

Hello, I'm Kristen Abell, co-founder and executive director of The Committed Project. The Committed Project is an organization created to help share the stories of professionals in higher education experiencing mental illness. By doing this, we hope to educate our fellow professionals about mental illness, increase support for those of us with mental illness, and stomp out the stigma associated with it. Today I'm talking with Sylvester Gaskin - I should have asked, did I pronounce that correctly?

Sylvester: Yeah, it's all good.

Kristen: Okay, so Sylvester, can you start by telling us a little bit about your career journey and your current role in higher ed?

Sylvester: Okay, career journey is kind of a little unique. I started off as an engineering student and I worked in, uh, residence halls at Iowa State. And so, you know, I was working in a learning community and I - the economy was kind of bad at the time for - for - for engineers, and so I decided to go to grad school. I got some - some advice to, you know, get a master's in higher ed, and you'll make a lot of money. And, you know I'm -

Kristen: (laughs)

Sylvester: Yeah - exactly.

Kristen: I don't know who gave you that advice, but...

Sylvester: No I - I actually had words with him later on in my career. I was like, "You gave me some pretty bad advice." He goes, "No, I told you you make money when you get to my level - not yours." I'm like, all right, cool, I see how it is. So I did master's work at Iowa State, and then my first job was at a small private school in Minnesota. And I was there for a couple years, and it - it wasn't the best of experiences, and I actually left - I left higher ed. I actually moved to California - moved to the Bay Area. I was with, uh, moved out with my partner - who's now my wife. Out there I was in K-12, you know, so I did teaching there. And then after awhile, I decided to go back into higher ed. And the only job that I could get was at Iowa State. And so I actually went - I moved from San Francisco to - to Ames, Iowa, which was a - yeah, yeah definitely. I was - I was teaching, I was working at

an elementary school in deep east Oakland, California, and probably in a span of like three days, I go from, you know, deep east to Ames, Iowa, which is like – fundamentally everything is different, you know. Idyllic, yeah, and that really – that was a major mind meld for me. Like that – that set off tremendous amounts of anxiety, but I was – I was there for a couple years, and then I'm from –

Kristen: Okay I'm just going to stop you for a second – when were you at Iowa State?

Sylvester: When was I there? I was a student there from '99 to 2006, and then I worked there from 2012 to 2014.

Kristen: Sorry, my husband worked at Iowa State for a year...

Sylvester: Okay.

Kristen: ...and I'm trying to think of when that was. Because I was living there, of course – I lived there for half the year, and then, I couldn't – the time that I was there, they were downsizing...

Sylvester: Okay.

Kristen: ...in a lot of departments, and so I couldn't get a job on campus to save my life. Because they kept giving it to all the people they just laid off in a different department. And so we ended up moving back down here, where I could find a job. But I think our times or paths might have crossed.

Sylvester: Yeah, it's weird, you know. Everybody says this is kind of a small field; I say it's a small world, where I had a colleague here who went to Iowa State – probably, he was probably in the master's cohort after me, and I'm like, I had no idea, and now we work like 20 feet away from each other. Like it's kind of weird like that, so...

Kristen: We were in like, Franklin Hall? Maybe?

Sylvester: Franklin Hall? I don't – I don't remember the buildings.

Kristen: Maybe – I just remember that he had some engineering students who were – that tried to convince him that they could build a hot tub in their second story – in their second story suite.

Sylvester: Yeah, that sounds like engineering students, yeah.

Kristen: Yeah, yeah, and he was like, yeah, you guys didn't account for the weight of the water, so no. Sorry to interject, but I was pretty sure we were there somewhere around there.

Sylvester: So I left Iowa State, I moved back to Baltimore. I worked at a university just north of Baltimore City, and I was there for probably three years, and I was working on my doctorate. I finished my doctorate June of last year, and then I actually transitioned to kind of like a mid-level management position here - I'm at the University of Arizona – so I've only been here probably about seven or eight months. And right now I'm an assistant dean of students, so I'm in charge of student government and student activities. So that's where I'm at.

Kristen: Alright, thank you.

Sylvester: It's been – it's been kind-of throughout. It probably manifested around age 12 when my folks split. And I think, me being the oldest son, I probably – yeah I had internalized that as it was my fault, that it was – it was, you know, it was me that caused that. And uh, it kind of manifested it kind-of festered for a while. It did – it kind of flared up in high school a little bit, it flared up in my undergraduate in college, but I never saw anybody. I think it was just either I didn't know or I was too prideful or nobody would believe me, but it wasn't until probably midway through my second year of my master's program I actually went to a clinician. And I was diagnosed with at that time a severe form of clinical depression. And I went on some medication, and I was in the middle of a job search, too. So it was just like everything cascaded at once.

