UCL Remarkable Stories

Episode 3 – Nick and the LGBTQ+ community

Transcript

**Mitesh Vagadia** 00:04

We are UCL. And these are our remarkable stories. Hi, I'm Mitesh Vagadia, I work in the UCL Student Support and Wellbeing team. In each episode I'll be in conversation with a UCL guest as they share with us their remarkable stories, experiences and life lessons. In today's episode I'll be talking to UCL alumni Nick Coveney about his experience growing up as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, and how this impacted his education and life as a young adult. When did you first know you were part of the LGBTQ+ community?

**Nick Coveney** 00:55

Um, I think for me, it was it was both a gradual thing and an instant thing, so there are two sort of things where, you know, growing up, I always felt slightly out of the loop of what, laddie lads and blokey boys were into. I never liked football, I didn't really get into any of that. And I have an older brother, who I'm very close to, he was much more sort of like your typical lad growing up. So he was into, you know, trucks and cars and rugby and football, and worldwide wrestling. And I was far more into, you know, computer games and comics and dragons in all sorts of sorts of imaginative things. So as a sensitive child, I believe is the euphemism commonly used. But also I had a very sort of instant moment where, just after my father passed away, I joined my fifth primary school. And I was in the position of having to choose who to sit next to in class. I would have been age of 10 at the time, and I wasn't conscious of it right then, but I knew who I needed to sit next to and it was another boy in my class who I ended up developing the most enormous crush on a few years later. So I think that was probably the moment when I really knew, even though I didn't have a name for it, and I didn't really know what it meant. I just knew I wanted to be around that person.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 02:25

Okay. You said fifth school.

**Nick Coveney** 02:28

Yeah.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 02:29

Wow.

**Nick Coveney** 02:30

Yes, I went to eight schools in total. I went to five primary schools, two secondary schools, and then a six form college. And they were kind of peppered all over the country. So certainly not exotic enough to be going to different countries, but different counties of the UK.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 02:46

And was this because of your family structure in terms of your parents working or what was a reason behind this.

**Nick Coveney** 02:53

So it was a mixture of different circumstances, to be honest with you. Sadly, as I referenced earlier on, my father passed away when I was 10, so that had an impact. And my mother, who was very brilliant in her career, worked in the kind of field where the only sort of progression opportunities available to her were ones which were split out by local authority. So she worked in tertiary education. And in order for her to sort of really progress her career, Sally that involve moving, not just sort of locally, but moving cross county in order to sort of follow the opportunities. Because there would have been a conflict of interest if you sort of tried to do the same thing in the same local authority area. So that's why we're sort of like middle class nomads.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 03:41

Okay. You said that you went to this school and so what age were you at this at this time?

**Nick Coveney** 03:48

So I would have been, this would have been 1997 and I would have been 10

**Mitesh Vagadia** 03:53

Wow, so as young as 10

**Nick Coveney** 03:54

Yeah. Yeah. For me. I mean, I think there've been signs I was already into things like you know, He-man and Thundercats in a big way and looking back now as a man in my 30s I think that the artists were having a lot of fun with some of the, you know, imagery. But, you know, I wasn't sort of conscious of it. And, you know, when I was 10, all I really knew was that I really wanted to spend time with this other boy in my class, and then, you know, over the years, they kind of developed into different feelings.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 04:26

And those feelings you ever share them with anyone?

**Nick Coveney** 04:29

No, actually not at the time. And sadly, the next thing that happened really was that we moved again to another county, so that that was never sort of romantically explored.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 04:40

Okay. So when was the first time you actually told another person?

**Nick Coveney** 04:44

Um, so the first person I sort of consciously came out to is actually my older brother. And I would have been about 15 and a half, so I guess this would have been around 2001. And I was very fortunate he was incredibly supportive. The one thing we did agree on was that I had to tell my mum because my mom and I have always been incredibly close. And I think he felt a little bit awkward that he'd had the dubious honour of being the first person in the family that I told, so you wanted to kind of rebalance that. But both here my mum were really supportive, which is great.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 05:22

In terms of your you mentioned that your brother was always into, like, the sporting stuff, the rugby and all that sort of stuff was was there ever a moment where you thought I don't want to tell him because of what he might think of me?

