

ASHE Presidential Podcast. 2023 Season. Episode 1.

Royel Johnson:

Before we jump into today's episode, it's important that we acknowledge that this conversation was recorded on the land of the Tongva and Chumash peoples. Panelists joined us from colonized lands throughout North America. We recognize the Tongva, Chumash and all Indigenous nations, tribes and peoples for being historical and continual caretakers of these lands.

Speaker 2:

Okay. I'll count you off. In three, two, one.

Royel Johnson:

Greetings, ASHE family, and welcome to the very first episode of the ASHE Presidential Podcast, focused on humanizing higher education. I am your co-host, Dr. Royel Johnson, Associate Professor of Higher Ed and Social Work at the University of Southern California, and Director of Student Engagement in the USC Race and Equity Center. Shoutout to my colleague and friend, Dr. Shaun Harper in the USC Race and Equity Center, for being a collaborator and sponsor on this podcast. I have the privilege and honor of working with my dear friend and colleague, Dr. Felecia Commodore.

Felecia Commodore:

Thank you, Dr. Johnson. So excited to be here on our first episode of this ASHE Presidential Podcast. Thank you also, again, to the USC Race and Equity Center for their support in us accomplishing this feat that we have set out to do. I am your other co-host, Dr. Felecia Commodore, Associate Professor at Old Dominion University in the higher education and community college programs. And we are super excited today because we have-

Royel Johnson:

Yes. Get excited.

Felecia Commodore:

...none other than our current ASHE president.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. So obviously, she is the president of the Association for the Study of Higher Education, but she's also the Alumni Association Distinguished Graduate Professor of Higher Ed, and Senior Advisor for Advancement of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion in the College of Education at North Carolina State University.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Dr. Joy Gaston Gayles here.

Royel Johnson:

We want to kick off every episode with this icebreaker activity.

Felecia Commodore:

Because what's higher ed without an icebreaker?

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Royel Johnson:

Yeah. We've learned something from student affairs. Listen, so it's called This or That. And you're going to pick between two things.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Okay.

Royel Johnson:

Only one.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Only one.

Royel Johnson:

The first one, Brandy or Monica?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Ooh. Ooh. This is a good one. Now, I did watch the Verzuz Battle.

Royel Johnson:

Yes. Yes. It was painful.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

I can't pick one though, because-

Felecia Commodore:

It was painful for me.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

It was good. You know, Monica has this raw soul.

Royel Johnson:

She does.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Right? And so I ride with that. I identify with that. Okay. But Brandy is like the people's people.

Royel Johnson:

She is.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

She's the people's person. And she actually shocked me in the Verzuz Battle because she was throwing some shade.

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Royel Johnson:

Oh, lots.

Felecia Commodore:

She was [inaudible 00:02:59].

Joy Gaston Gayles:

And so I was like, "Okay, Brandy, we don't expect this from the people's choice artist. You're the friendly..." And I can identify with that too. Because people think I'm-

Royel Johnson:

Who you been throwing shade at?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

But that's what I'm saying. I am nice. People will tell me how nice I am. But they don't know-

Royel Johnson:

They forget.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

...that I have another side that I try not to bring out, but I have it. And I felt like Brandy-

Felecia Commodore:

Not too fast [inaudible 00:03:28].

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. So I don't know. I like Monica though, because she's just real.

Royel Johnson:

Rah.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

She real. Yeah.

Royel Johnson:

I like Monica too.

Felecia Commodore:

We know that I'm a hardcore star that is Brandy's fan base. But it's okay.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah.

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Felecia Commodore:

We know. I know the truth. So I have this question. It's paining me to ask it, but I'm going to ask it anyway.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Okay. Okay.

Felecia Commodore:

Pink or green?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Oh, come on.

Royel Johnson:

Shout to AKAs.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yes. We're coming off our national convention. Woo. We had a good time. Green is my favorite color. But I do like the pink. But we look good in everything. So yes.

Felecia Commodore:

Pink is the-

Joy Gaston Gayles:

See the little shade. You see the little shade I got.

Felecia Commodore:

Pink is a diluted red. Just so we're all clear. But we all work together.

Royel Johnson:

Shout to the Divine Nine.

Felecia Commodore:

Yes. Yes. We love each other. Yes, we do.

Royel Johnson:

Okay. So the next one. Blackboard or Canvas?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

You know what? If you had asked me this six months ago, I would've said Blackboard. But I have learned Canva and it's like, I'm dangerous. People really think I have skills, and I don't. I just play around. And if you look at my Instagram page, it looks real professional, and people think that's NC State's [inaudible 00:04:52].

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Royel Johnson:

You talking about Canva, not-

Felecia Commodore:

You're talking about Canva. We're talking about Canvas.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Canvas? What is Canvas?

Felecia Commodore:

Well, that answers our question.

Royel Johnson:

Well, clearly it's Blackboard for you.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Oh, well-

Royel Johnson:

Canvas is just another management-

Joy Gaston Gayles:

I thought you said Canva. You see how excited I got? Because I have developed a whole new skill set.

Royel Johnson:

Same, same. Canva will change your life.

Felecia Commodore:

But you can't tell me nothing because you a graphic designer.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

I am a not good graphic designer who thinks she's good. Yes. So sorry.

Royel Johnson:

No, I'm sorry.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

I heard what I wanted to hear.

Royel Johnson:

Listen, Canva need to be a sponsor.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Right.

Royel Johnson:

Exciting.

