to just have a community where everybody is treated the same.

Nick Mansito - Have you made more Asian American friends here at ChattState?

Tae Wilmoth - I have, not quite as many as I would have liked to, but in general, there is not a lot around here.

Liz Norell - You talked about your relationship with your band director, are there other relationships that you have formed on this campus that feels really meaningful to you?

Tae Wilmoth - Yeah, yesterday was Chattanooga Pride and I went alone at first because I thought I was going to be meeting up with some people that I knew, but I ended up not really meeting with these people and I found some other people from classes that I have here and I reconnected with some old friends that I haven't seen in years. And I had the best day I have had in a very long time.

Liz Norell - Awesome.

Tae Wilmoth - All day yesterday.

Liz Norell - Oh, that is great.

Tae Wilmoth - We just hung around, danced to music, explored, talked with people, and ate, hung out, and just had a really good time.

Liz Norell - That's awesome.

Nick Mansito - That's great. I am curious just to know what you want to do when you get out of here?

Tae Wilmoth - Oh that is a loaded question.

Liz Norell - And if you don't know, that is okay.

Nick Mansito - Yeah.

Tae Wilmoth - I have no clue right now. I say no clue. I have a general idea, but it's not very concrete. I was as I said before, gonna do a music major, but I dropped that because things were getting pretty stressful with school, and so I'm not 100 percent sure that I am going to follow through with that right now, but other options I have been thinking about is restaurant management, culinary school and just hopefully owning a restaurant business.

Liz Norell - Cool.

Nick Mansito - Yeah, that would be awesome. I always wanted to be a chef secretly.

Liz Norell - Yeah.

Nick Mansito - Yeah, yeah, I told my dad, I think I was originally in pre-med and one day, I was like, yeah, I was like culinary school would be cool too though. I kind of like that. And he kind of squashed that real quick, but it's still something I love, yeah. I kind of think that would be really cool.

Tae Wilmoth - Oh, yeah, I cook a lot at home. Since my mom is South Korean, I learned a lot of really good dishes. She told me one day that my Korean barbecue is better than some of the stuff we have bought in restaurants and stores and I was like, that's it, that's like.

Liz Norell - Nice.

Nick Mansito - Yeah.

Tae Wilmoth - I can die happy.

Liz Norell - Very nice. What do you feel like some of the most important things you have learned at ChattState have been?

Tae Wilmoth - So far, one of the most important things is to not forget how to enjoy being myself because finding out who I am is, there is no end of figure it out now who you are. That's a

constant thing, and some people get so caught up in trying to figure out who they are, they forget to enjoy the now, the today, and they forget to enjoy how to learn growing. How to learn to just explore life and I am still not there. It's hard thing to do, but I think that's one of the most important things that people should know.

Nick Mansito - That's beautiful advice.

Liz Norell - It really is.

Nick Mansito - That's really great. I think yeah, so you get stuck on where you're headed and where you are going that you forget to just like enjoy being in the journey. I think that's great. I think more people need to hear that.

Tae Wilmoth - Yeah, because it's so stressful constantly thinking about what's going to happen, that is where you are going to go, what am I going to do? Where am I going to go to college? How am I going to save that money, just all of these things, constantly thinking about the future, and it is a smart thing to do, to think about the future, but you can't do that all the time. You have to take a step back and look at what you are doing now and look at who you are and not forget where you came from and not forget who you want to be.

Liz Norell - Stay at present. Present yeah.

Nick Mansito - That's great. So what advice would you give other students, current or future students?

Tae Wilmoth - Well, that was part of my advice to future students, but just always ask for help when you need it. Don't be afraid to ask for help because that was a very hard thing for me to learn because you can't do everything on your own and even if you can now, down the road, maybe next week, maybe next semester, you are not going to have that energy to do that and just always ask for help with homework, with social life. There is mental health resources here. There is advice in here. There is tutoring, whatever you need, just don't be afraid to ask for that. It's not a sign of weakness at all.

