

Benjamin Payne transcript

- Brittany Brown: [01:09](#) All right, well we'll go ahead and jump right into the questions. Um, I have about 27 questions for you. Um, but to start off, can you spell your first and last name for me please?
- Benjamin Payne: [02:03](#) Benjamin Payne
- Brittany Brown: And what is your major and classification?
- Benjamin Payne: I'm a public policy leadership major. I'm a junior from Ridgeland, Mississippi.
- Brittany Brown: [02:18](#) And Are you 18 years or older?
- Benjamin Payne: Yes.
- Brittany Brown: Okay. Um, where were you born?
- Benjamin Payne: [02:24](#) I was born in Metairie, Louisiana.
- Brittany Brown: [02:27](#) And where are you from? Where did you grow up spend most of your childhood?
- Benjamin Payne: [02:31](#) I spent half my life in New Orleans on like the outskirts of New Orleans. And then after Hurricane Katrina, my family moved to Ridgeland, Mississippi. I lived there from, I think it was about fourth grade to the present and then been in attendance the University of Mississippi for the last two and a half years.
- Brittany Brown: [02:46](#) Um, so that kind of answers the next question as to what other places you have lived. So you've lived in the outskirts of New Orleans. How did you move from New Orleans originally? Hurricane Katrina? Correct. Um, did your family have deep roots in the New Orleans area?
- Benjamin Payne: [03:04](#) My grandfather came to United States from Cuba right after Castro took power and originally he lived in Miami, Florida, so we have like a, a cluster family there. Then he moved to get out of school at LSU to get his engineering degree because it didn't transfer over when he immigrated. So, um, he studied at LSU and then moved to work at Entergy nuclear power corporation and then my mother grew up there and then, so we've had some family in the

New Orleans area. My father grew up in Florida and then he moved to a New Orleans to work at the same job as my mother did. So, um, New Orleans not, not particularly. We still have some family there. Uh, but our families kind of scattered all over the southeast.

Brittany Brown: [03:42](#) And how was that process, if you can recall a movie from New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina to originally and kind of resettling?

Benjamin Payne: [03:49](#) Sure. Um, so I remember that, you know, for a while my parents were going back and forth looking for a new place to live. We would stay with my grandparents, that was fine because like, I just spent a lot of time with them. But when we finally moved, um, it was, it was not a difficult adjustment. The school I went to, I went to a private Catholic school and it was like a small class, so it's really easy to get to know the other students and the families are very welcoming there. Um, so in, in the neighborhood we moved in, I had friends as well and like the neighboring area, like, you know, like adjacent to my home. So it wasn't too hard and meeting new people, um, my parents had a good position, they liked their job and then my sister liked it there. So I'd say it was a pretty smooth transition.

Brittany Brown: [04:23](#) Um, and is your race and important part of your identity?

Benjamin Payne: [04:29](#) Absolutely. Um, I think race is a really important part of my family. Uh, my grandfather has always emphasized that my middle name is Eduardo Gutierrez. It's very important to him. If you asked my mother what my name is, she'll say "Benjamín" and you know, she won't say Benjamin, but we've always grown up. Um, and family's always been like a really important part of essentially any major celebration. So just in August we had my grandfather's birthday and we have a big extended family. Um, there are like four or five brothers and sisters and they all have kids. So it's interesting. Every woman in my mother's family's name is Maria. So there's the first Maria and her mother's name was Maria. Then here's her older sister Maria. There's my mother, Maria Rosa, her sister Maria Vivian, and then her other sister Marie Adrianna. And then Sergio is my grandfather's name and my uncle's name. So, um, we have all the Marias and the Sergio was, is kind of a joke, but they all have family and it's a lot of fun. Um, I've always been very fortunate, not to long ago I was speaking one of

my aunts about, um, how lucky we are to have like a strong Hispanic family because it's just different. It's different than how my, you know, my white friends grew up essentially, they don't have the same, uh, like big family celebrations and it's, it is really an important part of our family's, a big part of our culture I would say.

Brittany Brown: [05:35](#)

And your grandfather, that's your mother's father?