Felecia Commodore:

Calvin Harris out there?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

But yeah. I don't even know what Canvas is.

Felecia Commodore:

It's another platform.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

We have Moodle. That wasn't even an option.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. No, Moodle's whack.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Okay.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Royel Johnson:

I have no good experience with that.

Felecia Commodore:

I don't even know what that is.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Right. Right. Okay. Okay.

Felecia Commodore:

Okay. Last question. Orioles or Nats?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Ooh. I'm going to say Orioles, even though they are not really-

Felecia Commodore:

I'm a Maryland girl so I am like, "Yay for the Orioles."

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Joy Gaston Gayles:

They're the home team though, right? Nationals came along a little late. Orioles, I want them... And you know what? It's kind of like, what are they calling themselves? I like the Washington football team. They have not been good since Doug Williams, but I'm still riding with the hope that they will win the Superbowl again one day.

Felecia Commodore:

That's hope.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

I hope I'm alive to see it. But yeah, that's how I ride for the Orioles. I have hope for them too.

Felecia Commodore:

In the words of Kendrick Lamar, "Loyalty, loyalty."

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yes.

Royel Johnson:

Loyalty, loyalty, loyalty, loyalty.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

I'm the home team. Yes.

Felecia Commodore:

So this year's theme for the conference is Humanizing Higher Education. We're really excited about that and thinking through what that means. And so, as this was your vision as ASHE President, could you tell us not only a little bit about yourself, the work that you're currently engaged in, but also what inspired this year's theme and this vision around humanizing higher education?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah, that's a great question and I appreciate it as well. What Humanizing Higher Education means to me... Well, first let me back up. I feel like I've been on this path in my career and yeah, you have the research, you have the publications, but at some point I got tired of... I wanted my work to be impactful and I just felt like writing for journals and publishing with my one or two readers, is like, "Am I really doing work that matters?" So I feel like I've been on this path. And then you get your findings, and then I ended up having more questions and answers, and I was like, "I need something more." And I feel like it led me to a space where I now feel like I have a greater impact, because I'm doing work that's humanizing. So when I think about the work that I do with NCFDD, to me, I'm on the ground with the-

Royel Johnson:

Will you say what that is, for the audience?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

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The National Center for Faculty Development & Diversity. It's one of our partners for ASHE. We've done a lot of cool things with them. But doing that work, to me, is humanizing because I get to see people. I get to hear their stories. And when my research originates from that space, I feel like it's humanizing because I see you. You know what I mean? And I'm not just creating solutions in my own right, based on my siloed experience as a researcher and just what I think." It's really about what matters to people. And so when I was thinking about the theme, I was trying to think of something catchy. I was all in the hip hop space. I was going to be, "Fight the power." And I'm like, "No, no, no." It was going to be like, "United we stand, divided we fall." No, no, no. So I had all these themes.

Felecia Commodore:

Public Enemy as.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

I was all in the space.

Royel Johnson:

Not Public Enemy.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

And I kind of drew from something that I heard Gloria Ladson-Billings say. She was a keynote for our Don C. Locke Symposium at NC State, and she was talking about social justice. One of the things she said, that still tickles me to this day, "All Social Studies teacher, they have a copy of the Constitution in their purse, in their backpack."

Felecia Commodore:

I have a fun story about that. I got sent to the principal's office in high school-

Royel Johnson:

Of course you did.

Felecia Commodore:

...for not saying the Pledge of Allegiance, and I pulled out my pocket Constitution, which I kept on me in school because that's interesting. And I was like, "Show me where I don't have the right to not do this."

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Right. Right.

Felecia Commodore:

So I was not a Social Studies teacher, but I was a pocket Constitution.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yes, yes. "I'm going to join the club."

Royel Johnson:

What is that about?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

"I'm joining the club." But she was saying how social justice gets a bad rap because people can take it and make it out to be something that it's not. But if you just focus on justice, you can't argue against that because it's in the Constitution. Everybody, if you are human, then you should have the right to life, Liberty and the pursuit of justice, happiness, whatever. And so I was thinking about that for the theme. I said, "What theme can I have that people can't...?" You can't push back on that, because if you do, it's going to reveal some stuff about you-

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, absolutely.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

...that you probably have been trying to keep secret for a long time. But you can't argue against that. And if we could focus and have something that we can come around collectively, where people can't do the... I'm not going to debate this semantically. You can't problematize it. Because that's what we all want. At the core, at the essence of who we are as people, we all want to be treated as human.

Felecia Commodore:

I want to be seen.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Right. I want to be seen, I want you to see me for who I am, not for who you want me to be.

Royel Johnson:

Absolutely.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Right?

Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

If we could rally around that, if we could think about what that means for research, policy, practice, I think it could take us to some cool places.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. Yeah.

Royel Johnson:

So to have a focus on humanizing higher education seems to suggest that there are some dehumanizing practices and concerns in higher ed, that we ought to be addressing. What are some of those things that prompted and motivated you to have this expressed and explicit focus on humanizing?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. That's another thing. When you become ASHE President, you have all these things that you have to do. You got to come up with... You don't have to come up with the conference thing, but most presidents choose to do so. But then you come up with this theme, it's like, "Oh, now I got to figure out what this means."

Royel Johnson:

Got to operationalize it.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

I got to operationalize it. But I've been reading. I've been doing a lot of thinking and a lot of reading and that's the first thing. It's just like, well, I can't define "humanizing" until we talk about the opposite. Because humanization wouldn't be a call if there wasn't a lot of dehumanization that's happening. Something about the pandemic forced us all to stop, and in that pause, you couldn't not pay attention to what was happening around you, in the way in which I think we do as a society because we're busy.

