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'We are essential': Conference at GCC promotes diversity, inclusion on island

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TAYLOR ROSE TOVES | THE GUAM DAILY POST JAN 27, 2023

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"Engagement+Empowerment+Equity=Diversity & Inclusion" conference Wednesday morning, Jan. 25, 2023, at Guam Community College in Mangilao. Norman M. Taruc/The Guam Daily Post

WELCOMING REMARKS: Brothers John, left, and James Cruickshank make welcoming remarks during the

GCC administrators said the "Engagement+Empo

werment+Equity=Di versity & Inclusion" conference was part of an effort to promote equality through discussion.

Guam Community College on Wednesday hosted a panel of influential

professionals in the community who shared their views and experiences on being LGBTQ on island. GCC administrators said the

"Engagement+Empowerment+Equity=Diversity & Inclusion" conference

was part of an effort to promote equality through discussion. "People are not mean or discriminate or treat you badly because of who

you are - they do it because of who they are," said Samuel Betances,

internationally renowned author and speaker. "It is the meaning they

place on sexuality. There isn't one person in our island who claims to be straight that does not have somebody in their family network who is gay, transgender, lesbian, gay - part of the LGBTQ community." To understand, respect and celebrate one another is the goal, said Betances, adding, "If not, respectfully tolerate people who are (LGBTQ)."

He said a lack of understanding of the LBGTQ community is what leads to hate and fear. "They don't understand ... that we are essential to this community. There

are many more of us than they realize," said Betances. "And we want to be able to have a platform where people feel safe being who they are."

Others pointed to the large role that religion plays in shaping the

'Tensions in the society'

perspectives of many on the island. Lt. Gov. Josh Tenorio shared during the discussion how interpretations of

faith can pose problems for members of the LGBTQ community.

"One of the priests told me that it's fine to be gay, but you just can't have sex. You can't be in a sexual relationship. And now that I am in a committed relationship with a partner, living together, I am disqualified

of being a godfather in the (Catholic) Church," Tenorio said. "It's not for

me to impose a change in a belief system, in a religion. That's the whole

purpose of being in this country and having the freedom as an out gay

man with a partner." The lieutenant governor added that there are some LGBTQ youths in the community who are not accepted by their parents; some who are without a home; some, because of who they are, who have difficulty getting a job that will provide health insurance; and some who, in their despair, choose to attempt suicide.

aware of, because it is a sign of unfinished business or unsettled tensions in the society," Tenorio said. "We need to make our island into an island of thriving. We shouldn't be satisfied with people just surviving, the goal should always be thriving,"

said Tenorio. "The way I feel we have to thrive is to understand more

"One of the highest suicide rates on our island are LGBTQ youth. I hope

that you know another group with a high high rate of suicide are young

Chuukese males. These are situations on our island that we have to be

He pointed to a youth summit that was held last year, comprising students from all over Guam. He said the youths saw a need for more diversity and understanding in their schools, and wanted to change things for the better.

"They want to see more cultural diversity programs in the schools. ...

They want more behavioral health programs in their schools. They want

to know how to deal with suicide. They want to understand how to address substance abuse," Tenorio said. "As an LGBT leader, I always feel my responsibility is to show parents, especially, that their kids can aspire to do whatever they want, and they

shouldn't see their way of life, how they were born, as to be a deterrent of

Timmy Dela Cruz, with Cooperative Extension & Outreach at the University of Guam, shared how the dynamics of "what a boy should be"

shaped his experience.

Acceptance and support

what they are going to be."

about each other."

"Public education requires that you participate in sports," said Dela Cruz. "It was such a struggle. ... I missed so many days of school because I was

of having to be in a sports team and couldn't live up to the definition of what a boy should be." Dela Cruz said, when he started attending GCC, he was finally able to be himself. He said he felt he was lucky to find a place where he was accepted and supported.

afraid to be me. I was afraid of walking into the locker room. I was afraid

"I wanted to come here because there was no sports. ... When you're feminine, (male) sports kind of exaggerates those features and it makes you a target," said Dela Cruz. "It allowed me to really live comfortably with who I was."

overcoming trauma and challenges is a common thread.

'Stronger together'

"It's about who your child identifies as," said Hufana. "If you don't uplift your children, in any avenue that they have, they're never going to want to succeed."

Trinity-Naima Dominique Hufana, who is openly transgender, said

The conference's keynote speaker, John Cruickshank, a retired National Science Foundation representative, said resiliency is the key to overcoming obstacles.

"Never underestimate the powers of networks and collaborations,"

an island. ... You're going to be stronger together than if you lived and worked in isolation." **MORE LOCAL NEWS** 1

Cruickshank said. "Although you live on an island, no one and no being is

3

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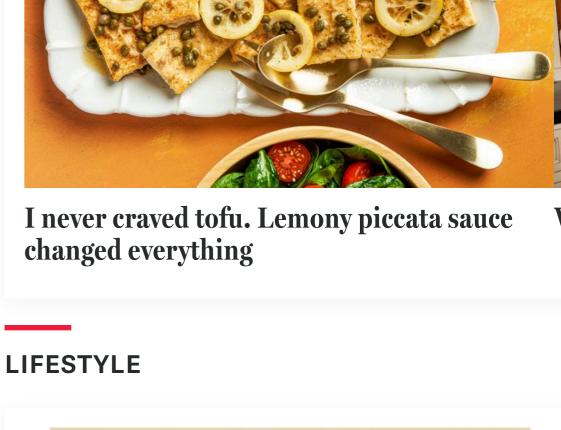
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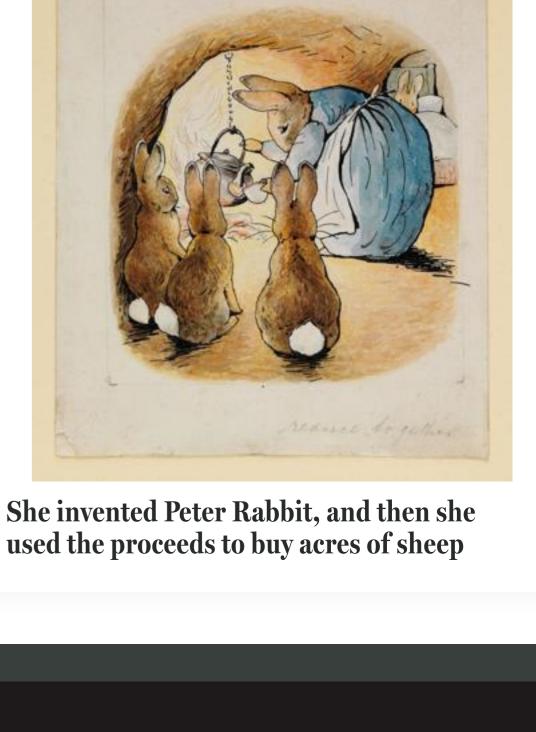
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