

The Activity System of ISU Women’s Basketball Pride Night: An Interview with Jordan Ashley

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Emily Capan and Bryanna Tidmarsh interview Redbird Athletics’ marketing director Jordan Ashley about the activity system of planning Pride Night: what texts were produced, who was involved, what the reception was, and more. The authors aim to highlight an event that promoted diversity and inclusion in our local community.

It sounds like a bar joke: two English graduate students walk into the Redbird Arena. They don’t know whether they are allowed to park in the lot outside, so seldom do they go there, and they aren’t sure whether to head left or right once inside the arena. The first one says to the other one, “Left or right?” The second one says, “It’s a circle. No matter what, if we head right, we’ll be headed the *right* way.”

We met Jordan Ashley, Director of Marketing for Redbird Athletics, on an overhang overlooking a basketball practice—pop music blaring. Ashley, who holds an MBA from ISU, spearheaded the Women’s Basketball Pride Night, which took place on January 24, 2020. Emily had seen billboards and social media posts about it, and Bryanna had attended the game, noticing the texts that were produced for the event: trivia questions on the Redbirds app, rainbow koozies, and Pride shirts at the Alamo.

We wondered how this event came to be: what kinds of groups or individuals were involved in making this event happen, what kinds of tools were used to produce the variety of texts for this event, and what the audience’s reception was. Was this event constructed ethically, and for the

right reasons? As this was the first-ever Pride Night for the ISU athletics department, we found that it was important to highlight this event and its role in promoting diversity and inclusion in our local community.



Figure 1: Jordan Ashley, director of marketing in the ISU Athletics Department.

Capan: What is your name, and what is your role here in the ISU Athletics Department?

Ashley: My name is Jordan Ashley. I'm the director of marketing here. I primarily coordinate efforts for football marketing, which is kind of a big deal because there are not a lot of women at the Division level that get to oversee football. So, I'm super proud of that. I oversee baseball and women's basketball marketing, and then I do all of our student marketing, which has a hand in revenue generation. I'm a liaison for our revenue generation committee. So, that's kind of an overview, I guess.

Tidmarsh: A lot of hats.

Ashley: Yes, a lot of hats. Email marketing, all sorts of stuff.

Capan: Yeah! With that, there must be a lot of writing—

Ashley: Yes.

Capan: —that you do during the production of those texts. So, what are the different types of texts that you produce?

Ashley: I'm in charge of our Instagram account, and I oversee all of our student Red Alert social media. So, that's a different type of writing. But I also produce all of our pacmails, which is our version of email marketing. I do all the texts for that and for email marketing campaigns. I also produce scripts—such as PA (Public Address) scripts for our football games, which is actually interesting. It's a different type of writing. I have to say the most intriguing thing I possibly can in the shortest amount of words that can get a point across really quickly. It's been a process to learn that over the last three years.

Capan: That's a great technical writing example.

Ashley: It is. I pride myself on transitions. I'm the transition queen in my office! I like to find creative ways to go from one PA to the next PA to make

it fun and kind of “punny,” as I like to say. I like to try to make people laugh, and I think it’s a good way to mix it up a little bit at games. I like doing that.

Capan: Are there any other ways that you communicate with other people?

Ashley: In the department, or just in general?

Capan: In general; the communication you do here at your job. Like on Instagram, you’re producing visuals and text. Are there any other ways that you communicate?

Ashley: So, we do a lot of video. I do not produce the video. I am one of the concept people. I come up with concepts for videos and then pitch it to our video department, who step in and help make it a reality.

Tidmarsh: Is that at UMC [University Marketing and Communications], or do you have your own video department?

Ashley: No, we have our own video production team. We are very lucky to have them. We actually have a director, two assistant directors, a graduate assistant, and a producer.

We produce two types of video—at least, that I’m involved with. There’s the video that goes on during the game, which is like a fan-interaction piece. So, that’s like your dance cams and bird cams and funny videos with the players—which could also be used on social media, but their primary focus is fan engagement in the venue.

And then we produce, like, fun marketing videos that are used to promote a specific game. For example, I was giving away a floppy baseball cap at a baseball game—two years ago, I went to one of our producers, and I was like, “Hey, I have this idea for a fun, corny, ’80s sales video for this dad hat.” We ended up making this really funny video.