Felecia Commodore:

Right. There were no distractions.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

We're on the hustle bus, right?

Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

But you had to stop. You had nothing to do.

Royel Johnson:

We were forced to.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

And so it just heightened your awareness to not new things, because these things were already happening. People were just now starting to pay attention, because they didn't have a choice.

Felecia Commodore:

Didn't have a choice.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Right? And so in that process, for me, it was a very reflective period and I found myself going back to history. And it's there where I learned, oh my gosh, you think it's bad now? It was real bad back in the day. I remember doing a Girltrek. I participated in that movement, and that was one of my survival strategies.

Felecia Commodore:

Shoutout to Girltrek.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. Shoutout to Girltrek. They did this series on icons in African American history. And so when you hear about the story of Mamie Till, it just put things in perspective for me, because when you think about what happened and how her son was dehumanized, and just anti-blackness, just all the things. They didn't treat that young man as a human, and you can.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

So dehumanization plays a big role in it, but it's so linked to all the other things. Systemic oppression, anti-blackness. All the things are wrapped up in it, and really unpacking that and understanding how people can even get to the place of dehumanization, is troubling. We do this thing where we move in and out of moral disengagement. If I can figure out a way to make you not human, it will justify how I can treat you poorly. Because you're not human, you're property. And so when I started unpacking that, it's like, "Man, this is deep." This has such deep roots in ways that I don't really think we fully understand. But you can't have the humanizing conversation without having the dehumanization conversation.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. So as part of your vision for operationalizing, bringing this theme of humanizing higher education to light, you decided to also bring something new to us with the ASHE Presidential Podcast. This is the first time that ASHE has decided to do a podcast in congruence with the conference. Could you tell us a little bit more about why you wanted to take this route, to do this kind of communication, discussion, why you wanted to launch this? And what is your hope for this podcast?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah, that's a great question. So shoutout to past president, Lori Patton Davis, who started this presidential webinar series. And it was great because, back then, Zoom was new.

Royel Johnson:

New shiny object.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

And so we were excited about... Yeah, shiny object. We got some new tech platforms. We could connect beyond the annual meeting and I could see your face, and we didn't have to get on a conference call

where you had to dial in on the phone. I could see you. So that was exciting back then. But the pandemic has made Zoom bad for everybody.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. Don't invite me into no Zooms.

Felecia Commodore:

Zoomed out.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Right. Zoomed out. And so when Jason and I were talking about this, I'm like, "Yo, I can't do another Zoom meeting." And it was something about pulling everybody together and making them be in the same place at the same time. People are tired. People are tired.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. It's a lot.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

So I was like, "We just can't do that again." And so then I was like, "Well, the ASHE grads, they always talking about ASHE is so antiquated and behind and all of this."

Felecia Commodore:

Shoutout to the ASHE grads.

Royel Johnson:

To the ASHE grads, yes.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Shoutout to the ASHE grads for making those oldie-goldies think about how we could come into the 21st century. And so I was like, "Ooh." And that's the other thing, during the pandemic, the Girltrek series, that was a podcast. And I just found myself, the more I was reeducating myself, the more I wanted to know. And so I resorted to podcasts, to get the contextualized stories to help me fill in some blanks that I was having, as I was going through this process of, one, trying to survive the pandemic, but also thinking about, what does this mean for me in this day and time?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

And so I was like, "We're going to do a podcast series," and I was like, "I got to have some dope host." And so you two naturally came to mind. So that's kind of where it came from. I was in that space and I just thought about how meaningful it was for me and how you could use it more... One, you wouldn't have to have people in the same place at the same time. That coordination piece, it took that away. But then the different ways that you could use a podcast.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. Some utility.

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Joy Gaston Gayles:

Incorporate it in your class. It could be a good way to hype people up, leading up to something, i.e., the annual meeting.

Royel Johnson:

Yes.

Felecia Commodore:

Las Vegas.

Royel Johnson:

That is true..

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. And it's something that will be there over time.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. Beyond.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Right? And then we can engage with these cool platforms like... What do you call it? I think Spotify in trouble, but some-

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. Apple and-

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Apple. All the things.

Royel Johnson:

Available where all podcasts are [inaudible 00:18:07].

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. That phrase. "This will be available where all podcasts are-"

Royel Johnson:

Streamed.

Felecia Commodore:

Are streamed.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yes. So I just thought it would be a cool way to engage.

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Royel Johnson:

Yeah. Very cool. What's your hope for it?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

I really do. I really hope that members will be able to use this in multiple spaces. Add it to your class. Can you listen to a podcast on the topic to contextualize some of what you're reading or what you're having, or to use it to spark conversation or get people thinking about a particular topic? And I also like the flexibility of it. You can listen to it while you're walking. You can take a 30 minute walk.

Royel Johnson:

When you're getting your steps in.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. Get your steps in and engage intellectually with some of the top thought leaders in our field. And so I just hope that our members will find it meaningful, useful, beneficial, and create spaces. You could have a brown bag. Listen to one of the podcasts topics and then have a brown bag discussion in your program.

Royel Johnson:

Be creative.

Felecia Commodore:

And I think this is really helpful and really great that ASHE is taking the lead on this, because I do think we have to begin to think about different forms of media as forms of scholarship and reframing this idea of scholarship only looking one way, being an article with a method section and a findings section, or being just a report.