Benjamin Payne: [05:38](#)

Yes, that's my mother's father. Um, he. And then he was married to Maria. Maria died of breast cancer and then he remarried to Sue, I don't know Sue's maiden name, but yeah.

Brittany Brown: [05:50](#)

Okay. Um, and how has your experience been at the university and living in Oxford?

Benjamin Payne: [05:57](#)

Um, I've loved it. It's a great community. Um, there are definitely challenges. And a large, you know, a very prominent, persistent issue has been race on this campus and it's been something that I've been aware of my entire time here. Um, my freshman year I lived with my best friend from high school who's an African American student and we lived in Stockard Hall and just my experience in contrast against his really shows the issues of race, like just on this campus. Um, a lot of it comes from ignorance, but some of it comes from like a darker place. So one day we were all hanging out in Stockard and um, Josh was in the room and these kids from California were there and when, you know, basic freshman year conversation like, you know, why you choose ole miss. And they said they chose almost to get away from the n-word. And we were shocked because Josh was in the room. They said that point blank and like I couldn't understand. They thought this was a place that you could come and like racism was tolerated. That that was something that just, you know, could be easily communicated to other peers. And that was just so disgusting to me and my friends, you know, because we have always had friends of different ethnicities and whatnot. And it's just a normal part. But to hear other people have such a different view is very difficult. Um, but for myself it's been pretty smooth. Most people are like excited to hear that I'm up like a Latino descent, like when they hear I'm Cuban they think that's interesting. They want to know more about it. Um, but I, I can't really say,

but as far as being like a Latino in Oxford has been totally fun.

Brittany Brown:

You've already told me your major classification. Tell me about some of the other notable involvement that you participate in.

Benjamin Payne: [07:26](#)

I'm an Ole Miss ambassador. Um, I worked with the Columns Society organization. They're like the host for the university. Um, I'm a member of the honors college, the Trent Lott leadership program and then the center for manufacturing excellence program. And within those I just do different things. Like on November the second I'm eating with the secretary, the secretary of the veteran's association, um, and that's through PPL and then through the CME, right now we're working on a project where there's a group of students working together to create like a packing process for [inaudible] It's a special needs facility in, where is it? Senatobia, Mississippi, so that taking up a lot of my time working on the factory floor, but between giving tours and then working different columns events, I'd say that's probably where a lot of my time goes. And then the special programs

Brittany Brown: [08:11](#)

Once you're done with school, with what type of industry do you see yourself working in or what would be the dream job?

Benjamin Payne: [08:18](#)

Um, so the more I've been at college and been exposed to different opportunities and possibilities and right now I'm pretty sure I want to go to law school. That's kind of the goal. So, um, you know, after your senior year what direction your I plan to apply to multiple schools and the senior year I see pursuing that. And then once I get into the law program, I'm sure I'll have a more set idea of what type of law I want to practice.

Brittany Brown: [08:38](#)

What are the most important aspects of your life right now and why?

Benjamin Payne: [08:43](#)

Um, school is definitely a huge one. My parents and my grandparents, they always emphasized how important the opportunity is and not to waste, you know, privileges that we have. Um, I'm very aware, like I'm very privileged and a lot of the sense of things I get to enjoy like, you know, going to the University of Mississippi and enjoying this

incredible education that I have and you know, being able to have a car and like a place to go to sleep and, you know, whatnot. So I really, I really consider those values. Can you repeat the question? I kind of got lost my ramble.

Brittany Brown:

Most important aspects of your life right now and why.

Benjamin Payne:

I say my friends are definitely important one. Um, the friends I've made through this special programs, friends I made from high school to now my girlfriend Stephanie, an important part of my family. Of course I've always tried to call my parents at least once or twice a day. Um, I'm staying in contact with my sister, she's moving to Memphis soon. So I'd say that's pretty important part, but just like daily routine. Um, I really enjoy giving tours for the university. It's a really fulfilling experience and I enjoy connecting with people from different areas, kind of trying to show them, you know, the positive things, the opportunities to university holds. The Columns Society takes up a good amount of time. It's fun to give you, you know, playing that role we get to meet with alumni or donors or whatnot. Um, and then I really enjoy the, the manufacturing community just because like I hang out with a lot of the engineers, accountants and business students. They all have very different personalities so it's kind of cool to like interact with different students that environment.

