June 8, 2021 — In November 2019, Jake Barney attended the Encircle Summit, where 3,000 LGBTQIA+ youth and young adults, along with their families and friends, gathered for what Barney remembers as a day of sheer joy.

Biological engineering alum Jake Barney, '20, is director of development at Encircle, a Utah-based nonprofit that provides mental health resources to LGBTQIA+ youth and young adults.

"There was this feeling of love and connection, and that's not something that every kid gets in this state or in this world. I realized that this was a problem I wanted to help solve, bringing families and communities together for LGBTQ youth to thrive."

The summit was also a turning point in Barney's young career. For the past six months, he had been volunteering with Encircle, a Utah-based nonprofit that provides mental health and community resources to LGBTQIA+ youth and young adults. He was making the two-hour drive down to Utah County twice a week to meet with potential donors and prepare for the event. But he was also less than six months from graduating with his bachelor’s in biological engineering from Utah State. When he wasn’t volunteering with Encircle, he was in the lab, poring over microscopic cell cultures and assisting grad students with their research. The previous summer, he had also completed an internship with GE Healthcare to develop medical supplies.

“I had been telling myself my whole life that engineer was going to be in my title. During my senior year, I decided to focus less on my title and more on the impact I could have on the community. That is when I decided to make the leap to Encircle.”

After graduating in spring 2020, Barney took a job with Encircle as its director of development, where he leads the organization’s fundraising efforts. While his position has little to do with engineering – though Barney says his tech knowledge often helps him connect with Silicone Slopes donors – Barney is proud of his engineering background.

“I still hold to myself that I am an engineer. I might not use heat transfer or mass transfer every single day, but the analytical problem-solving – I use that every day.”

Barney came out as gay to his parents the day before graduating high school. He was met with a lot of love and support from his family. He also found a lot of support in the Biological Engineering Department.

“Dr. Vargis has an ally sticker right outside her door, and I knew just from seeing it that she was a professor I wanted to do research for, because it felt safe and inclusive.”

But Barney also recognizes that his experience wasn’t universal. “I could have gone to Utah State and had never seen a pride sticker or an ally sticker.”

Mental health outcomes for LGBTQIA+ youth in the United States are bleak. A recent national survey showed that 40 percent had considered attempting suicide in the past year and 48 percent had engaged in self-harm. Many of the respondents reported symptoms of anxiety and depression and wanted help from a mental health professional, but less than half were able to receive it.

Much of the money Encircle raises goes toward providing mental health resources out of the Encircle Homes. Encircle has homes in Salt Lake City, Provo, St. George, and Heber, with plans to build eight more in Utah, Nevada, Idaho, and Arizona. Earlier this year, they broke ground on a home in Logan, located at the bottom of Old Main Hill. These homes offer subsidized therapy sessions, but they also offer daily programs, like artmaking and jam sessions, or friendship circles for LGBTQIA+ people to share their stories with empathetic peers. Encircle hopes to create spaces not where hard things are avoided but where joy is created.

“It's really just about fun. We are mental health-focused in everything we do, but a big part of mental health is just having fun and being happy and celebrating life.”
Learn more about Encircle at Encircletogether.org. And check out resources available to LGBTQIA+ students and allies at USU’s Inclusion Center.

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