Royel Johnson:

Y'all better cite this podcast.

Felecia Commodore:

Right.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. There are ways to cite podcasts.

Felecia Commodore:

There's different ways in which we can engage in scholarship. And so I'm really excited that ASHE, as a primarily scholarly community, is saying, "Hey, here's a way that we can approach doing scholarship that looks different but still is accomplishing the educational and scholarship and creating knowledge goals that we have as a community."

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yes. Yes.

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Royel Johnson:

Yes. So we had mentioned this. One of the things that we plan to do with the podcast is a list of resources. There will be a syllabus that will accompany all of the recordings for this, so there will be some more instructional assets that folks will be able to use and supplement in the curriculum. So look forward to that on each episode.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yes. That's awesome. Love it.

Royel Johnson:

So one of the things that we're going to ask you is... And we know you've been in the field for a little bit, just a seasoned scholar.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

That's a way of calling me old. Yes.

Felecia Commodore:

Seasoned.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Seasoned. Yes.

Royel Johnson:

So what are some of the things that you've seen over time, and the shifts that we've seen in how the field has evolved in your time and career?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Oh gosh. I've been a member of ASHE since 2000, 2001. I think my first ASHE was Richmond, Virginia.

Felecia Commodore:

Oof. We didn't even go to Richmond.

Speaker 2:

We didn't go to Richmond. No.

Royel Johnson:

[inaudible 00:20:57]. That's Richmond.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. So that was my first ASHE. I was a grad student at the Ohio State University.

Royel Johnson:

Shoutout to Ohio State.

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Joy Gaston Gayles:

Shoutout to the Buckeyes. I didn't have an advisor who was in the know. In the know, like top ASHE scholar. But I felt like that was the thing back then. That's how you navigated ASHE. You went with your advisor. Your advisor maybe introduced you to other-

Royel Johnson:

Perhaps.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Perhaps. It didn't always translate that way, but they introduce you to all the other players and-

Royel Johnson:

Folks you need to know.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Folks who you're reading about. So I found myself in a very lonely space, but I also found other people who shared my experience, and so we got together. And so that was my ASHE, and it wasn't a very welcoming kind of space. I didn't feel that way.

Royel Johnson:

So no CEP back then?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Well, CEP... I feel like there was.

Royel Johnson:

Okay. We'll have to fact check that.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

Jason?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. You're stretching my memory. There was, but it was kind of new. But again, part of navigating is knowing that those spaces exist.

Felecia Commodore:

That they even exist.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

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So again, I went to AREA more than I went to ASHE and for some reason I was able to navigate that space, even though it was much, much bigger. But I had difficulty navigating ASHE. I've often said, "If you were to ask me, back then, if I would ever be ASHE President, I'd have told you, "Hell no. I can't even figure this space out."" So it's evolved quite a bit. I know we have our fair share of challenges now, but I often think about, "Wow, we've come a long way." Back then, I think we only had one Black president at the time.

Royel Johnson:

Michael Nettles.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Michael Nettles. So it's come a long way. ASHE has always been my professional home. And so even through the seasons of my life as an academic... Not just my life as an academic, but I also have a life outside of academia. And so it's been my professional home. It's where I learned to come to find my intellectual community and engage in topics. And for me, my area of interest, intercollegiate athletics in higher ed, was not... Not only did I not have an advisor who was an ASHE star, he was a star in his own right, but I also studied a topic that was not well perceived at ASHE. So I had also had to navigate that, and that was challenging. But I found that, because I was an ASHE member, I think that actually helped me figure out how to get my stuff published in the top journals, even though I wasn't writing about a topic that was considered whatever.

Royel Johnson:

[inaudible 00:24:02].

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. Yeah. But it was a topic that I'm passionate about, because again, it reflects my own experience. And I think that-

Royel Johnson:

A lot of folks may not know that, that you were a student athlete.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yes.

Royel Johnson:

Will you say more about that?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah, I play softball and I'm a first generation college student. I come from very humble beginnings and so I didn't have a plan, but I created one along the way. From a very early age, something that I would do with my brother to cope with life in the working class neighborhood... I come from humble beginnings. Can't complain, because we never missed a meal. We always had a roof over our heads, but we didn't have a lot of money and so that created hardships in a lot of ways. Growing up, my mom was sick a lot and so I didn't have... I had to fend for myself in ways.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

So athletics was always my outlet. And so me and my brother would go to the basketball court, shoot a round, and because of those early experiences, I found that I was pretty good. It took me a while. I thought I was going the basketball route, but again, we didn't have money to do AAU and some of those other kinds of experiences. I remember trying out for the basketball team in high school. And I was good enough, I made it, but I could already see the politics. I was like, "Nah, I'm good. I'm going to run track. I'm going to run track." So I took myself out there and I was like, "Oh no, this isn't a good decision. Running track is hard. It's hot out there. How many times I got to run this 100 meter [inaudible 00:25:46]? I only got to run it one time at the meet."

Felecia Commodore:

This is why I threw shot put, because I wasn't running nowhere.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Like, "How many you want us to do for the practice run?" So I ended up playing softball and it was there, that's where I felt at home. I was like, "Okay, this is good. Balls, and keeping my feet on the ground. This is good." So I ended up becoming very good in softball, and I had a softball coach who knew my situation and saw something in me and invested in me, and took me to the clinics where I could hone my skills, that I couldn't afford, and she paid for it.

