Lambda Alumni Scholars Reflect on the Future of UCLA, Dating and Being Authentic

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Lambda Alumni Scholarship winners Johnnie Yaj ’18 and Bo James Hwang ’18 took time from their busy schedules to reflect on their UCLA experience before heading into the Geffen Playhouse in Westwood.

First, we interviewed Johnnie Yaj, who is currently a budget review director at UCLA’s Undergraduate Students Association Council. The son of refugees, he transplanted himself from chilly Madison, Wisconsin to sunny Los Angeles, California in 2014, the year he won the Lambda Alumni Scholarship as a freshman. He is majoring in World Culture and Arts with future goals of a doctorate in Education. He chose UCLA for its multi-cultural diversity — something he yearned for in Wisconsin — and got more than he expected.

**What was your first impression of UCLA?**

“Being in the LGBTQ community in Wisconsin, it’s really rare to run into other LGBT folks within my community, so coming to UCLA it was kind of overwhelming how normalized it was to hold hands, same genders holding hands in public, or having a place like West Hollywood, or other small communities of LGBT folks. It was very overwhelming, but also very comforting.

My first impression of [UCLA] was that the whole ‘UCLA experience’ was very privileged, but I think that it actually met all of my expectations and a little bit more, too, I would say, just because the life here is just so luxurious, and I grew up really poor. I’m very grateful now being within UCLA and being a part of the LGBT community.”
What has been your high point at UCLA so far?

“One of the high points was the beginning of my second year, when I started the first LGBT collective retreat here at UCLA. Basically, I organized one for the LGBT folks, and we went to Palm Springs and we rented a big house and we just had a bunch of workshops learning about each other.

I’m from the gay community but I really don’t know that much about the trans community or the bisexual community, and that was kind of a way for me to learn more about it from other people’s personal experiences, which is something that I have to seek out. That’s not a part of the UCLA curriculum. I would say that was one of the high points, just being able to organize that, and bond with some amazing people and be crazy and just be myself. It’s really rare for someone like me to find a space like that, especially coming from Wisconsin. I would say that was definitely one of the high points of my UCLA so far.”

What could be improved in the LGBT scene at UCLA?

“I think the current LGBT community at UCLA is very isolated in terms of — they do a lot of programming just within the LGBT community, but I think that that could definitely expand to other identities on this campus. For example, the Community Programs Office — there’s a lot of programming for low-income students, undocumented students, formerly incarcerated students and things like that, but also within all of those communities. There’s a lot of LGBT folks, but they’re neglected or they don’t really get the resources that the LGBT resource center provides because they’re not reached out to. So I think in that sense, it could definitely improve.”

What are your future goals?

“I’m currently doing undergraduate research, so I want to get into education policy for public schools for K through 12. There are a lot of issues in the K through 12 education system that I really want to tackle, such as gender neutral bathrooms, and food, and helping low-income students be able to go to school [and] have a good quality education, because I didn’t have that good of a quality education. But I think that the way I navigated the space, I was one of very few students who [was] able to get out of my community, and now I can actually go back and contribute to the community and help it improve, instead of just continuing the poverty cycle.”

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Bo James Hwang, Lambda’s 2016 scholarship recipient is thrilled to be graduating this year. Two years ago he paved his way to UCLA from community college by volunteering with the Black and Latino AIDS project as well as the campus LGBT Center. As a pre-med trans-gender male, he is currently interning in an East LA clinic providing trans-affirming care.

Like Johnnie, Bo made UCLA his first choice in part because of the feel of its community.

**What were your first impressions of UCLA?**

“I knew that it was going to be academically rigorous, but I also knew that it was — even though it was a really big campus — I knew that I was able to make friends. There was a community here.”

**Looking back, do you have a highlight moment at UCLA?**

“The most memorable one is ... I live in the dorms and I really like my floor mates, and we talk about anything from gender to sexuality, sex, and class and racism. Those heavy conversations that got [me] to really open my eyes, was something that I’m not ever going to forget.”

**What challenges does the Bruin LGBT community face?**

“The really good thing is having the LGBT Center at the main campus [which] really shows visibility to a lot of folks — that we’re here and we’re queer. And I think some of the challenges that a lot of LGBTQ students have ... I think UCLA’s doing very well with even preferred names for a lot of gender-nonconforming and trans students, which definitely saved my life. Also, a lot of the physicians here provide gender-affirming care and they’re moving toward LGBTQ-affirming care, which is very hard to find anywhere in other campuses. So that’s going well.”

But Bo believes there is still work to do.

“I think a lot of ally training, or just getting professors, staff and faculty to really just be a little bit exposed to the struggles that LGBTQ students face would be nice.”

**Is there any time for romance, outside of studying and volunteering for these scholars?**
Both succinctly agreed, “Dating is hard!” then turned the conversation back to their journey of becoming an out and proud LGBT Bruin.

**Johnnie:**
“A lot of the work that I do is not in specifically LGBTQ organizations. But I think just me being there, just being my authentic self, really does make a change. And for some folks, they want to be in different spaces besides being in LGBT spaces, and I think that’s okay as long as they feel comfortable and they’re living their authentic self. I think that’s what really matters.”

**Bo:**
“I think I fell in love with myself here, and I really want the new incoming Bruins to really, really explore. I’ve explored so many different career choices: from law, to entrepreneurship, to consulting. And I feel that the world is your oyster here at UCLA, and really, really make the most out of it. It doesn’t matter if you’re single or not, but just really falling in love with yourself and being the best person that you can be. And living your authentic self.”