Capan: Lots of graphics . . .

Ashley: Yea! Lots of like . . . I got Lance, who is actually a professor in the communications department, to be the voiceover for it. He’s just got a very strong voice and it really fit the theme.

And I did another one. We were going to unofficially try to break a world record for the most handshakes ever given by a mascot at a soccer game, so we did a fun video where Reggie was preparing for the world record attempt. It had the Rocky song in the background. It was really funny.

It’s just a different type of communication. Get it out there but in a fun, engaging way.

Tidmarsh: Where do those videos get shared?

Ashley: They get shared on multiple social media platforms. We have a Twitter, an Instagram, and a Facebook, of course.

Reggie has his own Twitter, though. And he's verified, which is a very big deal for our level. There are not a lot of mascots that are verified, but Reggie is. So that's really fun. And then they are also shared on our sports accounts. Sometimes I work with Tyler Emken with University Marketing and Communications to send some videos, and he'll put them out on the university page for us, which is super nice of him.

Capan: It seems like you do a lot of collaborative writing and creating with people.

Ashley: The more impressions I can get on those videos, the better return on investment it is for our video staff—because they're stretched a lot. They have to produce all in-game stuff and commercials for all our games. Then we have sponsored elements that have to be done because they're contracted. So, when marketing comes in with a video idea, I really have to be strategic about how I pitch it because their time is valuable. Everyone's time is valuable—but I want them to make time for me, so I have to be a little politically savvy.

Capan: You have to work within those power structures to get what you want.

Ashley: Yes, exactly. But in a strategic way, not a pushy way. Gotta be careful with that.

Tidmarsh: Related to that, how did the inception of the Pride Night come about? I know that was sort of your baby, right?

Ashley: It was actually my baby and also Danny Bug's, who was a former graduate assistant here in digital marketing. He actually just left us for an assistant director role at Drake University. Pride night was his last hurrah with us—our last collaboration together.

The way Pride Night came about . . . I had seen a Pride Night done right before. There were a lot of minor and major league baseball teams that took on Pride Night, and they would do a really cool T-shirt with it. I had seen a Pride night at a WNBA game as well.

The way we do our marketing plans is, we sit down in the off-season and look at the sports schedule. "Okay, we definitely need a promotion here."

“We need promotion here and here and here.” We look at it from a big scope. And then we come up with our ideas: “So, what fits well here?”

Some reoccurring ones we have for women’s basketball are Education Day, which happens in the non-conference season. We get to invite all local elementary school students to come to a game. It’s usually right before winter break in December. It fits really well with our schedule. It’s kind of a win-win. It’s free for them, but it really validates our female student athletes because they get to play in front of such a large crowd: over 3,000 people, which is a really big deal.

We have a Play for Kay game, which is another reoccurring one. It’s for breast cancer awareness. It was started by an NC State legendary head coach who had breast cancer. Her name was Kay Yow. Our head coach actually played for Kay, which is kind of a neat tie. She has since passed away. So, that’s a big one. We actually just raised \$25,000 for that. That game always happens in February.

The other one we have is a Pack-the-Arena type of night, which is also a free event. It’s where we can invite the whole community to come in just to witness a women’s basketball game, and we try to create an experience that brings in new fans.

When we were thinking of other ideas, Pride Night came up. I’m a member of the LGBTQ community, and so is Danny Bug, and we were like, “Let’s try it.” I actually have a fabulous marketing assistant. Her name is Marineth Sierra. And she was all for it; she actually really hyped us up about it. We brought it up and were like, “Do we think we could pull this off, ya know? Are we sure we want to test these waters?” And she was like, “Yes! Go for it. Let’s do it!”

Tidmarsh: That’s so important because the two of you are in particular vulnerable positions, right? So, it’s good to have an ally champion—

Ashley: Oh my gosh. We needed it. I really pride myself on my leadership style being that everyone’s voice is able to be heard. I don’t care if an idea comes from an intern or the assistant AD [athletics director]. If it’s a good idea, it’s a good idea. So, I really love that she felt like she could speak up and say, “Hey, this is a great idea. I think you should go for it.”