**Nick Coveney** 05:38

No, I think I was incredibly fortunate. I picked up on some vibes in my family. That meant that I had a few internalised fears about coming out, which we might touch on later on. But I kind of sense that my brothers and my mom loved me and I thought that they would have to continue to do so. I didn't really think that my sexuality would, you know, be an issue with that, but it was, you know, it was a pressuring scenario. And it was one of those things where I definitely, you know, had girlfriends at secondary school who I was only interested platonically in as friends who I should not have dated, but I felt very much sort of under the expectation that I had to have those relationships and I had to be seen to be, you know, one of the lads. So it was quite liberating, actually, to end up being happier in myself and coming out to my family when I was, you know, relatively young at the age of 15. Because that enabled me to really, you know, start owning my identity and my relationships properly and kind of break away from that peer pressure.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 06:53

Was it like an instant weight off your shoulder when you actually told your brother for the first time when you told your Mom?

**Nick Coveney** 06:58

Yes. Once the tears are dried up, yeah, it's one of those things. I think for some people, it's an incredibly unique and personal thing. And you know, you always remember the day you first came out, coming out is a kind of continual process because it's something that you know, you you have to do in your day to day life all the time. So, whenever I meet a new person at work, whenever I'm in a new social scenario, usually it's not an issue. And I'm very fortunate I work in a, you know, progressive, creative industry where most people expect a certain amount of liberal values. But you do kind of have to make a conscious decision in life, whether or not you're going to tell someone whether or not they're going to make an assumption. But telling my, my older brother and my mom was very liberating for me, because once you know, they'd said their piece and had a while to sort of wrap their heads around it. It was very positive in terms of enabling us to be honest with each other.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 08:00

You said internal fears?

**Nick Coveney** 08:02

Yes.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 08:02

What did you mean by that?

**Nick Coveney** 08:04

Um, so, you know, as I referenced earlier on, I went to a variety of schools, um, a few of those primary schools were religious. And so I definitely had a bit of fire and brimstone in my education about you know, sexuality being sinful. And one of them was a Roman Catholic primary school. So it's the unforgivable sin. Worse than murdering people somehow. Because you can say sorry for murdering people in Catholic faith, but you can't for homosexuality.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 08:36

Was there anyone you felt worried or scared about telling at that age.

**Nick Coveney** 08:43

So, there are a couple of different things. Um, me personally, I was kind of advised by my family to maybe not broadcast it at school, which we'll come back to. The other thing was that I was sort of asked very respectfully not to mention it to my maternal grandparents for reasons that became very poignant to me later on, I discovered that I actually had a great uncle who was gay. And very sadly, those were less liberal, progressive times, and he was convicted, and actually ended up committing suicide. So that was obviously a very emotional thing for my family, and still remains very sort of poignant to me personally. It makes me very conscious of the fact that, you know, I'm very lucky and fortunate to be living, now. Even though we don't live in a utopia. We have progressed as a society. And I'm very glad to be alive now where I can be open and authentic and then my my own life, rather than in the 1950s.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 09:59

You said you're going to we're going to come back to you went to school...

**Nick Coveney** 10:03

Yeah my family initially actually advised that owing to the context of me being new at the school, and having only been there for, say, seven months to not come out to my best friends. Because although I felt very close to those people, although I thought that we were close, I'd only known them for a relatively short window of time. Of course being a teenager I knew better. So I told my best friends at school and asked him to keep it a secret because this would have been 2001. And I knew that kids got bullied for being gay, even though no one in my school was openly gay. It was something that you'd hear homophobic insults all the time. I knew enough to know that it wouldn't go down well, so I asked them to keep it to themselves. And one of them actually told her boyfriend, who at a sort of school party decided it would be funny to get drunk and tell everybody. So I then had the situation where suddenly being relatively unknown other than to a small group of the people I became friends with. I was notorious in my school, as batty boy and asked, you know, you're gay then. So I got outvoted, which basically means, rather than choosing to come out, people decided to broadcast my sexuality without my consent at my secondary school, and after being outed, rather than denying it, I decided to try and kind of own it. So that was, for me, a sort of big turning point.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 11:49

Wow. Was that frustrating that it was someone else that outed you and not yourself?

**Nick Coveney** 11:57

Yeah, massively. It's an incredibly sort of personal thing. And even though I'd elected to tell that small, you know, trusted circle of friends, it felt like a huge betrayal. And it felt very scary and kind of odd to be thrust into a spotlight like that. And sort of forced into a position where you don't want to deny it because there's there's nothing wrong with it and it is who you are. But also it's a catch 22 because you know that by by saying, Yeah, okay. Your life is going to be different.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 12:36

Were you glad that it came out then now?