Liz Norell - Can you give us an example of a time where you needed to ask for help and you did?

Tae Wilmoth - That is a very good question.

Liz Norell - You can take your time.

Tae Wilmoth - Yeah, I think one of the times was just needing to drop my specific music major for this semester because at the end of spring, I was very sure and very certain that that was what I wanted to do, but over the summer, I just kind of sat on it and thought, weighed my options and thought about the classes that I was taking, my core classes that I needed versus the additional music related classes I needed to take and I finally realized that I don't want to push myself that

hard. I don't think I could take it. I think I might have made it this first semester in fall, but the rest of the semesters, I didn't know how I would feel. I didn't know how drained I would be of school, and so I went ahead and just told my advisor to drop those classes and I don't regret it for me right now. I had to, another time was last spring, I had taken comp 1 in a chemistry lab, and on top of all my high school back in English and everything else I was doing, it became a lot. It was my first ever chemistry class and it was a full on college load. It was a lot to handle and because I could not drop that, I had to sit down and give up comp 1 so I could focus on the things that I needed to, but I am back in comp 1 this semester and doing better than ever.

Liz Norell - That's terrific.

Nick Mansito - Awesome.

Liz Norell - You mentioned that this is your second year at ChattState, how far along are you in your program?

Tae Wilmoth - It's kind of weird because I got here during my sophomore year of high school and so to complete 2 years of college between 3 years, it's a little hard to measure exactly how far you are. So at this point and technically about half done.

Liz Norell - With like an associates degree?

Tae Wilmoth - With an associates degree.

Liz Norell -That's amazing Tae.

Nick Mansito - Yeah.

Tae Wilmoth - I'm planning to graduate high school with my associates degree just for general one, and hopefully it will transfer to wherever I decide to go.

Liz Norell - So will that be spring 2021?

Tae Wilmoth - Yes.

Liz Norell - So that sounds like a million years from now.

Tae Wilmoth - It does, but I know, it's going to come up really fast.

Liz Norell - It will, it will. Is there anything else you would like to share with us?

Tae Wilmoth - Yeah, for people in general, feeling alone and especially for the LGBT people here, it's really scary, either starting fresh as whoever you identify as or coming out to people here. It's daunting, it's terrifying, and it's easy to get caught up in your own head worrying about everything that could possibly go wrong and sure you will have some bad eggs in the basket, the teachers and students, but overall, it's good, it's safe, and maybe you don't feel safe with

everybody around you, but there are people here for you and to support you and just to help you feel safer here.

Liz Norell - I am so glad that you said that.

Nick Mansito - Yeah, that's nice to hear.

Liz Norell - It is nice to hear though, you know, we are doing something right, but I am glad you found that to be true.

Tae Wilmoth - It's a real breath of fresh air, and I just hope that everyone coming from a situation like mine will quickly realize that it's safer and that it's better and I would be willing to talk to people if they need it.

Liz Norell - That's so kind of you. Thank you so much.

Nick Mansito - Yeah, thank you.

Tae Wilmoth -I'm really happy to be here.

Liz Norell - Yeah. We are happy you are here too.

Nick Mansito -Yeah.

Liz Norell - Good job. The microphone is yours.

Tae Wilmoth - Yeah. I yield my time to the chair.

Liz Norell - Excellent, that's a little parli pro humor because we did a parli pro crash course today.

Nick Mansito - Okay, I see.

Liz Norell - See what just happened there.

Nick Mansito - Yeah.

Tae Wilmoth - I think I'm good, okay.

Liz Norell - Those of us who have the honor and privilege to work on Chattanooga State's Campuses know that something nearly special happens here, and it's humbling to get to get to share a few of those special things with you, our listeners. So thanks to you for joining us here today, and a special thank you to the students, faculty, and staff who make this podcast possible. If you are a student at Chattanooga State, and you want to be on Tiger Stories, let us know, you can get in touch at the email address in the show notes. We will be back soon with another installment of Tiger Stories. Until then, make it a great one.