We were like, “Okay let’s do it!” My assistant AD—my boss—was out on paternity leave when we put this down. So, he came back and we were like, “We want to do Pride Night for women’s basketball.” And he was a total ally and backed us going for it. He actually corded me at the Lavender

Graduation when I graduated with my MBA. He spoke and put my cord on me. It was so cool.

Tidmarsh: Weren't you already working here at the time?

Ashley: I was! I was a GA, and then he promoted me a year in to assistant director. I didn't finish my MBA for another year. I was working full time and doing the MBA.

Capan: Congratulations!

Ashley: Thanks. It was a lot. When I found out about that Lavender Graduation, I really wanted to do it. I was like, "I want to do this. I think it will be so cool." I asked him to be the person to cord me. And he said yes. It was such a special moment for me.

He was super supportive of Pride Night. He helped us come up with ideas for it and all sorts of stuff. When we pitched it to our head coach, she was receptive of it, and at the time it was the off-season, so I don't think that she fully took it in. Then it started getting closer, and we started doing stuff. We met with the Diversity and Inclusion Office to make sure they were on board with us hosting this. Could they co-host with us? Could they look over all our verbiage? All our text? We wanted to make sure we were very inclusive. We didn't want to offend anyone or for it to be taken the wrong way. Really, the last thing I really wanted for this event was for the Pride community to think that we were trying to use them. That was not what I wanted for . . .

Capan: Yeah, like it's trendy . . .

Ashley: Yeah! Because rainbow stuff is cool now. Which is awesome, if you think about it. But it is also, like . . . I don't want them to think we just want them to come to this game and that this really doesn't mean anything.

Tidmarsh: You're not co-opting a movement.

Ashley: I wanted to make a statement. I wanted this to be a way for us to say, "Hey, you're included in our community. We care about what you think. Come out! This is an inclusive environment for you to hang out and have fun with your friends." I wanted that to be heard in the community, but I also wanted that to be heard by our student athletes. I felt it was really important for the student athletes to know that they're in an inclusive athletic department. Be who you want to be, and we'll support you for it. I felt this game, the way we approached it—we did just that, which I really liked.

Danny and I were going to use this as an education tool for the community—to educate everybody about what’s already happening on our campus for the LGBTQ+ community. We found out about the Student Support Fund and how they give scholarships to students and provide emergency financial assistance to students who lose financial support from their family due to their sexual orientation or gender identity. If I’m being completely honest, I did not know this fund existed.

Tidmarsh: I didn’t know that until I saw it on the screen at the game.

Capan: I didn’t know that.

Ashley: On a personal note, I came out and was scared to go home. My parents and I did not speak for six months. I was cut off financially. My car was taken away. And this was all in my junior year of college. I was very lucky to have an uncle and grandparents that supported me through that time. So, I was OK financially.

I was also lucky that I was a student athlete. I was on scholarship, so I could still afford school. But if a fund like this would have been at my undergraduate institution, I could have really benefited from it. I know there were others who could have benefited from it, too.

When we found out about the fund, we really shifted and were like, “We need everyone to know about this. I want to raise some money.” Danny was very, “We’re going to raise money for this.” We had to get that approved by our athletic director, and usually we cannot raise money for outside things. That was a hurdle that we had to jump. Because it was on our campus, he was all for it. We actually had a sit-down meeting with Larry Lyons. I honestly cannot speak highly enough of him. He was so receptive to the cause and being open minded.

That’s really all I ask: Be open-minded. You don’t have to believe what I believe; I don’t have to believe what you believe. But if you could be open-minded to this idea, that would be great. And he was. He told us to go for it. I really appreciated that. He could have shut us down.

Tidmarsh: That’s your boss?

Ashley: Oh, no. Larry Lyons is the AD. The athletic director of our department. So, he’s like the big man. If I can get him on board, I can do what I want to. I was very excited about that.

Capan: So, I know that you produced a lot of texts for the event. Driving around Normal, I even saw a billboard advertising the game. I was very

impressed by that. What other kinds of texts did you produce for the Pride Night event?

Ashley: We did flyers that we got approved by the Diversity and Inclusion office. Everything that we did, we pushed through them first. We wanted an ally in the text realm just because it can be touchy. You want to make sure you do it right. You don't want anybody to think that we were taking advantage or anything and not being inclusive. We sent drafts to the Diversity and Inclusion office, who sent us back some points, and we made changes. We did that for all of our "Did You Know?" questions. We did that for the trivia. Our billboard—it had the rainbow on there, and we originally did not have the brown and black colors included in the rainbow. The Diversity and Inclusion office are actually the ones who were like, "You should actually add these two colors."