Kristen:

Sylvester: Yeah, it's just like it never – it never comes at a convenient time. It's like, “Oh, you have a lot going on? Well, here I am.” And so yeah, I – I struggled with it through my first professional job. I just – it wasn't a healthy environment

for me to be I guess as successful as I wanted to be. And when I moved to California I was in a – I was in a pretty much a better place, and I was actually able to talk to a doctor and kind-of get off medication. And so I had a few years where I was fine, but the anxiety kind-of came back when I was working in Oakland. And you know, I'm working in – I'm working in K-12 schools in – in some pretty – in some pretty tough environments with students who were going through some pretty tough situations. Yeah, it just – it just kind-of wore – it kind-of wore on me. So like the jump back to higher ed I thought would be good, you know, not just mentally but professionally. And it was good professionally, but it was a switch to moving to Ames that, you know – I – I – I remember like, my last day in a school in Oakland there was a big fight and having to kind-of sort all that out and paperwork and people, you know. Just it was just kind of a bad situation, and then three days later I'm – I'm in the middle of Iowa, and...

Kristen:

Sylvester: Yeah, yeah, and – and I do remember sitting at my desk, and it was like eerily quiet, and I thought – and I really honestly thought something was wrong. I was like, something is not right here, and it turned out what I really honestly thought is that... The intrusive thoughts came back – like they came back roaring. Like you don't – you – you don't belong here, you don't need to be in this environment, it's – this is too good for you. And, you know, a lot of paranoia set in. It was – it came back – roaring back. It was to the point where I would sit in my office every day, and if the door was open, people would walk past, and I knew that as soon as they walked past my door they were talking about me. You know, I knew it, like I was convinced of it. Like I'd go to staff meetings, and you know, I knew people were like you know, "Why'd we hired this guy from – from – from east Oakland, California?" You know, "Even though he's an alum, like why – why is he here?" And you know, so I actually went back to a clinician, and he's – he's like, "Yeah, you've got a severe form of anxiety – a generalized anxiety disorder. And I said you know, the depression doesn't kick back in, but the anxiety man, it's like through the roof. And that's kind of something I've been struggling with, um, until now. And – and the one thing that's helped me managed it was I actually had a supervisor at ISU who had kind of been through something pretty similar. And she gave me some – she gave me some like wonderful advice. Because I – I went in and I talked to her, and I thought I was gonna be fired. Yeah, I was that paranoid. And she's like, "First off, that's not gonna happen. And second off –" she gave me

this great piece of wisdom - she's like, "You know, where you were from, like imagine when you go to like a bar, and you – there's like a bunch of TVs there, like – like when you go there, every TV's red. Like it's red, it's blaring, it's – it's you know, no good, no good, no good. Now you're in an environment where every TV is green. But you see that one TV that shows up red, and now your mind is saying everything is red, everything is bad. You know, everything is like not what it should be." And she's like, "I had to kind-of work through that, too." And – and that – that really helped me you know kind of work through – work through things. And I remember that – I think about that even now to this day. When – when I go to meetings with higher-ups, and I think that every TV is red, I have to remind myself that it's – it's not. It's just my interpretation of what I think is gonna happen. And that's been incredibly beneficial for me as I kind of work through you know, a new job, a new environment, you know, a higher position and you know, still kind of struggling with mental illness. And- and you know, being a man of color, too – I mean that's a whole other layer of, you know, expectations on top of it, so.

Kristen:

Sylvester: Yeah, I think about that – I think about it a lot and and I do remember when she told me that I remember walking back to my car and like campus was quiet you know the minute I would say campus it's beautiful there's trees there's birds you know you know you'll hear the the Campanile and it's just very ideal it wasn't like the elementary school in Oakland that I was I was at and it took me it took me a while to realize it's like this this is the environment that I'm in and and what I'm like what I'm sensing like everything I'm seeing is normal for this environment and that's something that really helped me and I had a really good therapist who I talked a lot about talked a lot about with he was great it helped me out he's like this is Ames Iowa like it's you know the environment and that was like okay like I've been here before you know so yeah it was a hell of an adjustment yeah I think I'm think I'm incredibly beneficial to have had that experience because I know some folks who haven't and I think I think I've incredibly I've lucked out incredibly with it uh I think it was more internal I think its internal because I just didn't know what was going on and I think another part of its cultural and and I've talked with with other amount of color about this is that you you know you have moments where you have like self-doubt and you have anxious moments and you know it might it was my purpose in life stuff like