Royel Johnson:

Wow.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

So I'm very fortunate to people along my life who saw something in me that I certainly didn't see in myself, and invested in me. So ended up sending off some videos. There was four of us in high school that we were real tight, and one of them, Lynette's mom, was a professor at Bowie State. And that's how I became interested in the greatest sorority in the land, because she's also in AKA. She took us to a step show at Morgan State, and I saw it on pretty girl step. I was like, "I want to be that. I want to be that."

Joy Gaston Gayles:

But she also exposed me to HBCUs. Because I thought I was going to Penn State and I was going to play softball for a division one school. But then when she talked to me about HBCUs and the opportunities to play sports... Because sports was a vehicle for me, because I knew my parents couldn't afford to send me to college but I knew I could get a scholarship. Like, "Y'all going to pay me to throw the ball? Oh, I can do that. I can do that." And so I ended up getting a scholarship. It was an academic and athletic scholarship at Shaw University. They had the major that I was interested in, and so that's the role that sport played in my life and what I was going through.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

It turned into a business, even at a division two institution. I was like, "This ain't fun no more. I feel like I got to work too hard and something about the fun is missing." But then I got a postgraduate scholarship from the NCAA to go to grad school. And my career plans to be the first African American female athletic trainer for a major professional team, basketball, football, that didn't pan out.

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Royel Johnson:

Well, you did some other things.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah, but I had to pivot. My senior year at Shaw, I had to pivot quick and I was so lost, I didn't know what I was going to do. I just knew I couldn't go back home. So then I got the scholarship and I was like, "Okay. Grad school." But then I didn't know what I wanted to do. So I found the program at Auburn University, and I liked that at the time they had a partnership with the athletics department.

Felecia Commodore:

Oh, okay.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

So that's how this whole journey started.

Royel Johnson:

Got it. Wow.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

But it comes from a deep place for me, that spoke to the stick-to-it-ness, regardless of the naysayers, Reviewer 2s out there, that gave me a hard time. But that's where the passion came from.

Felecia Commodore:

I love your story because I think it shows how it's... Very few of us went in our freshman year of college-

Royel Johnson:

Aspiring to be-

Felecia Commodore:

...and was like, "I would like to be in higher education." There's so many paths that many of us find here, and a lot of it has to do with our experiences going through college, experiencing college, who we were as students, our multiple identities. And so it's really great to hear how you not only had sports as a vehicle to give you access to higher education, but then it became a part of your motivation for studying higher education. That's really beautiful. So how do you see ASHE, because you talked about how when you first got here, it was like, "What am I doing, and who are these people?"

Joy Gaston Gayles:

"What's going on here?"

Felecia Commodore:

And now you're the ASHE President. So how do you see ASHE now, and your role as president, in moving the field of higher education towards being more humanized?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. I love ASHE, again, because it is the place where I go. When I leave ASHE... And being virtual was hard, and I didn't realize it until we went to San Juan that, wow, I really miss people. And now I understand why ASHE is important. It solidified its importance for me. Because it's, one, a place where I go to talk to and cultivate relationship and be in community with scholars who are doing work similar to what I'm doing, and I'm always learning new things, and I love it for that. And I always walk away with new ideas, new questions, new energy, and I can go back and sustain myself until I go to the next meeting where I can get my energy. So it's become that place for me.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

And even though it's not perfect, we still have a lot of work to do, I've seen the evolution and I'm excited for the direction that we're moving in. And it's a collective effort. I think we do a good job of trying to engage members and understand what some of the problems are, and we're engaging in strategic planning and I think that will take us to a good place. Are we going to get there tomorrow? No. But I do feel like we're on our way. Yeah.

Royel Johnson:

When you think about and reflect on your career and experience, I know there are lots of ASHE grads and early career scholars and practitioners who are listening to this conversation. What's a piece of wisdom, a negative wisdom you would offer when you reflect on your time in the field?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

There's something about the Academy that will always make you feel like you don't belong. So don't let the Academy break your soul, and don't let the systems and the processes make you feel like you don't belong here. That place of belonging needs to come from a deep place inside of you. And when the Academy does that, you need to go to that place and remind yourself of why you're here and what you want to do. Don't let all the things deter you from that. And it can be hard. It can be hard. And I recognize that. And to also know that there are people, you may not see them, there are people on the other side who are fighting to change systems so that that won't be the case. And that was one of the reasons... Because for me, I got to have my why together for everything.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, for sure.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Because truth be told, I could have been an associate professor and I could have rolled off into the sunset. And so I had to have a good reason for why I wanted to go up for full professor, other than the little measly pay increase that you get, because that wasn't enough.

Speaker 2:

Let the people know we're not rich.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. We're not rich at all. My why, though, came from that space of, "If not you, then who?" Who's going to be at the table to flip it. And you don't always see the flipping that goes on, for people who

have advanced and have that same intentionality about being able to be at tables. And that's what happens when you become full. You get invited to all these tables, and I try to flip as many as I can.

Royel Johnson:

Thank you. Thank you. Yeah.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

You don't see me. I'm not the person who's out there, but behind the closed door, I got a reputation at my institution.

Royel Johnson:

Flipping some tables.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

I'm flipping tables. Right. And people don't like you, and I'm okay with that.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. That's cool.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

You don't have to like me, but I'm going to flip this table, and I'm going to call you. I'm going to call you on your stuff. And I want you to call me on my stuff. I'm not perfect either and I don't always get it right. But just always remember your why, and don't let nobody turn you around.

