

## Diversity Statement

### Johnny Reed

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On one student evaluation, I received the comment “He was very respectful when discussing race.” My mission as an educator is to create an environment where students, both in and out of the classroom, feel as though they can express any joy or frustration. My requirements in class are to be constructive and respectful. I do not shy away from difficult conversations and in a classroom full of culturally diverse students, I believe that I am required to be an example. I achieve this in three ways, to begin, when I present the lecture on LGBTQIA+ and Native American theatre, I share my experience within the appropriate context of the class and discussion. Second, I admit to my class that I am not perfect and sometimes I am not up on the latest verbiage. I diligently stress that they are empowered to correct me, respectfully and contextually. Last, it is my responsibility to monitor my class through these conversations. I need to make sure we remain on task and I thank each student who shares any experiences when we discuss racial, LGBTQIA+, body image. Acknowledgment that the student was heard helps to validate the student's feelings and experience and allows me to get a pulse on the class to help structure future conversations.

I identify as a gay white male. In reality, I am a Native American gay male. At a young age I realized that I did not have the same skin tone as my cousins and when we would walk into town to get a soda or some treat, the staff at the local convenience store would make derogatory comments and do everything short of throwing us out of the store. As a child, I could not comprehend why I was treated differently if I were to walk in alone or with my mother, who was white. I thought it was odd and that my cousins would sometime give me a list of treats and I would be asked if the ‘Indian kids’ were giving me a difficult time. As an adult I have learned all too well the tone of my skin affords me some privilege. I would like to say that this is an old issue, however, my husband recently accepted a job in Tahlequah, Oklahoma the home of the Cherokee Nation. While we were shopping in one of the small local stores we were surprised the shop owner was accepting of a white gay couple but referred to the Native American population as an “us versus them.” I have not lived in Oklahoma in several years, but the sense of entitlement took me back to being a child walking into a convenience store to purchase a Dr. Pepper.

Diversity is a broad statement and the focus tends to be on ethnicity and the LGBTQIA+ communities. In our chosen field there is pressure to look like or be the vision of perfection. I extend my definition of diversity to include persons who do not fit the mold of the ideal, whatever that may be. Doing our best to prepare our students to accept who they are regardless of what they perceive as personal defects or imperfections is equally as important as respecting their choice of pronouns and celebrating their ethnic diversity. In my lecture class with non-majors, the last day of the semester, I have a general question and answer session built into my lesson plan. Questions surrounding rejection and physical perception are always asked as part of this discussion. I share with these students, just as I do with my acting students, my experiences and stress that we can not control the perceptions of other people. When I was working at a theme park in Missouri, where I was a featured vocalist in the saloon show, the final version of the show was built around the cast. I was the funny fat guy but I was never the butt of the joke. Our team structured the show so I sang Danny Boy toward the end of the show and that moment changed the way the audience viewed my

character. After one performance this lady came up to me and thanked me because her son was chubby and was bullied because of his weight. She was so happy he was a part of a performance with someone he could identify and this character was viewed in a positive light. I share with my students that we should strive to focus on our truth and our positives because we never know the impact we have on others.