that like that that's fine but I think for me it goes back to the old adage of you know your ancestors have been through far worse and have done far more so like you know there's no reason to be like down you know and and I got that you know even got that from from like older like advisors and staff and many of them were men of color her like you know yeah this is tough but think of what our families have been through you know I was like okay well okay well I'd yeah I'm the only black dude in a Florida person class you know my granddaddy went through Jim Crow South like this is nothing but I think that over time that begins to wear on you because now there's like this expectation of was an expectation that you somehow there's like this expectation that because everybody else has as like overcome that you have to do it as well but the one thing that is not explained to you is that the environment has changed and then as people we have changed to the environment so yeah my granddaddy you know my name is we're gonna grew up with Florida in in during Jim Crow and my dad was one of what that was in the first classes desegregated high school 70s you know me I'm I'm going to college on a scholarship like that's you know Wow while I have achieved that those pressures are still there and you know I talk with other other men of color who say like yeah like week that was kind of the standard line that we got you know as kids was you know you know your family done done something so you need to you know buck up and it's okay and so I think part of that was in my head too was you know if granted he could do and dad could do it I can do it but I didn't understand that that it's at a certain point your mind is I don't say your minds gonna break down but your mind is not going to operate like at its maximum and it wasn't until you know grad school that I realized that my mind was breaking down like I just I couldn't focus I couldn't do anything I had vivid images of my funeral and I'm like I think for me once I experienced that I was like that's not like how the brain supposed to operate no this is normal like I know people don't like me but now I'm sitting here thinking that what are we gonna save my funeral and I'm like 22 like I just didn't didn't enjoy with me and so that's when I finally went but I think through you know through undergraduate I knew to go to the doctor if I was physically sick I didn't know that I go if I was not you know performing mentally you know at at my peak or if I was having issues I didn't know I could do that I mean that and part of it was you know like I'm almost first a college student I had no idea there's a health center so if I like broke my foot I know I can go there but if I'm having ideations I didn't know I can go somewhere no clue yeah mm-hm yeah yeah I yeah for me and for other folks that I knew it was it just at the point where it's like you know I just can't live with this I

I just can't yeah but well the one thing I will say is I am I am heartened to see younger professionals of color and in some of my students of color who openly say I go to therapy they're there they're there 17 18 like I go therapy ideal some stuff and professionals who are like I go to therapy because I need it and I do remember working with a student a student leader who was doing a lot she goes I've been to therapy for a while because I need it I'd that's that's where I get my I reclaim my soul and I wanted to break down a cry because I'm like I wish I had your your insight at your age when I was your age because I would I think my time in school would have been a thousand times better it had I just had it had I had that clarity of thought that you have right now I'll mean my college experience would have been infinitely better but it hardens me to see that there are you know students of color and people of color going to find therapists and certainly going to find therapists of color going out there way and networking is saying okay you need to go see this person right now that you know the down for the cause that that makes me like hopeful yeah it it is like damn I wish I had am wait you know it's cool I would there's no way I would have found that you know like but but I mean I think while they're there the structural barriers there I it is heartening to see folks acknowledging that they need the help and then going out of their way to find the resources that they need I mean it's it's hardening to see you know professionals on like on social media saying like this is what I need I think for me it was helpful to see just the small amount of professionals of color say I need help in order for me to come out and say okay like I I can you know this look there's a few of us who say like yeah that this is what I need in life I live with mental illness I struggle with it at times I thrive through it at others and I work in a field that can be open yet demanding it can be open to closed so I had to navigate all this stuff and it made me feel like okay I'm really not the only one that does kind of going through it yeah I I actually de positively one first because I thought about this and I talked to my wife about this is that I think having the anxiety it makes me double triple check my work and it makes sure that I know what I'm doing before I go in and and it can be a little bit of a bear to handle but now it's like I see like massive budgets and I can't I can't overspend like I will lose my job if I do that so the anxious mind is like okay you know you know what you need to spend you know how to spend it on you know prepare for this be prepared for that it it it actually helped I think to some extent it helps me be not somewhat more cautious but aware of the pitfalls that may come down the road and so when I speak to higher administration I feel like I'm more prepared yeah and if and if something comes up like out of the blue there's like there's no way you