Royel Johnson:

Shoutout to Beyonce. "You won't break my soul." It's going to be the soundtrack.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

I'm telling you. I'm telling you. (Music)

Felecia Commodore:

I'm glad you said what you said, because I think sometimes we're like mid-career scholars, which is even weird to say that.

Royel Johnson:

Very weird.

Felecia Commodore:

Right now. But it can feel like you're the first person to get to a space and have to deal with whatever interesting or crazy things are happening in that space. But to see, from my perspective, some of our senior scholars in the field, our more seasoned scholars, and hear your stories and know that you are in these spaces still, flipping tables and moving things around so that we can have a different experience as mid-career scholars, is so important to me for us not to forget, that you all are still... You've gotten to

these spaces, but you're still pushing things around and shifting things for us, and that that onus is on us now to do that.

Royel Johnson:

To flip some tables also.

Felecia Commodore:

To flip some tables and move and shift things for the scholars.

Royel Johnson:

Well, listen, I've been working out, so I'm ready to flip some tables.

Felecia Commodore:

Well, I don't need to work out to flip that table. I am a seasoned table flipper.

Royel Johnson:

I better exercise the muscles.

Felecia Commodore:

Yes. But yeah, I think it's always good to remember that we're not the first and we won't be the last and we all are in this still, together.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. But that's the other thing about the pandemic and the journey that I went on. Part of listening to those podcasts, I was learning strategy for how to flip tables. How to flip tables, and if I can keep the relationship intact, I'm going to do that. But also recognize that sometimes I'm not going to be able to do that, and that's okay. Because when it comes down to you oppressing me, that's the line. That's the line of... Mm-mm. We don't come back. You going to have to get yourself together and own that before we can move forward. But so much strategy, from listening to stories of icons and people who have come before us, who flipped much bigger tables.

Felecia Commodore:

Right, right.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. My advisor used to always say, "Not every issue is a stand on the table issue. But when you get to that stand on the table issue, you better be ready to break the table."

Felecia Commodore:

Right.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Right. Absolutely.

Royel Johnson:

I think we have to be judicious and figure out which fights are ours and which ones that we need to just self persevere, and take care-

Felecia Commodore:

And which fights are not ours to fight alone. I think strategy is... I'm big on that. And that sometimes we have to think about who is the best person to be at the front? Who's the best person to be the support? Who's the best person to maybe loosen the legs on the table?

Royel Johnson:

Meet him before the meeting.

Felecia Commodore:

Or break the table.

Royel Johnson:

So you can run in with a strategy.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. And again, thinking how we all have our different perspectives, strengths, and gifts, and really working together strategically, as a network of people trying to change things and create a more humanized higher education system.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Absolutely.

Felecia Commodore:

How do we do that together, as opposed to trying to do it in these silos and wearing ourselves out?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Right. Yep. And so, embedded in some of these strategies were in fact humanizing approaches. You asked me where I got the theme part of it. Some of it came from just, that was what I came away with. There are other ways to be, do, and know, that are not dehumanizing. And part of what I got from my reeducation of sorts is, "There's a space for this, but it's going to look real different. It's going to be things like..." Because I read Bell Hooks' All About Love again. It's just like, "Dang, people really don't-"

Felecia Commodore:

One of my favorite books.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Right. You talk about love in the Academy, everybody screams out, "What do you mean? [inaudible 00:38:34]." But there is space for that and if you allow for it, it'll take you... I just have this saying. I don't want to be like what I've seen in the Academy. I don't want to be anything like that. I think there's space

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to be and do and know differently. But it's going to take a lot of courage and a lot of vulnerability, which feel like kryptonite to the Academy. But I'm the kryptonite.

Royel Johnson:

I love it.

Felecia Commodore:

So this year, ASHE is returning to Las Vegas. For those of us who have done an ASHE Vegas, it's quite an experience.

Royel Johnson:

Which is crazy. That was my first ASHE, 10 years ago. So this is full circle, going back 10 years later.

Felecia Commodore:

That was the first ASHE I presented at, was ASHE Las Vegas.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Nice.

Royel Johnson:

We were at the Cosmopolitan.

Felecia Commodore:

Mm. We won't talk about-

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah, that was interesting.

Felecia Commodore:

Quite an experience at 9:00 in the morning. Vegas is a very interesting city. So this year we're going back to Vegas. What should people look forward to there? What should we be thinking about and getting ready for at ASHE Vegas?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. There's going to be so much to look forward to, and I'm excited. Well, first I hope that members will expand their knowledge about Vegas beyond the Strip.

Royel Johnson:

Yes.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Right. And so we had the-

Royel Johnson:

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Get out of those casinos.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Oh gosh. So much more.

Felecia Commodore:

Pause. Some of us are... We're humanized.

Royel Johnson:

We need to do more than the casinos this year.

Felecia Commodore:

But we can do more than the casino.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

You can do more. You can do more.

Felecia Commodore:

More than the slot machines. But the slot machines are... We all have our vices.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. But we're going to learn more about Vegas than the Strip. And so our local community engagement committee is working hard to cultivate some experiences, to help us learn more about Indigenous peoples and their contributions to the land and space and place. And so I'm excited about that. We had a chance, as the program committee, to go there in preparation.

Felecia Commodore:

Shout out to the program committee, who does a lot of work.

Royel Johnson:

Yes, yes, yes.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. The program committee, I don't know about previous presidents, but I have the most hype program committee.

Royel Johnson:

Love that.