Brittany Brown:

[10:01](#)

Cool. Um, so now we're going to get more into like the questions that will focus on what it means to be on Latino student here. Um, so the US Census Bureau considers race and ethnicity as two different concepts. What do you consider your ethnicity to be?

Benjamin Payne:

[10:17](#)

So my ethnicity is, um, I'd say Cuban American. I have stronger roots in like my Cuban heritage I do in anything else. And then the further back, if we trace it, um, were, were like Spanish. So we have family who lived in Spain. We have over from the Basque region, um, we don't really know specifically how far back, but we know part of the Gutierrez family, that's where our name or it's like stems from. But um, my grandfather was always very adamant about making me understand that was a Cuban American.

Brittany Brown:

[10:42](#)

Um, and what are your parents' nationality and do you identify with that?

Benjamin Payne: [10:47](#) Sure. So my father, um, I guess you could say is American as White, Caucasian. Um, grew up in Florida and then as far as he knows, his family came back from England I believe once upon a time. And then, um, my mother's family, she's full Cuban, parents grew up in New Orleans. Um, does that answer the question?

Brittany Brown: [11:03](#) Do you identify with your parent's nationality? Which identity do you more so I guess like select on the census or on a job application?

Benjamin Payne: [11:12](#) I would always say I'm white and then like Latino, Hispanic. I'm Caucasian, Latino.

Brittany Brown: How do you identify racially?

Benjamin Payne: [11:23](#) I would say I'm Cuban. Whenever people ask, you know, if that ever comes up in conversation, I'm very forward with that. I think people are aware that I'm white, you know, just by looking at me, but I'm always like a forward Cuban.

Brittany Brown: [11:33](#) And why do you choose to identify this way?

Benjamin Payne: [11:36](#) Because it's, it's, it's part of who I am, it's part of my, you know, who I would identify with part of my history and my heritage, my family. It's something I'm proud of.

Brittany Brown: [11:44](#) And um, do you identify as Hispanic or Latino?

Benjamin Payne: I would probably say Hispanic.

Brittany Brown: Studies show that the Latino is growing in the United States. How do you think this will affect the way race or race relations is viewed in this country?

Benjamin Payne: [12:00](#) I think with all things, people who have like any like racist or ignorant views just haven't spent enough time with people with Hispanic, Latino people. Just out of curiosity, can I ask, can I ask you a question? What are you using like Hispanic Latino in this project?

Brittany Brown: [12:16](#) I'm using the term Latino because the project is titled the Latino South, which I'm going to stick with that. So I'm just going to stick with Latino throughout the language I'm going to use. But that's part of the project, kind of seeing which term do you prefer Hispanic or Latino.

- Benjamin Payne: But I think the more people interact with people like, you know, Latino families just going to see that they're just normal just like everybody else. And I think racial tensions will improve on that front. Um, I think we'll see a lot more of like, what's the term I'm looking for, interracial marriages. I think that's going to become like fairly normal. Um, so I'm excited. I'm excited to see what the future holds. I know some publications talking about how more and more Latinos are like becoming present in the United States, like via population wise. I think it's really interesting.
- Brittany Brown: [13:01](#) And um, how do you maintain your Latino culture while being a student here?
- Benjamin Payne: [13:07](#) That's a good question. Um, my mother likes to challenge me to speak Spanish, so does my grandfather whenever I talk to them. Um, I'm, I try to practice as much as I can. Um, I like to keep up with current affairs. I'm interested in like foreign policy, so I always want to know what's going on with, you know, Cuban relations with the United States, what is doing right now through all doing right now. I'm, I'm interested as well with immigration situation going on at the border in Mexico right now.
- Brittany Brown: [13:36](#) And um, what are some challenges or have you ever faced challenges at the university because of your Latino identity?
- Benjamin Payne: [13:43](#) Um, I really can't say that I have. I think it speaks primarily because I don't look Latino. So that's not what people initially assume when they, like they speak to me or when they meet me, but when I forward it, you know, just the majority of the time people are interested in more so than discriminatory.
- Brittany Brown: [13:58](#) And has anyone ever required inquired about your race or ethnicity? How do you respond to these questions? And if no one has ever asked, how would you respond?
- Benjamin Payne: [14:07](#) I think people ask once I tell them that I'm Cuban because, you know, if it comes up in a conversation, they're like, oh, you know, you're white. I'm like, no, I'm Cuban. Actually. Then I explain just my family heritage, um, where the lineage comes from when my grandfather came to United States, that whole story and people, I don't think people