**Nick Coveney** 12:40

Ah, that's a tricky question to answer. After I got outed, I was bullied pretty ferociously. Um, and that was very difficult for me to deal with for a number of reasons. But I think with the benefit of hindsight, a lot of it wasn't even about my sexuality. You know, it was new to that school. Basically a pretty anonymous straw man with a target on my back, very easy for kids, the way kids are to sort of push their insecurities onto me, because none of them grew up with me, none of them really knew me. So it's kind of like a from their perspective a victimless crime. But I did get a lot of abuse, mainly, you know, verbal, just insults, some very off-colour, and a little bit of physical abuse. What was really challenging and difficult for me to reconcile with, though, was that, owing to the fact that Section 28 was still in force in the UK at the time, I actually received some very sort of low level microaggressions some more obvious aggressions, and some outright abuse from members of the faculty at my secondary school, because they were under the sort of warped perspective that Section 28 enabled them to be abusive towards me.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 14:01

But layman's term, what is section 28? For someone like me?

**Nick Coveney** 14:05

I thought you might ask. So I actually have some wording of the official background of Section 28. And they call authorities shall not intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality or promote the teaching in any maintained School of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 14:36

Okay.

**Nick Coveney** 14:37

So if you sort of unpick that "it shall not intentionally promote". So a lot of homophobic people read that as well, I can be as negative about it as I like because I'm not promoting it. And so it was used as a gateway for a lot of people to either cover up homophobic abuse or to in some instances commit homophobic abuse. Because, you know, they weren't making it look like a good thing.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 15:17

At school, the students particularly nasty, but was it just the students?

**Nick Coveney** 15:25

No, I mean, um, as well as the students, there were certain teachers, members of the faculty who were also abusive, so I won't name names. It was a long time ago, that I had a maths teacher who referred to me as it or her. And one of my PE teachers may or may not have been the author of the petition that was circulated that stated that other boys were uncomfortable with me changing in the same area as them for PE. Um, said teacher also observed football and rugby balls being thrown at me while I was getting changed for months, and did absolutely nothing to stop it. Other than to advise the students who were throwing these things at me, not to hit my face because it would leave a mark. But I was also very fortunate in that some of the teachers were much more supportive. I had a brilliant art teacher, an excellent English teacher, and a great science teacher and all three of them were great. And if I had any issues or instances of bullying, either in the corridors or between lessons in lessons, they were always very keen to sort of try and protect me. One of the weirdest things for me now, is that one of the people who at the time I felt was being most supportive with the benefit of hindsight, I think was maybe manipulating my behaviour a little bit. So I, I was fortunate in that my head teacher was sympathetic to my plight. They later actually outed themselves as an openly gay man and cited me as a point of inspiration, which was very flattering. But they also kind of encouraged me to not tell my mother or my family, about all of the behaviour happening at school because we wouldn't want to worry them would we. So, obviously, you know, as a 15 year old, I was quite susceptible to the sort of flattery that I could handle this on my own. But with the benefit of hindsight, I should never have been put in that position. I should have been encouraged to tell my family about what was happening so that they could support me as well as the school. It shouldn't have been a sort of either or. But I was able to sort of channel some of it positively. You know, I kind of fought back in my own way against some of the abuse that I received. And I worked with my school to sort of lobby the local council. And I helped set up and then run a gay youth group as well, which was called "GLYSSN"- gay lesbian youth social support network. And that was run by some brilliant people at the info shop in Hastings. I kind of volunteered to be this youth Chair of it for er a year and a bit? It was brilliant. We did sort of sex ed, put condoms on bananas. It was very innovative, watched, you know, queer cinema and ate pizza, it was great.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 18:41

Did anyone else come out as a result of you coming out?

**Nick Coveney** 18:45

Well, I wouldn't want to say that it was directly as a result, but um, after the abuse sort of got properly managed by the school and began to die down. A few of the people in my academic year did come out and in the school more widely. And what was really nice and refreshing to see actually, was that they didn't seem to sort of suffered the same abuse that I did, which was really positive actually. I was really relieved to sort of see them just being left alone and happy in themselves. I think by that point, the school had gotten whatever it was out of its system to a point. At my leavers event, I still had a sort of subtle dig or in the programme I was referenced as most likely to have a sex change, which shows a fundamental misunderstanding between being a gay man and being a trans person, but you know, it is what it is.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 19:44

The head teacher manipulated you in terms of not letting your family involve not getting them to be aware of what's happening at school. It sounds like you did this all yourself like it was pretty lonely at the time.

