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APRIL DAWN FRIGES

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***Diversity Statement***

My understanding of what it takes to be an ally for marginalized groups began with awareness. I observed the lack of female voices in *History of Photography* lectures while in undergraduate school and I perpetually witnessed the male gaze in what is still a very male-dominated discourse. Years in the industry, selling cameras and working in commercial studios heightened my understanding of discrimination within the photography field. Even in a progressive city like Los Angeles, customers often looked over my shoulder onto the sales floor in search of someone male, who could teach them how to use a camera. I later lost my job in a commercial photography studio because I refused unwarranted advances of a manager. It can be demoralizing to question whether your position as a photographer is earned because of your skill, or because of your sex. I convey to students our industry's misogynistic and discriminatory past, and help prepare them in outlining boundaries and raising steadfast awareness in pushing toward a more disparate future. Empowerment education shows students how artists can ask questions visually, how works of art can explore difficult topics and create important critiques. Artists and art can prompt audiences to think critically about topics including loss, representation, the body, identity, injustice—even thought itself. And so it is in these moments of forlorn that I am surprised by the lack of diversity in photography, where marginalized histories still struggle to coexist.

My values in empowerment education can be summed up from 2013-2014, my first year teaching at Point Park University; a senior, Joseph Smith was enrolled in my advanced Senior Thesis I + II courses. As a Black student living on the autism spectrum, I observed striking amounts of unrecognized talent, and he credits me during this critical year we had together in a [2020 article he wrote, featured in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette](#)<sup>1</sup>:

“I transitioned to Point Park University, where I became comfortable with my autism. It was there that April Friges, my photography professor, encouraged me to do my senior project based on my life on the spectrum. It was called *The Spectrum Project* and really opened doors to me being comfortable with myself and not letting the negativity of the world bring me down.”

I teach to advance human creativity, and it is through critical thinking that creativity can be achieved in its highest form. And while Joey credits me, I credit my brother, Scott, who helped me understand the struggles of living with a severe mental health condition and just how easily a person can be completely misunderstood.

Fluid updates in language and training around diversity and inclusion are a regular part of being an educator within higher education and are the foundation of liberal arts education. This involves rejecting problematic rhetoric and implementing safe words; and to not convey this as burdensome, but to endorse as a responsibility to empower our students as a greater cohort. I quickly take notice of preferred names and gender pronouns, but I admit I still often struggle. However, I won't let myself move forward in my sentence until I correct myself, and I always correct myself professionally and respectfully.

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<sup>1</sup> Joseph Smith was featured in a series called “ADA at 30: Accessibility in Pittsburgh,” on July 20, 2020 and submitted a first-person essay for this feature.

Myself and my colleagues collectively emphasize that our BFA Photography program at Point Park University is dedicated to cultivating spaces where student artists can create works of art free of censorship, ridicule and fear. I support our students and their endeavors to produce content that is both intellectually challenging as well as culturally urgent and ensure anyone entering our department understand that they are entering dedicated safe spaces, where students are allowed to work with difficult subject matter under the guidance of faculty and peer mentorship. As people navigate our photo areas I require that they maintain a high level of professionalism and understand that not all works of art are designed to depict visual beauty.

I consider myself an Ally. This does not solely mean bearing a progressive pride flag on my door; it means continuously advocating, supporting and participating in change. Within my current tenure at Point Park, I volunteered to be a part of the Diversity + Inclusion task force. It was clear that racial disparities caused by the pandemic would hurt our students that needed additional support. As a direct response to our task force effort, the university now has an Assistant Director of Diversity to lead our new Center for Inclusive Excellence department.

The *Pittsburgh Promise* has helped a range of first generation university students from public schools enter our program. Many students within our program also come from rural PA with limited means. As an advisor and mentor, I feel responsible for the success of our students, even with our department's limited means. My department regularly assists students with the cost of photography materials. Discrimination begins with less, while others have access to more. As a result, on all my syllabi, and in all my advisement meetings, I remind students that supplies are available to those who are struggling financially. I cannot change the cost of photography in our industry, but my students learn to be resourceful within my classroom. I specifically teach wet mount scanning because it's a fantastic way to convert analog film and I am continuously offering methods to reduce costs for our students after graduation with professional results. It's not realistic to think that students will have access to 15k scanners after completing their degrees. Students with limited resources can and do often base their projects and ideas on the reality of the resources they can afford, and they cannot risk mistakes. If they cannot obtain larger paper, they will not print large. To empower students of lower socioeconomic backgrounds, I make it my responsibility to ensure they can make the work necessary to be a photographer, and this sentiment goes beyond cameras and supplies.

While I believe they can be an indicator of talent, I do not fully believe the portfolio review process is an adequate indicator of whether aspiring students will succeed in an undergraduate art program. Many students from previous educational institutions often do not have access to specialized arts programs, and the lack of accessibility may discourage a lot of talented and capable students from applying. Through my experience in teaching and coordinating, I believe that university-level arts education should be the core institution in which professional portfolios are created and graduate degrees programs are where they are typically concentrated. With the cost of a portfolio disqualifying potential students, I've concluded that high-achieving undergraduate applications often, but not always, signifies access, knowledge and means, rather than an indication of future success. While portfolio reviews can be a great form of marketing via high school NASAD events, being an Ally means allocating resources for the local community to be a part of university programming. I want to create a bridge between communities that do not currently exist. Taking stock of the diversity makeup of the student body and ensuring that diversity and inclusion issues are a priority for my photography program has, in turn, become the most rewarding experience of being a mentor.