know a lot of, so I'm not sure if there's a large Hispanic presence on campus. I know maybe three or four. Um, so I think people are just kind of interested as like how did we come to the United States and for us to understand the history of, you know, the Cuban missile crisis in the embargo and Castro coming into power. So that's something that kind of all jumbled together. It's like a topic they want to know more about, I guess you'd say.

Brittany Brown: [14:42](#)

So what is your grandfather's story of him as you know, him immigrating to the U.S.?

Benjamin Payne: [14:46](#)

Sure. So, um, he and his wife were pregnant with their first child and the communist government essentially takes over and it's essentially taking away people's property, people's rights and saying this is sent by the government now, and he knew that was gonna be a problem and it's going to limit opportunity and he wanted to leave to try to go the United States somewhere that was more free, that didn't have all these, you know, suppressing religion, suppressing ideologies and whatnot. He was educated so he understood what was going on and he had like a clear stake; I wouldn't say he had a stake in the routine prior to Castro that tasted his rule of power because he was just as cruel, but I don't think he appreciated the whole communist mindset, the whole ideology that followed it. So he came to the United States and it was really difficult time. Um, because Castro, the Cuban government were trying to get Cubans back into Cuba who had left. Um, you know, it's a big deal because he had a several, essentially cut all ties to his family there. It was very hard for him to communicate with them for a long time. He was involved in trips going back to Cuba to bring people out. That was something that he did and he doesn't like to talk about that very much because I understand that it's a very stressful time. It's, I can imagine it was very difficult. Um, but he will talk about, you know, his story getting here. The situation where they came here, they had literally nothing. My grandmother was pregnant with her first daughter and how difficult that was. Um, just trying to get his education again because it didn't transfer over. Just how that really puts a strain on his family. They all lived in a very small house his entire life. And then after he was able to get an engineering degree back, he was able to provide for them, but they had a big family. They had five individuals, you know, first generation Americans. So they had to work really hard. So that was a big thing that he

always wanted me to recognize how fortunate I was and what it means that, you know, people work so hard so I can be here.

Brittany Brown: [16:27](#)

Um, do you speak Spanish?

Benjamin Payne:

Very little.

Brittany Brown:

And how did you learn the little Spanish that you speak?

Benjamin Payne: [16:35](#)

My mother – so it's a shame. Um, when I was younger they spoke Spanish to me all the time because we lived very close to my grandparents and they said it where I can understand it. But when I went to elementary school, you know, English is the focus English, just the focus, English grammar, English writing, English speaking. So, um, when I got into high school I took Spanish for I think three or four years. So I spent a lot of time with it then. Well, we've traveled abroad to Spain, so when I was there for a long period of time I was speaking Spanish, my relatives there and I took I think three semesters of Spanish in college and then I've been to Mexico a couple of times and I've been to like other Spanish speaking countries just to, not for the sake of learning Spanish, but I've been able to practice it there. So I would say like if you dropped me in the middle of nowhere, probably hold my own, but I wouldn't say I'm great at grammar is tough.

Brittany Brown: [17:22](#)

Um, and have you ever experienced any assumptions about your character because of your perceived race?

Benjamin Payne:

Can you elaborate on that question?

Brittany Brown:

So you've said many times in this interview that when people see you, they just assume that you are a white male. Um, and has anyone ever maybe assumed or anything about you or say things to you because of your perceived identity?

Benjamin Payne: [17:44](#)

Um, the one thing that I can think back to you recently, and I guess this is, this relates more being a white male than being a Cuban male, but I'm, someone saw that I was in three special programs and someone's like, Yo, you know, blah, blah blah. And they're just like, oh, he's just seemed like a white male. Like he's afforded that opportunity and um, or he's had like different opportunities to advance

himself than other minorities and whatnot. And I was offended because my grandfather, you know, he's always stressed at heart. He had to work in a country that didn't particularly care for Cubans when they first came. Um, and it was kind of disappointing to hear that someone just like assumed I was white and that's why like I've had all the opportunities I've had, you know, if that makes sense.