**Nick Coveney** 20:00

Yeah, it was, um, and I had that sort of fallout with some of those best friends in inverted commas, who I'd told initially because obviously, one of them had chosen to tell her boyfriend who broadcast it to everybody. Um, so I made better friends during the rest of my two years there. Um, but for me, it was a really rough time, I didn't enjoy being bullied. And I didn't, didn't even realise at the time that I was being manipulated into not telling my mom what was happening. You know, part of the context to that is that she would have been known as a senior figure to people at that school. So I think it was that they were concerned that if she had been aware of what was happening, there would have been some wider fallout, and there probably would have been, but that probably should have been as well. So it's a little bit circular. But you know, looking back now I wouldn't be who I am today, if I hadn't had those experiences. So I can't begrudge anything that happened too much. But it was tough at the time. And it was quite scary. But the worst thing that actually happened during that period, didn't even happen to me. I had this very odd experience where I told my friends, I was going to go to a gallery. And we'd all sort of said, we might go check out this exhibit that was running. I didn't fancy it in the end. By this point, I think I was about 16. And I had a boyfriend and we decided to do something else. And I got this string of text messages from my friends that are panicking, saying, Nick, are you okay, what what's happened? Can you call me and I was a bit bemused, but sort of got in touch with them. So yeah, I'm fine, guys. What's wrong? We heard you're in hospital. And it transpired that a group of guys who tried to beat me up outside PE after lesson because I've been annoying them by being there, had set their older brothers on to me. But they made the mistake and they basically got some other kid beaten up for looking like me. So that was a sort of double whammy because that kid had done absolutely nothing wrong other than being in the wrong place at the wrong time. But even if I'd been there, and I'd been beaten up, I wouldn't have done anything wrong other than existing. So yeah, that was probably the worst thing that happened.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 22:28

Was there any positives?

**Nick Coveney** 22:30

I mean, it's, it's kind of hard to pretend it was sunshine and roses at the time, but I became much more confident. I became much more articulate, and I wouldn't say witty but my retorts to the jibes got much, much better. I learned how to handle myself. I was fortunate in that having got two brothers and growing up with two brothers. We've had the odd occasion of a fight growing up as boys do so you know, when guys tried to beat me up, I think they often underestimated my physical abilities. So I was okay on that front. And I don't know. I mean, I think, for me, it was the beginning of my journey, in terms of being a gay man, and being an out member of the LGBT community. And it taught me a lot about, you know, identity, a sense of self and confidence, but also the importance of having good allies around you. And that, you know, whatever your fears might be, actually, being yourself is not a bad thing. I was certainly by the time I went to six form college, far more confident and far happier in myself for having had that period. So I don't have any regrets about what happened, really. What was hard was feeling like the ownership of what had happened, was taken away from me the moment someone outed me. And then I had that sort of intense bullying period for about a year and a half, where it was really popular to bully me, but just because it was, you know, easy pickings. I don't know how much of that was homophobic and how much of it was just the fact I was a new kid who also happened to be outed as gay. But, you know, a lot of it sort of dissipated after a while they moved on to other things, or once, the positive role models at my school, got involved into kind of proactively clamping down on it. And the head teacher did come out that kind of paid to a lot of the negativity. So I think overall, it was positive. I'm very proud of getting involved with "GLYSSN" and then latterly All Sorts in Brighton, which are the tea so the youth groups I was a part of. They did incredible work, and I was very proud to be a part of that. And also, to be completely honest, it you know, probably helped my life enormously having some proper formative, detailed, LGBT specific sex ed, because that isn't provided in school to this day properly. I know that generally sex education is a little bit wobbly, and varies wildly from school to school, particularly, I think in faith schools, which is a big issue, but it was certainly something that, you know, as a gay guy growing up, I had no idea about, you know, how at risk I was, or how to have safe sex before I got involved with those youth groups. So I'm very glad that they were there right at the start of my journey.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 25:45Did it get easier from going from school to six form, and then Uni?