could prepare for that like there's just no way and then I have to train my mind to be like hey listen you can't prepare for every single eventualities well you can prepare for what you can prepare for but I think the anxious mind helps me prepare for a whole lot more than I think anybody else would have yeah I mean it part of it part of it was poor grips with my engineering training like you know you have a back-up plan for a back-up plan for Abeka plan but they ain't says maybe they have three more backup plans for everything else you know like you just need to have it done but I think negatively it part of it is that you know it does impact relationships I mean it definitely did probably my first couple years in the field it definitely did in grad school because I didn't I guess I read the mystery I miss it makes me a mystery to the room it definitely makes me think you know that you know what what isn't real Israel and it makes me question interactions and more it manifests on interactions with people because this is a people profession you know we talked about that and I'm naturally an introvert so I don't like to meet people like I just like I'll meet a few folks like okay I'm fine and I'm done you know but now it's like like conferences are are just yeah I'm not a big fan of them and and I actually I think I think my first NASPA was 2014 and I had a panic attack like right in the middle of the lobby you know and and I told myself for an ass for 2018 because I hadn't hadn't been back since like I said I know I know what I need to do now so you know there are functions where I can go I can I can show face and I can leave and as much as I want to stay just you know I'm just not in the right head space to do it and I don't want those intrusive thoughts to come back I was at another conference in 2016 where you know it was it was like extroverts paradise and I actually left you know I was in the middle of dinner and I got up and I walked out and I didn't come back and and the anxiety was like everybody's gonna know that she left but honestly nobody knew that was gone and so now the anxious mind was like well nobody recognizes you so like yeah like damn like man I can't do I can't do nothing right so it that's all manifests itself but I mean I was happy to say that NASPA in Philly you know I was able to manage it fairly well I was able to meet with friends and colleagues and you know find a community of like-minded folks who have similar experiences to me that were you know Dave you know they openly talked I thought was therapy too and I was like okay like yeah like okay I'm with the right crew there's 8,000 people here but these 10 are the ones I need to be around so I mean it the anxiety really the other the manifesto smells like right before meetings it's a special if I know they're gonna be some difficult conversations I'm nervous but then once I get in there I know what to say but then the anxiety comes in of you don't want to be too



overbearing you don't we be that angry black guy and you know that that I think my last position I don't was that that kind of manifests itself a lot but here I've actually had conversations with some folks you know some professionals of covers they're like hey listen if you you know there comes up that if it comes up that way it comes off that way I just got to get over that you know I took that but I think that's a pervasive thing within the field that it feels my anxiety to is you don't want that that label on you I think that's more of a scarlet letter than yeah I don't want to say that but I mean it's it to me it's like it's like a double burden yeah yeah yeah yeah I think for me it man it really managed to manifest itself after so I've had the conversation I had a conversation like probably a week and a half ago with some folks that I I was dreading and it wasn't amazing it had it had be had and yeah I let my opinions be known you know in a professional standard but I mean as soon as I left you know probably a half hour later I'm like oh man I really came off as you know I'm the angry brother in the room and at that point someone that someone was someone told me was well they probably had it coming and to me that that brought the anxiety down from a hundred to like negative five was like for some reason I needed a validation but then it gave me this one with clarity of it doesn't matter how I'm gonna be seen you know they're gonna be seat they're gonna see me how they got see me what matters is that I do my job and that's part of working through that those anxious moments is is it yeah some of the stuff is gonna be there and no matter what you do is never gonna go away like I could buy everybody lunch breakfast lunch in there for a week in that I say one thing and that automatically pops back up I have to be my I have to you know call my my head to know that that's gonna happen and then if it does happen to not belabor about it after the meeting to the point where I had I have to move forward and I think that's another negative of the anxiety is that I'll spend time ruminating about stuff like after the fact four days in it [Laughter] Hogman that's that's me to a tee I'll get home and talking my partner maybe like I should have said this I should have said that she's like dude it's over she's like come on if I could rewind time I'd go back into that meeting but I'd say this I'd say it this way but I I mean yeah I bet that's yeah that's me to a tee too [Laughter] ask a question that's deep well honestly I think that I think I think it's just a thought that I wish I'd had this when I was a younger professional I I wish that when I was at my first job there was there was a like a YouTube video or another blog somewhere where there was a young professional color you know in higher ed talking about some of some of the mental health challenges they face I wish I'd had that I really do and so part of me is thinking you know there's probably a