Brittany Brown: [18:21](#) Um, how important do you feel the ability to speak Spanish to the Latino culture?

Benjamin Payne: [18:27](#) Oh, it's, it's, it's essential. It's everything. I'm embarrassed when I, like I try to like converse with someone who's a native speaker and I really just like can barely hold my own and speak very slow and I can see how important it is to communicate on an authentic level with someone in their native tongue or the comfort that that brings. And how would that kind of grounds you into your family more so than anything and family's really important, at least in my opinion.

Brittany Brown: [18:50](#) And you did say that when you were younger, your parents and grandparents would be speaking to you in Spanish. Would you try like reciprocate those efforts or was there a time when you tried to suppress this, you know, your ability to speak Spanish because of attending school?

Benjamin Payne: [19:06](#) When I was young, I never had a dislike for Spanish. I don't think it was something that was really present in my life for majority of, like my elementary, middle school years, but in high school my mom, like every morning she tries to speak Spanish to me, like, you know, just like over breakfast on the way to school because she really thought it was important. So I was taking Spanish classes at the time, like I was actually having to learn the language and she felt that it was really important. I know she was really excited that I studied Spanish in college and she really wanted me to go study abroad. So it is something that like I've always had an interest in. It's difficult. So I would say that I haven't been fully, you know, fluent in Spanish because I don't know, the language is hard. Um, but I. Today I hardly use it unless I'm conversing with my grandparents, but I'm happy to try. I'm willing to, you know, do the trial and effort what it takes to try to fumble through, trying to learn

Brittany Brown: [19:55](#) If you could go back, is that something you would try to place more emphasis on learning how to speak Spanish as a child versus trying to learn it later?

Benjamin Payne: [20:04](#) Absolutely. Because um, other family members on mother's side also had kids and one family in particular really emphasized the importance of Spanish and other kids are fluent in Spanish and they're like in ninth or 10th grade. But, you know, I'm really jealous of that. I wish. I wish that that was me. I wish my parents would've tried harder, not tried harder, but just, you know. Yeah. I don't know, you know what I mean? I guess I'm saying like, just for the sake of the interview, can you really emphasize by having a white father, you know, it didn't help because he didn't know any Spanish. My mother definitely did. I just mean she's fluent even today. Um, so one person would be trying hard with Spanish. That person could really contribute. And my father was, my father was never like, hey, Spanish is important, you know, like, you don't need to know that. He always saw the importance of Spanish, my mother's family, uh, to the importance of my Cuban identity. So that was something that he was always encouraging about, but he just couldn't contribute to, um, but at the same time, like in school, um, I, I guess I can, I, I have like, I can pronounce Spanish words better than other students could. So teachers would like it when I would read, I would get more attention for that reason just because I had more of like an accent I guess you'd say when I spoke I can roll my r's and whatnot. Um, so it's definitely something that's always been encouraged but just not always provided that I could pursue it.

Brittany Brown: [21:23](#) Okay. And how does the university and the community cater to the Latino population?

Benjamin Payne: [21:28](#) I think they do a pretty good job as far as I can tell. There are a lot of different organizations on campus for Latino students. Um, we have like a Latino heritage month where there's different movies or different events that go on that kind of focus in support Latino heritage and history and culture. Um, I have different friends who were involved in some of these programs and they seem really like, they, they feel included, they really enjoy it as far as I can tell. Um, but I guess directly I have not been involved in those clubs as like a member, so I couldn't say, but I've been to the events and I've been able to interact with other students

who are Latino on campus and they feel pretty welcomed I would say.

Brittany Brown: [22:04](#)

Um, and do you feel the university omits the Latino population on campus?