**Nick Coveney** 25:51

Oh, definitely. Um, as soon as I got to six form college, there was like an instant inversion of power. So all of the kids who've been incredibly cool and popular at our high school kind of lost, the structure that they built around and their mystique was shot. Because it didn't really matter whether or not you're in the top set for PE, where you had the coolest boots or you know, the slickest kickers are whatever the trend was at the time, it was more about your abilities academically and what you were studying. And by that point, you know, friendship groups are self-selecting, it's not about geography. So that the sixth form college I went to had multiple schools feeding into it. So some of my best friends now to my oldest friends are from that six form college. And the kind of the people who had all the power and were bullying me lost their power are kind of laughed at had better things to do than to, you know, actively believe in myself, but um, they kind of ostracised themselves from the rest of the group. And I think that, you know, that must have been very hard for them losing all that power and control and also realising that they weren't actually the brightest bulb in the box. But you know, going to university was even more empowering. I did my bachelor's degree at Nottingham. And I generally found that, you know, being gay and being, you know, openly LGBTQ wasn't an issue in most scenarios. There were still a few environments where I kind of felt like there was something at play, and I'd always wanted to get into rowing, it was always a sport was kind of appealed to me. And what I discovered at the University of Nottingham was that I didn't feel comfortable trying to get involved with the university's Rowing Club at the time. I don't know how much of that was in my head. Much of it was, you know, the kind of Macho aura coming off the club, they didn't feel like a space where I could be my sort of authentic self, which by this point, I'd actually, you know, grown accustomed and felt kind of entitled to do. So I didn't get into rowing then latterly, about two and a bit years ago, I got involved with the London otters who were at London's LGBTQ inclusive Rowing Club. So we have over 140 members in our club, from all different backgrounds and of all different sexual orientations and ethnicities, and it's brilliant. And you know, that club has enabled me to learn to row but I didn't feel comfortable or confident doing that at university, which would have been a natural time for me to learn. Because I still felt that it wouldn't have been safe. I should have done that in every other environment that pretty much I felt empowered and looked after by my fellow students. So broadly, I felt pretty comfortable. It was just the odd experience where it still didn't feel right.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 29:01

Hmm. And from a university perspective, was there a lot of support at the time?

**Nick Coveney** 29:05

Um, I think there was support, maybe, there was a lot and I think that you had to sort of actively seek it. So I got involved with the LGBTQ society. I don't remember seeing any literature around the campus might have just been a notice board that I missed. Nottingham campus is pretty big. It's about 300 acres or something of parkland. So it might have been in a different Union Building. As it happened, I ended up getting involved with the raise and give society, University of Nottingham Karnival. And, you know, that was great, but again, I think there wasn't really a dedicated provision to LGBTQ people at the time. So my bachelor's degree would have been from 2005 to 2008. Um, and I think that you know, there were things in place there were certain places where you could go and get free condoms and free lube, etc, etc, etc. But I didn't feel like, um, we as a community were kind of actively looked after.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 30:11

Why do you think that was?

**Nick Coveney** 30:14

I'm not sure to be honest with you. Um, looking back at sort of a little bit glaring, I suppose it might have just been sort of seen as something where, you know, people would self select, and then if they needed the resources, they get involved with one of the societies or sort of do it themselves. But with the benefit of hindsight, that does seem a little bit odd. And certainly not as supportive as it could be particularly for people who might be struggling with their sexuality or questioning their sexuality. Coming to a British University for the first time from perhaps a country where being openly LGBTQ is not acceptable.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 30:54

What would benefit and what would be good to helping students?