Felecia Commodore:

That's wonderful.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

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When we tweet something, we tweet it. I love them. I love them so. But we had an opportunity just to be in community and we went off the Strip and it's like, who knew? Vegas was-

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. That there's a life outside of-

Joy Gaston Gayles:

There's a life outside the Strip. And it's actually nice. There's so much culture and art. We just had a good time, and I've heard many of them say, "When I come back in November, I'm going back to this space."

Felecia Commodore:

Great. Yeah.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Because it was so-

Royel Johnson:

Check out Lake Mead too, for folks who are coming back. I love Lake Mead.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. So I encourage you to venture off. Don't venture off too far. You'll miss your session.

Royel Johnson:

But come back.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

But come back. And then the amazing Vanessa Sansone is going to do another institute to help us further engage-

Royel Johnson:

Shoutout to Vanessa.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

...with issues prevalent to what's happening in that part of our country, and so I'm excited about that. You also have to look forward to our dynamic keynotes. We have some cool keynotes.

Felecia Commodore:

You have some great keynotes.

Royel Johnson:

Yes. Looking forward to that.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

And so I don't know-

Royel Johnson:

And we're looking forward to your keynote.

Felecia Commodore:

That's right.

Speaker 2:

Presidential address.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

No pressure, no pressure.

Speaker 2:

They just keep going up and up every year.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. The bar keeps raising.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

I know. I'm feeling it. I'm feeling it. So I'm trying to work some things out. Working some things out, but I'm excited. I don't know if this is the first time that we've had an international scholar as a keynote. David Gillborn is coming from the UK, and he's an amazing scholar. Has done a lot of work on critical race theory and critical issues in education.

Royel Johnson:

And editor of Race, Ethnicity, and Education.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yes. And so I encourage you to engage with his work, find him, find some podcasts, just so you have an understanding of what he's bringing to that conversation. So I'm super, super excited about having him come all the way from the UK. And then the amazing Ruha Benjamin. If you haven't read her book, *Race After Technology*, you got to read it. And she has an amazing TED Talk that blew my socks off. When you think about, AI has always scared me, particularly as I walk around with this tracking device called the iPhone, just in terms of how fast we're moving. And if we're not careful, we going to bake systemic oppression right on into algorithms in ways that we don't even fully-

Royel Johnson:

Already have.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Oh, we already have. And that's a humanizing thing. Because if you think for one minute that because we created this algorithm, so it's not biased. Well, guess who put the bias in the algorithm? The people.

Right? The people who designed it. And let's be honest. When you think about design technology, it's not based on the least of these. It's not based on people who have been pushed to the margins. It's based on people who have access and privilege and power. And so it's already problematic, if I'm gearing all of the technological advances to that segment.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. And so important, as we are transitioning into this world affected by COVID, because technology is now ramping up in our classrooms and the way that our institutions do what they do. And so I think that's such a timely and important conversation to talk about that now, because everything we're doing concerning our students or even our staff and faculty, technology is about to play a role that we haven't seen before, so we need to know.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. Check out Safiya Noble's book, *Algorithms of Oppression*, too, is a good resource.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah. So I'm super excited. And Ruha has a new book coming out, just in time for the conference, so we'll hopefully have copies there. So yeah, I'm excited. It's going to be good. It's going to be good.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Royel Johnson:

We know the last two years have been really difficult for so many people. How are you finding creating joy, Joy?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Gosh. I feel like it should come naturally to me because my mom named me Joy. But it's interesting. I was at a symposium, inaugural symposium at Princeton University, earlier in the spring, and I was invited to talk about cultivating joy. Because the theme for the Inclusive Academy Symposium that the amazing Renita Miller put on, it was amazing. The theme was "Cultivating genius and joy." So I had to think about that thing, because it's not easy and it's more than what meets the eye. And to me, part of that conversation involved distinguishing joy from happiness. It's not the same. Happiness is that fleeting... Something good happens, you feel good in the moment, and if you're not careful, you can sink right back into the sunken place. But joy is something that is on the inside. And when I think about-

Royel Johnson:

You can't take my joy.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Exactly. Shirley Caesar, and then Beyonce comes out with the follow-up to the Shirley Caesar. It's something that's not given to you by the world. It's something that is inside of you. We all have it, and we just have to tap into it. For me, I had a shirt on that said, "Joy is an act of resistance," because it really is.

Felecia Commodore:

It is.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Because I feel like part of the dehumanization process is to steal your joy.

Royel Johnson:

To steal your joy.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Right? Or to stomp it out of you. So cultivating joy is so important, in ways that we don't fully understand. And I think it's a place where, to me, that's where your genius lies. That's where your creativity lies. That's where all of the ways in which when I say, "I don't want to be like anybody," that's the place where I find different ways of being, knowing, that come authentically from me. And how can I cultivate that so I know what it is and I can share it with the world?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

But if you get caught up in all the stuff, you will find that that place becomes dark. But that's your light. It's like a force field. And when you think about it like that, you got to protect it. You cannot afford not to cultivate joy in your life, even in the midst of all the things that are happening. We've had so many murders. Again, not that these things haven't been happening, but it feels different. It feels heightened in this moment. And if you're not careful, your light dims because you're so devastated. As you should be. And so you need to have space in place to deal with that, but you got to find your way back. You got to find your way back to your joy. And so if you don't know what that means for you, if you didn't hear nothing else I said today, find it.

Royel Johnson:

Find it.