Tidmarsh: Did you have anything to do with the shirts changing at the Alamo? Because they had their original rainbow ones, and then they had the rainbow shirts with the brown and black added.

Ashley: I don't know if you know Larry, one of the owners of the Alamo II but he is a huge ally of LGBTQ+ community, and when I took the flyer to him, he was like, "Have you seen our new shirts? They have the brown and black color on them!" And I was like, "I'm so proud, Larry! Good job!"

Tidmarsh: When I went to buy my shirt for the game, the clerk was like, "Did you know there's a different one?" And I was like, "Girl, thank you."

Ashley: I was so happy when that got added, ya know? I didn't actually know that each color individually meant something. Did you know that?

Tidmarsh: Yeah. I'm queer, but I always forget exactly what they are.

Ashley: That was a trivia question. I thought that was neat. We did flyers; we did the billboard. We did a Facebook event that had text in it. We did multiple tweets and an Instagram post. For in-house, we did a PA script. Obviously, that had all of our trivia on it and "Did You Know?" questions, which included the Student Support Fund, Lavender Graduation, and several others on there. I thought it was a really good night. It was really cool to see new faces in Redbird Arena having so much fun.

Tidmarsh: It was the first game I had been to, and I only went because it was Pride Night.

Ashley: Really?

Tidmarsh: I went with my family. Looking around and seeing other people in Pride shirts—it felt good. This community can sometimes feel so isolating.

Ashley: For sure. For sure. And to say I wasn't . . . I was definitely nervous. I was nervous for the game. We had some pushback on Facebook and Twitter. Some comments. Mostly Facebook to be honest.

Capan: What did those look like?

Ashley: They were very much . . . “If you're going to do this, why isn't there a Christian night?” is kind of what it was. Or, “I don't support this. If you don't support this, you need to call your dean on duty. Tell them your concerns.” That sort of deal. Some people said, “I won't be attending. I've been a season ticket holder for X amount of years, but I won't be at this game.”

Leading up to the game . . . I'm a super positive person. I'm known for being positively resilient. I really try to pride myself on that. But there were a couple of days where I was like, “Oh no. What if this goes horribly wrong? What if this goes really bad?” Danny and I had a heart-to-heart one night and we were like, “If we raise any money at all for that Student Support Fund, this was worth it. If we could impact one undergrad student who is struggling with this support fund, then it was worth it.” And we did! We raised over a thousand dollars.

Capan: That's amazing. So, that negative reception from some audiences didn't seem to necessarily affect the turnout at the game?

Ashley: I think it more affected me. It affected me more personally. We got some emails that were from the community that were not in support of this game. They didn't like the stance that athletics had taken by producing this game, so my boss shared those with me and really used it as a teaching tool, like, “Hey when you choose to do something like this, you're going to get some pushback, but that doesn't mean you shouldn't go for it.” It was a lot. Like I said, Larry, our AD, was so supportive. I really thought I would have some different champions, if I'm being honest, in the athletic department, but I didn't. I did not get those.

Tidmarsh: It reveals people's true colors.

Ashley: It does. That was a hard pill for me to swallow, to be honest. I really thought I was gonna get this support from some key people in the athletic department because I was making a stance. We were making a stance together. This is important. We want everyone to feel included. And I did not. I got support from two straight white men. Yes. Two straight white men.

Married. But two allies. I'm very proud to say that I work for an ally, and that our athletic director is an ally. That makes me happy.

Capan: That's awesome. What were some of the positive responses that you saw from the public on social media?

Ashley: The support fund—we shared that on social media. That got shared several times. Awareness about that came out of it. We got a lot of positive comments as well. Like, "I'll be there!" and "My alma mater is doing this, I'm so proud!" The koozies. I got a lot of like, "These are so cool" type of deal. I thought the koozies were a good touch.

Tidmarsh: I was like, "I better get my koozie."