**Nick Coveney** 30:58

Well, I think maybe some proactive presence at freshers fair and a nice visible section of a website. It's one of those things. Obviously, if you if you try and run an event, something I'm very conscious of as I'm, in my spare time, I'm co-chair of pride and publishing, which is a professional network for LGBTQ people working in the book industry with a volunteer network that we try and sort of signal boost LGBTQ fiction and the kind of issues that affect an LGBTQ+ workforce in book publishing. So we include literary agents, booksellers, and people who work for publishers. Um, one of the things we don't do is kind of outreach in terms of asking people, Hey, are you okay? You have to be more respectful than that, obviously. It's actually something where I've had people ask me if I can ask if someone is gay because they're curious. And I politely told them to "fuck off" it's none of their business. Um, you know, if someone is a bisexual, lesbian, or, or trans or somewhere on the spectrum of being LGBTQ+, it's their job to tell you, if they feel comfortable, and if they don't feel comfortable, then it's really none of your business. But, I think by having visible resources, and presence, and the kind of message that this is, okay, and this is supportive, and if this is something that you're worried about, there are, you know, support structures and resources that you can draw on is incredibly positive. So you know, those things matter, but you do kind of have to put out things out there and let people come to you. So, network now, Pride in Publishing has over 140 people on its mailing list, that they've all chosen to sign up, and they've all gotten in touch with us or gotten involved through the committee. And you know, we've got a website, that's not very good. Twitter and Facebook, not a lot, but it's enough. I think universities should just try and make sure that you know rather than hiding something away and expecting people to know that there is an LGBTQ+ society, make nice and visible for people as a resource, both physically and online. Because, you know, if someone is with a group of friends and they're in the closet, they might not have the confidence to go up to a stall, take a flyer, you know, they might actually prefer to, to just know that there are societies there and get in touch in their own time online when they've got anonymity and they feel like they can do that.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 33:42

Did you get involved when you at UCL in any sort of clubs or societies, so I think you're only here for a year is that right?

**Nick Coveney** 33:47

Yes. So I did my master's degree between 2009 and 2010. I was course rep for my master's programme along with one of my best friends. I again I joined the LGBTQ society, but I didn't have a formative role on the committee, I'm afraid. I got involved with the Society of Young Publishers and was very sort of focused on trying to get into the book industry. So for me at the time, having done a fair amount of sort of LGBTQ volunteering by that point, for a number of different charities, I kind of thought, I'm gonna just focus on my studies, and, you know, go to the social stuff so that I can make new friends and meet new people. But I was a little bit lame in terms of giving back while I was here. It was only for a year!

**Mitesh Vagadia** 34:34

When you give them back now?

**Nick Coveney** 34:35

Well, I try to.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 34:37

By sitting here with me.

**Nick Coveney** 34:38

Oh, thank you Mitesh.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 34:45

One thing that really resonated to me, you said it today and in our first initial meeting was coming out, never stop coming out.

**Nick Coveney** 34:53

Yeah.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 34:55

Is that the case now that you're working in the world of work in publishing that you still feel that way?

**Nick Coveney** 35:00

Yeah, to a point. Um, you know, I'm very openly gay in the workplace. I'm actually nominated as one of my companies LGBTQ committee for I work for Rakuten Kobo, and Rakuten America's are setting up an inaugural LGBTQA+ network for Rakuten Americas and I'm one of Kobo’s representatives on that which I'm very honoured to do. But it is something that is a, it's a continual process. And in my past life I worked as an editor commissioning, I often found, to my surprise, that people would assume that I was straight. Sometimes in very small, unassuming, non-offensive or vaguely non-offensive ways and sometimes in really pretty unpalatable ways. From you know, trying to sort of encourage you to go on a date with somebody else in a different department, to more glaring instances. And you know, this wasn't a long time ago. So one of the reasons why I'm co-chair of Pride in Publishing and I care so much about this is that as an industry, publishing is perceived to be sort of liberal playground, but it still has a lot of issues around inclusivity and minority communities. And one of the things that I think we're, we're quite bad at, I mean, I'm very privileged as a cis white male working in the industry, I already have a lot of sort of power and privilege because I'll probably be considered as less likely to have a baby, or take time off work. So when I was an Editor, I might have been given preferential treatment. I always, you know, worked as hard as I could, and tried to sort of give as much to the industry as I can, but I am conscious of the fact that you know, I'm from a very middle class background. That's another position of privilege. Um, but one of the things that is quite galling is that you realise that sometimes when the mask slips, people’s sort of homophobia or heteronormativity is really laid bare. And publishing kind of exists in a monoculture. Where very, very few people decide what is published for everyone. So you know, there'll be an acquisitions meeting people in that meeting or picking what gets bought by the general public in bookshops. Self-publishing and companies like mine Rakuten Kobo have kind of democratised the system because they've enabled people to push their own books out online. Physical books is still brilliant and physical publishers do an incredible job of curating great books. But the problem is if you don't have a very diverse workforce, or if that workforce can't even be their authentic selves, when they're commissioning. Then you end up replicating the same book for the same person again and again and again. And they usually white, middle class, 40+ mother-of-one-or-two kids. And that experience just gets pushed out. It's like, this is Britain. This is a British book, which is really harmful and not true. You know, you have a more diverse nation than that. And so you know, there's been a lot of things about trying to get more working class people, get more people from BAME backgrounds and do more to commission for working class people, people from BAME backgrounds and for the LGBTQ community. And it might sound really simple, but this is still a big problem. And it's kind of double pronged because you have the thing where there are challenges sometimes in commissioning, LGBTQ, adjacent or related content. But then there's also issues of you know, where does it sit? If you do publish it, does it go into gay section? Does that make it a less good book if it sits in the gay section than the fiction section? It can be quite challenging sometimes.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 39:04

Do you feel there's still occasions where you feel like you have to still bite your tongue? Because if you if you say something you're going to be seen as a oversensitive, overdramatic guy.