Felecia Commodore:

Find it.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

And it looks different for all of us. For me, it's spaces where I can be helpful to others. When I think about my kids and I envision for them what their life could be, that's so much beyond what my life is... It's riding my bike and moving my body, because it's a privilege to be able to do so. And so I take a time out. I go on vacation because I need time away and I need time to think. And during the pandemic, it was getting a COVID puppy. Bentley is... I mean, Bentley, we ride.

Royel Johnson:

You got him in the pandemic?

Joy Gaston Gayles:

I did. I did. And he's my little companion. I walk him every day. That's how I found the nature trail behind my house during the pandemic. It was always back there, but I wasn't going. And I was like, "Well, I don't have nothing else to do." But that little 30 minute walk, that's where I did the Girltrek and that's where I found ways to do things that filled my spirit. And to me, that's cultivating joy. In crafts. Some of you have benefited from my crafty moments, but as tedious as it is to make things, something about it brings me joy.

Felecia Commodore:

I love crafting.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Because it translates into me being creative and coming up with creative solutions to really complex problems. If I can sit there and be in that creative space, I make all kind of connections to things that I was grappling with during my writing session earlier. But if you don't make time for it, if you tell yourself, "I don't have time to do these things that are not related to academia," you never find the key connections that come.

Royel Johnson:

Stop waiting to get tenure to do things that bring you joy.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

There's a book by Tracy Lewis-Giggetts called Black Joy and it's stories of resistance and... I can't remember the other word, but the last word is restoration. And I think that's the other part of joy. You need to find that joy to restore the ways in which these systems and these jobs and all of these things, and us just existing in these societies, especially those of us with marginalized and oppressed identities, that deplete us.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yes.

Royel Johnson:

They conspire it in the [inaudible 00:50:56] us.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. And so the finding that joy, to being persistent and intentional about finding and developing joy, is a way and a path to restoration.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Absolutely.

Felecia Commodore:

So that we can continue to do the work.

Royel Johnson:

Shout to the Nap Ministry.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Oh my God. I was about to say that. That has freaked me, because guess what also brings me joy? Taking a nap.

Royel Johnson:

I need to tap into that.

Felecia Commodore:

I need to get [inaudible 00:51:19].

Joy Gaston Gayles:

I'm telling you.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. I need to figure the nap thing out. Well, I got to figure the sleep thing out, and then the nap thing.

Royel Johnson:

You don't sleep.

Felecia Commodore:

I don't sleep.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

We're working on it. We working on it.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

You got to get your eight hours. I'm telling you.

Felecia Commodore:

We're working on it. The senior scholars are getting me together. People are working on it. Yes.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

But it's so important. I really do feel like if everybody would tap it into their joy, the world would be a better place because you might not be so evil. It might be a cure for narcissism too.

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Felecia Commodore:

I don't know about that.

Royel Johnson:

Listen, that's another episode.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

That's a script.

Felecia Commodore:

I don't have no psychology degree. I'm going to stay in my lane.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Right. I'm telling you. I'm just trying to be in a space where we can find some creative solutions to some long time, long term, deeply embedded problems.

Felecia Commodore:

Yes. Well, thank you so much, Joy. We've gotten to learn so much about you.

Royel Johnson:

What a way to kick off the series.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. And your vision for the Association, but also for this podcast and in the field at large. We are super, super grateful and blessed to have you, not only here to talk with, but have you be a part and a pillar of our higher education community. We're all better for it. So this was our kickoff episode. Everybody come back for the upcoming episodes.

Royel Johnson:

We have so much in store for you.

Felecia Commodore:

Such great conversations are coming, with other brilliant scholars, practitioners.

Royel Johnson:

And register for the conference, if you haven't already. Register for the conference.

Felecia Commodore:

And get a room.

Speaker 2:

Yes.

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Royel Johnson:

Shoutout to the staff at ASHE who are working tirelessly.

Felecia Commodore:

Yes. Amazing staff.

Royel Johnson:

Especially our fearless executive director, Jason, to bring to us a humanizing conference experience.

Joy Gaston Gayles:

Yes, yes.

Felecia Commodore:

Yes, you don't want to miss this ASHE. And if you are struggling to find your joy, get to Vegas. We're going to help you find it in Vegas.

Royel Johnson:

We're the joy curators.

Felecia Commodore:

It's going to be a different higher education, a different ASHE when we leave. And so thank you again.
(Music)

Felecia Commodore:

Thank you to our guest, ASHE President Dr. Joy Gaston Gayles, for joining us today and dropping all of her wisdom and OG knowledge, as she gave us a preview of what we should expect at the ASHE 2022 annual meeting in Las Vegas. At the end of each conversation, we'd like to engage in a segment called scholar soundtrack, as we reflect on what musical selections rang in our minds as we reflect on the day's conversation. Today, the song that came to our minds was Break My Soul by Beyonce, because we are being charged this year by both B and Dr. Joy to not lose our joy. And we're going to figure out just how to do that as we continue to discuss humanizing higher education in this podcast series. Don't forget that there will be a scholar soundtrack and syllabus for today's episode, and all of the episodes in the ASHE Presidential Podcast series. We've got you covered on all sides, folks.

Royel Johnson:

Buckle up and get ready for the conversations to come. You don't want to miss this. Join us next week as we continue to discuss humanizing higher education. Till next week, I'm Royel.

Felecia Commodore:

I'm Felecia.

Royel Johnson:

Until next time, keep it human.

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Felecia Commodore:

Keep it human. (Music)