Ashley: Right? I had so many people calling saying, "Hey, how do I get the koozie?" And I said, "They are just going to be out and about. You just gotta come." That was one of the largest general fan giveaways we've ever done for women's basketball. We had 600 koozies. And all of them were taken. All of them.

So, you could have fifty positive comments, and then you have this one negative one. And that negative one really sticks with you because words matter. What you say matters. *How* you say it matters more.

Tidmarsh: The stakeholders, trustees, donors, people with money—was that a concern?

Ashley: Yes. It was a concern, but it was not a concern until after the game was already planned. Because it didn't dawn on me that I would get pushback.

Capan: So, it was after the negative reception—

Ashley: —that started coming up. Oh my gosh. This is the twenty-first century.

Tidmarsh: I know. It seems like the most basic thing.

Ashley: I mean like, you're kidding me, right? We just want people to understand that people are just people. They just want to feel included. And you're gonna be negative about it. I didn't even think of the stakeholders until we were already in it. The athletic department got asked to do a couple of radio interviews. And usually those are done by the head coach or our SWA, which is our senior women's administrator. They both actually reached out to me and they're like, "Would you like to do these interviews? Would you like to be the person that does this?" and I'm like, "Yes. Yes, I would. I will put my name on this all day long."

I got to do two radio interviews, which is really a lot more media exposure than I thought we were going to get. And usually we don't get those extra interviews for a women's basketball game.

Capan: What did they ask you in those interviews?

Ashley: They asked me, "Why? Why this game?" I did get asked, "Why women's basketball?" which I thought was a fair question, and to that I said, "I have my hand in women's basketball so I knew I could impact it." But I could definitely see this at a male sport. I *want* to see it at a male sport.

Tidmarsh: I want to see it at football. When you said this was the first Pride Night, I thought, "Oh, it's the first for women's basketball."

Ashley: No. It was the first Pride Night ever for Illinois State Athletics.

Capan: Wow, that's wild.

Ashley: Right?

Tidmarsh: Isn't this supposed to be the oldest institution, or second oldest, in the state . . .

Ashley: In the state! Yes. And isn't one of our core pillars diversity and inclusion?

I kept reverting back to that because I thought it was so important. "Why are we doing this?" Well, we are celebrating one of our core values, which is diversity and inclusion. And I know that the LGBTQ+ community is just one dimension of diversity and inclusion, but it's one that has been historically left out. And they don't feel included.

This game was all about inclusion. I just wanted everyone to feel included. I want them to feel they can come to a game and they can come with their friends and they can be themselves and have fun. We made a whole Pride playlist for the game.

Capan: How did you choose what songs to include, and what tools did you use to make that?

Ashley: Spotify was my best friend in that. And Danny Bug championed that playlist. He killed it for me.

Tidmarsh: What other ways does the marketing department or the athletic department work towards diversity and inclusion?

Ashley: Not gonna lie, I feel like we need to work on it. And that's another reason for this game. I wanted to make strides. We actually just started a

program with our student athletes. Joe, the head of our academic and life skills unit, is starting a thing with the Diversity and Inclusion office, I believe, where student athletes can come in and talk to diverse people and ask questions. They just had the first one of those, I wanna say, a couple of weeks ago. He's championing that cause. I thought that was really cool. But every team is different, every coach is different—everyone has their own way of doing it. I think we could do more, though. I think the university could do more. That's just me.

Capan: As someone who is not an avid sports fan, I feel like I saw more advertising for the Pride Night game than any other ISU women's basketball game. I was happy to see it come across my social media news feeds.

Ashley: I worked with our graphic designer. I told her that I don't want this to be in your face; I want it to be very subtle. I don't want it to be flashy-flashy. I want it to be taken seriously.

Tidmarsh: It also normalizes it. It says, "This is just another game."

Ashley: It is. It's just another group of people. People are just people.

I actually used a quote I loved in one of my radio interviews. It is from Abe Lincoln. He says, "I don't like that man. I should get to know him better." I just loved that quote so much because there are so many stereotypes of LGBTQ+ people. My parents even had these stereotypes. When I came out, one of my dad's first words were, "But you're so pretty. You're so pretty. How could you be attracted to women? You're so pretty." And I'm like, because women are pretty!

Tidmarsh: We sure are.

Capan, Ashley, Tidmarsh: (Laughs)

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