**Nick Coveney** 39:15

Yeah, I mean, I, I think I might mention it and we talked about previously when we first met. But one of the things that really shocked me when I was a commissioning editor, trying to get celebrities to write middle grade fiction, which is basically books for 7 to 11 year olds. Whereas there was a brilliant celebrity that we had a concept for, we're kind of working up a pitch. And for any books that were too expensive or had a big advance, we had to go away to the consumer insight team and get the overlords there to rubber stamp what we were doing this with, yeah, that person, they're safe that the data says yes, you know, they are real celebrity. And I was in this meeting with a very senior colleague who shall remain nameless. And they sort of said, I'm paraphrasing now partly to protect their identity. But they basically said; speaking as a parent, that they wouldn't buy a book by a "big poof off the telly". And this was not that long ago. Um, and that really shocked me. Um, I was in the meeting, I was there with my line manager and a few of the members of the team. No one said a thing. Not one thing. And this was, you know, a very eminent, popular liberal organisation with progressive values and yet very, very popular senior management team, and no one sort of said at the meeting, that's unacceptable. So after the meeting, I go straight to my line manager and say look, I'm really unhappy, I can't believe that happened, why didn't you say anything I want to complain. And I basically got told to keep my mouth shut. I didn't say anything at the time, I felt like you know, blood boil and then condensed in my veins but I didn't say anything because I didn't feel like I could, you know, I'd fought very, very hard. Publishing is a very tough industry to get into notoriously. So that's why people do great MA programmes at places like UCL to get into the industry. So I'd gotten myself a dream job. I was a commissioning editor. And then this happened to me and I felt really blindsided by it because I wanted to complain and say that that's completely unacceptable. But I, I was the least senior person in that room. So I kind of felt like I was relying on someone else to say it for me, because then I wouldn't have had to be the melodramatic guy saying, Oh, this is terrible. You know, it gets quite wearying sometimes if you're in a minority group. That you have to be the one saying, that's unacceptable. I've got some family members who I love very dearly. And I have basically had to police their language. And this is something that I picked up on when I was in school. So when I when I was outed, I'm a member of my family said, oh that's so gay, don't do that. No, no, no, I don't mean it like that. I don't care how you mean it by saying it, you're perpetuating the idea that being gay, being me is negative. It's not an insult. Don't do that. And now they don't, you know, this is a long time ago now. This is over more years, then i want to count, maybe over 18 years ago. And they don't anymore. But that's because I said to them, don't do that. Um, and in the industry, you know, in the working world, we need allies. We need people to actually say that's unacceptable, because then people like me who are actually in the minority group don't have to put our head above the parapet and worry about our job security by complaining about inappropriate behaviour. It should be referenced that that the person who I was talking about has since left said organisation and I believe the book trade all together. So they're now doing something different. But it was shockingly recent. And it was a very, very esteemed sort of national treasure, who I certainly would never refer to as that "puff of the Telly". And I think that that was a very insulting and pejorative term and it is shocking that it was made, you know, in a meeting room, not so long ago.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 43:44

What would the ideal society look like when it comes to being gay?

