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Breakout Connections at Redzone's Speed Friending

Liam Lawless, Staff Reporter

College students have arguably been the most impacted by the lack of in-person socialization throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. They have had to relearn everything they knew about making friends upon moving to school. While Zoom typically hinders the fluidity of human interaction, Seattle University's Redzone team has continued to do everything they can to sustain students' social engagements virtually.

Putting a spin on the age-old 'speed dating' concept, Redzone's Speed Friending event was the latest attempt at curtailing the awkwardness of screen-to-screen conversations between students. Noah Winkleman, a fourth-year journalism major and Redzone's vice president of athletics, co-hosted the Speed Friending event with help from other Redzone officers Dream Gonzales and Kai Felix.



Luca Del Carlo

"Originally, we were going to put this event on closer to Valentine's Day and we were going to do it in person," Winkleman said. "We did this last year in the beginning of the year, and I think we had over 80 participants via Zoom. We got a lot of positive feedback from that, so we wanted to do something similar."

This year's Speed Friending had closer to 30 participants, enough to resemble a crowd on Zoom's gallery mode. Third-year Computer Science student Rucha Joshi went to Speed Friending for the second year in a row, with a friend she met at last year's event.

"I always like to meet new people," Joshi said. "You don't get that many opportunities to socialize during the pandemic."

Having been a first-year student when the pandemic hit, Joshi's burgeoning college friendships were given the ultimate test.

"It kind of felt like starting all over again," Joshi said. "A lot of my friends who were on campus freshman year were living off campus or their schedules were wacky. Making friends was pretty hard at first, but I think the school made a really big effort to keep having social events. Being able to put myself out there made the pandemic a little more optimistic."

Last year, Joshi befriended Christina Beavers, a second-year psychology major, who had crossed paths with Joshi plenty of times within the strict social confines of dormitory quarantine. Yet, it was not until they were left to themselves in a breakout room that their friendship started to grow.

"We actually lived on the same floor at the time," Joshi explained.

My experience attending the event

Beavers, Joshi and I ended up in the first breakout room together, and once more before the event was over. Every few minutes, Redzone brought everyone back into the main session, gave us a new icebreaker and reshuffled the groups. In all the chaos of randomized room assignments, some participants met a wide variety of new people while others had more opportunities to connect with the same few people. After meeting Beavers and Joshi, another student and I shared some laughs in our back-to-back-to-back breakout sessions.

Entirely accustomed to a digital learning environment, Beavers had sparse opportunities to meet her peers as a freshman. Starting this year as a member of the university's Homecoming Royalty gave her a taste of the excitement of being part of the Redhawk community.

"I really like meeting new people, and the pandemic has made it hard to meet people in classes," Beavers said. "I'm a sophomore on campus, so I'm still trying to meet people and get the traditional college experience. [Homecoming] was one of my favorite in-person events because my friends got to be there to support me. That really got me excited for in-person activities."

Even though Seattle U is returning to mostly in-person instruction this week, uncertainty has limited Redzone's possibilities for networking events.

"Similarly to the beginning of COVID-19, we didn't know how this quarter was going to look," Winkleman said. "It's been pretty difficult in terms of navigating guidelines and whether or not we're going to be back in person."

Being responsible for some of the school's largest on-campus events, the Redzone team often has to make catering and marketing plans two weeks in advance, which only exacerbates the already challenging circumstances. After more than two years of settling for remote interaction, overcoming constant ambiguity has proven Redzone's perseverance and commitment to the Seattle U community ten times over.

"While we're going back in person, we're also still trying to be responsible and make sure we're putting the health of students first and making sure that everyone feels safe and comfortable coming to our events," Winkleman said. "We still have a lot in the works, it's just looking a little different than what we originally planned."

Ready with new initiatives like HawkSquad, Redzone is doing everything in their power to keep Seattle U's student community connected, engaged and safe.