Benjamin Payne: [22:12](#)

I don't believe that they do it on a conscious level, but I think the students do. I wouldn't say the university. I think the faculty and staff are great. I think they're very aware of the importance of diversity in an educational environment because she wanted them to perspectives. But I'm not sure if the students are, um, you look at, you know, fraternities and it's essentially all white males and it's not that I think that they're trying, they're working to exclude the Latino population. I just don't feel like they feel included or their presence just isn't there because it's not something that their friends would want to do, but I'm sure for the students who are, they, I'm sure they have a very different perspective than what I'm conveying. But I think, you know, if you look at certain organizations, there's definitely not as many Latinos represented, I don't want to say it's deliberate, but I'm sure it is recognizable.

Brittany Brown: [22:58](#)

Um, and how do you view race in the US in the south and in Oxford?

Benjamin Payne: [23:04](#)

Sure. I think race is very difficult issue. I think a lot of people are afraid to talk about it on all levels because it's very sensitive and it's easy to upset someone, but I think it's something that needs to be talked about on the entire United States scale. I think there's a lot of polarization in a lot of different ways. I think in general terms, race relations have improved as far as on like a, it's an individual basis, but nationwide they're just huge thing so it'll explode on social media about, um, you know, one or two people who do these really like atrocious things and they garner a lot of attention, which they should because I think that helps educate people. But, um, it's, I guess that's, that's a tough question. That's a very difficult question. I see racism in Oxford, Mississippi. I hear about it very often and it's really upsetting. Um, it's definitely still prevalent and it's definitely prominent in certain areas more so than others. But if you look like I was recently in San Francisco and race just seems to be like, it's such a diverse city, you know, everywhere you look you'll see people of different ethnicities and that's really cool they are all interacting

together, but here in the south it's very different than that. Um, I think the groups, you know, I don't want to say self-segregate, but they definitely don't mix like they do another part of the United States. So the south definitely suffers from a lot of, um, ignorance, miscommunications, bias, um, you know, discriminatory practices, I wouldn't say none of them are supported by the government, but I feel like individuals do support discriminatory practices and maybe their own businesses or whatnot, which is a real. It's hard to read and hear about. I'm at the university. It's definitely a hot topic right now. Um, there's been a lot of things going on from Ed Meek to, you know, a couple of years ago people put a noose on the James Meredith statue, like how does that make any sense? Like where does this come from, who is supporting these views. But it's definitely not prevalent on our campus, but I think it's a pretty low. I don't want to say it's prevalent. There is an issue of racial discrimination on our campus, but students, I think a lot of students are working to improve this culture in, to improve the campus so that students feel welcome here, which is really exciting. It's exciting to see. It's exciting to see dialogue taking place and even if people are trying to push back, at least it means that they're listening to some degree

Brittany Brown: [25:29](#) How do you perceive the Latino population affecting the idea of race in the south?

Benjamin Payne: I think they can add another dynamic. Let me think. Can you repeat the question one more time?

Brittany Brown: How do you perceive the Latino population affecting the idea of race in the south?

Benjamin Payne: [25:51](#) So you look at, I think it's La Case de Gloria on highway seven, the Latino Church. Every time I passed it, I think that's really cool. Um, I think it's awesome that there's a community of Latinos who come together to worship together in a place that they feel is really central. It's a community that they can kind of support, but I'm not sure how many people go there or what the, what the rates are, but you wonder how many go to other churches as well and if their presence is accepted or you know, how well they've been integrated into these communities. Um, but at the same, you know, then you go to maybe like Taco Shop on university. It's very, I wouldn't say it's different than a lot of the other Hispanic restaurants in town or the Latino

restaurants in town, but it feels a lot more authentic and you see a larger presence of Latinos because it's such a small place, but every time you go, um, it feels like a place where the community gathers to some degree and I'd like to see more of that. Um, as Latino presence continues to increase in southern communities, I think it'd be really exciting to see them essentially establish their own roots in different areas. Like in Jackson, where I'm from, I would not say there's a very large Latino presence. There are very few stores that cater to them, but the more that come, the more opportunities it offers to individuals to whites or not just whites, it's white, black and anyone. Any ethnicity to interact and to, you know, have a more one on one interaction with Latino community to learn about their values for their customs and traditions. And in a sense, you know, making it more normal. Normalizing that.

Brittany Brown: [27:20](#)

Are there any other points that you would like to discuss?

Benjamin Payne: [27:29](#)

No, not that I can think of.