someone like me out there who is going through the mess is probably dealing with some you know not wonderful colleagues and a not great place and it's questioned whether they want to exist on this earth and maybe here in this will will tell them that there is purpose that there is there's a reason to keep to keep living because you know there were times probably my there were times my first job worse like you know I nobody cares whether or those who die whether whether I live or die like nobody cares like those places would keep going like they're clean on my office looking to hire somebody within two weeks and they're just gonna keep them so it doesn't matter but ultimately it it had to matter to me and I did I yeah it it was much harder for me to come to that realization because I didn't think I had any help you know I mean no doubt that you know I don't if somebody gets something out of this and I'm then I've done more I've done I feel like I've done something helpful even if it's just one person honestly Thanks only one just one thing okay all right one more thing you know I'll tell you it is for four-eyed sailors for men of color because that that's a context that come from I really I think about that cuz this one cuz I give you like a thousand I give you a thesis right now I would honestly say when you listen to our stories you will see that this that the stereotype is not always true but it requires you to listen and we are not good at that the one thing I'll share is I will I will readily admit that when when I was kind of going through you know rough times and undergraduate and in my first job I didn't have a lot of I had no community I have a lot of friends you know I mean I just kind of just went through went through things so I think for me now is that I have I have a small Network like I said I'm an introvert I don't I don't need many friends like give me four and I'm happy for maybe it's like two too many I don't know but what I'll say is you know find the people that like you for you and and they really are genuinely invested in you and I and that we do a we do a camp here right before school begins and I asked me to speak and I said that and I said and I actually I actually talked about my anxiety disorder with with all these freshmen so I'm like here here's dr. Gaskin like this big wig guy hey listen I got another illness and I struggled yesterday like damn like I don't wanna get out of bed yesterday like it's real and and I and I I told them I said you know you'll fight you'll want to find the group of people who have your best interest in mind and they want you to succeed no matter what like they they just like you because you're awesome and they're gonna be there for you no matter what you know that's true friendship that's true community and I had I had several students come to me and I do remember a couple of them were crying and they're like I'm afraid I'm not gonna find it and I said I said at a bare minimum you got me you got me

I'm in your corner I don't even know you but I'm in your corner and I think that I think the one thing I've experienced as professional color is is you know we can be in each other's corner like we just we just have to because there's not many of us in the field you know our ranks are growing but I mean there's still we still have issues with within our own little micro society within America so you know we have to be in each other's corner no matter what and for for me I think telling that student that you know was was like earth-shattering to them and I said I'm not doing it I'm not doing it because it's my job doing it because it's you and I have no idea where I'm going with this but yeah I think for me that's that's been the hardest part because like I said my first job I I had no community like it really did there are people who like I work with they're like oh yeah that's cool like I'm a see I'm a see you for drinks afterwards stuff like that but you know I went home alone you know to my to my pretty empty apartment and I had I didn't go out I didn't do anything I I just sat it just sat and ruminated but as I progressed I I developed more relationships that I was close with and I developed that community to the point where I I no longer fear being alone because I know that I can reach out to someone and I think that's I think it's a thing that any professional needs to know is is that they they can do that I think social medias been a wonderful thing and helping folks do that I mean this is how I connect it with with with you and other folks I mean that's that that's dope like I said I wish I'd had this at my first job I think I think like oh yeah yeah I think it's really helped me as I advanced in the career to to develop those relationships to the point where I actually actually cherished meeting people at NASA that that was an amazing thing my first my first conference you know being on meds and you know not wanting to be around anybody was was awful cuz I didn't know anybody but but now it's you know I I have a network that I could hit up or like yeah let's let's let's let's do much let's get together let's let's shoot the mess so I think that that's yeah I think that's the one thing for me is that community peace and yeah [Laughter] yeah yeah I for me one thing a 20 another thing I learned being particularly you know with with my partner is that we we've learned each other's tics you know in that and that's really helped me particularly you know making the move back to Iowa was like she noticed she so you're off like oh yeah you know you need to do something she was actually the impetus to you know when I come home only I really think people are talking to me she's like that's not you because normally you don't care you know you don't care people don't like you and I'm like I'm really stressing about it and so she noticed like the little ticks they're in and she won't go as far as I call it talking for me but she'll be like listen

like if if you know she'll she'll stick up for me she because she's looking out for me and I and I like your partner's like hey listen you're not you know normal here because to me that way I the way I hear it is is like you know I care for you that much that that you're not you know you're not this way and something right so I need you to be this way you know and for me my my my spouse does the same thing to she knows this when I'm anxious she knows this when I pace and when I like my leg shakes and and she doesn't a little thing like put her hand on my Fuhrer hand on my shoulder like dude you're cool you know and I think that you know I didn't I didn't have that you know early enough but she is my community and it means a lot so yeah likewise either okay yeah okay I'm still recording