**Nick Coveney** 43:51

Um, this is gonna sound really odd, because being gay, being openly gay, is a big part of my identity. It's something that affects every day of my life. But it's also only a tiny bit of my personality. It's a tiny bit of my life. There are so many other things about me that might be more interesting than that. However, it defines my existence, because it breaks with the norm. So, you know, if I'm travelling with my partner, I have to think is it safe for us to hold hands? Is it safe for me to look them in the eye even, like, can we make eye contact here, but that not be safe? Um, can I give them a peck on the cheek? Probably not. And it's only on things like Pride in London, where you feel like you're more emboldened to do those things potentially, or in areas like Soho, where you think there is safety numbers, but that said, you know, since the Brexit referendum, there's been a huge spike in the number of LGBT Related hate crimes have been reported. And that is worrying because it makes you feel like we could be going backwards as a society, you know, there are still a lot of issues. There's things like “gay cure” therapy, or so-called gay cure therapy, because there's no such thing where people try and either pray the gay away or in the past have used awful treatments as a form of sort of mental bondage to try and force people to change their sexuality. Um, there's the fact that because of people's stigma and ignorance around HIV and AIDS, that gay men are more likely to kind of be ostracised from health services or less likely to take up those health services available to them. And also it can be prejudice against in a workplace you know, there are some shocking things reported about what happens if people are even believed to be HIV positive, whether or not they are or are now undetectable because they've been on the right meds for a long enough period of time. So there are all of these sort of complicated, nuanced things. In an ideal world, we would be safe and not tolerated but allowed to exist. Coexist in a way that meant it wasn't an issue. You know, the very fact that I'm kind of here today talking to you about this kind of shows that this is still a problem. Because we need to, you know, continue to push for a more inclusive society that's more welcoming and more supportive and less, you know, tied to anachronistic or religious teachings where you know, science unfortunately disagrees. people's faith is their own personal business, but that should never be allowed to define anybody's existence or their legal rights. That's why it crosses the line and becomes a sort of tool of oppression rather than a personal preference. And, you know, I have a lot of friends of faith who I think would agree with me on that wholeheartedly. So, you know, what I would like to see is a diverse and inclusive society, where it didn't matter that I was gay. And I didn't have to worry about holding my partner's hand or giving him a quick peck on the cheek or whatever. Because it shouldn't matter. But at the moment, it still does.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 47:44

What piece of advice would you give to someone who is still not out yet? Who's at university and wants to.

**Nick Coveney** 47:56

Um, I would say come out when you're ready and you're safe and when you have a support structure that doesn't have to be your family. Um, I hope that, you know, anyone listening to this, if they're thinking about telling their family and they do that their family are as supportive as mine have been. The sad truth is they may not be. But as long as you have people around you who care and who you trust, and you're safe and secure, then you can, you know, own your identity and your sexuality and you will be a lot happier when you come out in your own time. And in your own way. You know, some people it's a big seismic event. It's a really big deal. Other people it's far more commonplace run of the mill you often have I've had friends, oh, you know, we know we've always known it. It really varies and depending on who you're talking to. So think about that. Think about who you're going to tell and how you might tell them, how they might react, and protect them, protect you. Only tell them when you're ready. Don't be pressured into feeling like you have to tell them. If you never tell them, that's your choice, but it might affect your happiness if you're not able to tell them. So think about that. Think about how you would like to tell them think about how you would like them to react, and then, you know, try and create a situation where you feel like they're going to respond to the news as positively as possible. If they don't, if for whatever reason, they don't support you. That's their failing, not yours. You know, if they can't reconcile themselves to it, it's their character flaw. It's got nothing to do with you or your identity. You're not doing anything wrong by being LGBTQ+. So remember that most of all.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 50:04

That's deep.

**Nick Coveney** 50:06

I can do deep.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 50:07

My final question we ask everyone This question is, what would you do differently? Or what would you say to your younger self? If you if you could go back in time, one piece of advice you would tell you?

**Nick Coveney** 50:23

Well, I probably would have kissed that boy, I never really expressed my feelings to you as a starter. Because you know, if you don't, you'll never know. I still don't. And so there's always that, but more seriously, don't be afraid. Don't be afraid of telling your family your family will always be there for you. Your family will always love you. You'll find your friends, you'll find your you know, tribe is thrown around in our community a lot. But you will find your tribe of people and you'll find your identity and it will be incredibly empowering for you. Don't feel rushed. Maybe don't tell that group that you're thinking of telling first? Because that will turn out differently to what you expect. But tell people when you're ready, don't be afraid, own it.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 51:14

Own it. Find your tribe.

**Nick Coveney** 51:16

Yeah.

**Mitesh Vagadia** 51:17

Love it. Nick, thank you so much for coming in. If you have been affected by any of the topics raised in this episode, please do visit the UCL students’ well-being website, where you'll find a number of helpful resources. Thank you for listening, tune in to episode four where I'll be talking to UCL undergraduate student Lea, about her journey overcoming alcohol and drug addiction, what she has learned from her experience and where she is today.