

Royel Johnson:

Greetings ASHE family, and welcome back to ASHE Presidential Podcast Series, season four. I'm Royel Johnson, Associate Professor of Higher Education and Social Work at the University of Southern California. And I'm joined by my dear friend and colleague.

Felecia Commodore:

Hi, I'm Felecia Commodore, Associate Professor of Higher Education at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign. And we are excited. We're back for the fourth season of the ASHE Presidential Podcast. We have a great lineup this year.

Royel Johnson:

Amazing. Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

We're having great conversations. It's the 50th anniversary of ASHE. The theme is The Bend in the Arc.

Royel Johnson:

The Bend in the Arc. Yes.

Felecia Commodore:

And so we're really excited, Royel. And there's one little change you might be seeing.

Royel Johnson:

There's a small minor one.

Felecia Commodore:

There's something a little different.

Royel Johnson:

You can see us, right?

Felecia Commodore:

You can see us. You can see us. So we are live and in color this season.

Royel Johnson:

Yes.

Felecia Commodore:

And so we'll be joining you again in your cars, in your offices, in your showers, if that's your business. And we are looking forward to the conversations we're about to have.

Royel Johnson:

So literally, buckle up your seats. We have an amazing group of panelists in store this season, but we're going to start first with our president, none other than Dr. Eboni Zamani-Gallagher, who is the Renee and Richard Goldman Dean at the University of Pittsburgh School of Education. Welcome.

Felecia Commodore:

Welcome, Eboni.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallagher:

Thank you. Good to be with you.

Royel Johnson:

We are so excited to have you, and I'm excited to have you both here in Los Angeles.

Felecia Commodore:

Always a great time coming to LA.

Royel Johnson:

Yes. The fourth season of the podcast, which is crazy. Thank you for having us back this year.

Felecia Commodore:

Yes.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallagher:

Most definitely.

Royel Johnson:

So we're looking forward to the season. We have lots of folks that we plan to be in conversation with, but we have to start the conversation with you, of course, the person who sets the tone and theme of the season. And it's The Bend of the Arc.

Felecia Commodore:

The Bend In the Arc.

Royel Johnson:

The Bend in the Arc. And we're going to talk a little bit about that.

Felecia Commodore:

The arc is bending. That's what's important.

Royel Johnson:

The arc is bending. We'll talk about that in a moment.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallagher:

It's so bent.

Royel Johnson:

So we start every season off with a game. And you are from Chicago like me. And so I wanted to start with this really important defining one. This or That, you just choose which one. Harold's Chicken or Uncle Remus.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Harold's.

Royel Johnson:

See, she's from the South Side.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Harold's Chicken. Right.

Royel Johnson:

Exactly.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Yeah. Some West Side stuff there.

Royel Johnson:

Exactly. Exactly. I'm all for this person.

Felecia Commodore:

So we're going to keep on in Chicago.

Royel Johnson:

Yes.

Felecia Commodore:

And so my question is deep dish or thin thrust?

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Thin crust.

Royel Johnson:

Thin crust. Anybody who's from Chicago knows it's thin crust. Visitors and tourists do deep dish, yes.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Not this visitor. I tried and I felt like I had jumped into a mozzarella and marinara pie.

Royel Johnson:

It's too much. It is way too much. So next one. I think I kind of know this one, but I'm not sure. Morning person or night owl?

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Night owl.

Royel Johnson:

Night owl. Felecia's a night owl.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. Night owls unite.

Royel Johnson:

Yes. I am a morning person.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

I'm trying to be a morning person too.

Royel Johnson:

Begrundetly.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

I'm allergic.

Royel Johnson:

It is not on purpose.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Pop a Benadryl because I have such issues with mornings.

Felecia Commodore:

It's not right.

Royel Johnson:

Oh my God. I struggle. Yes.

Felecia Commodore:

So last one, truth, or dare.

Royel Johnson:

Choose wisely.

Felecia Commodore:

Well, okay, truth.

Royel Johnson:

Truth. Okay. A person of integrity.

Felecia Commodore:

Yes.

Royel Johnson:

Okay. I'm getting confused.

Felecia Commodore:

I'm a dare girl. It caused me a lot of trouble growing up, but I'm here. I made it.

Royel Johnson:

You're a rebel rouser.

Felecia Commodore:

Well, so now we've gotten through This or That. We want to learn more about what you're doing in the ASHE presidency, what we're thinking about this year with the conference, but then also a little more about you as a scholar and your career and how you're fairing in our new existence of higher ed right now in society.

Royel Johnson:

Which I love this question, because we always get to... Or this sort of format, we always get to learn more about the president in a more intimate setting in ways that people may not know, details and insights. So one, just tell us a little bit about yourself. People may have picked up that you're from Chicago already. I know that you wear like 20 different 5011 hats.

Felecia Commodore:

Yes.

Royel Johnson:

But tell us what you do. What are all the roles that you play at this moment?

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Well, let's see. A couple of hats. I, of course, am deaning right now at the School of Education.

Royel Johnson:

And what a time to be a dean.

Felecia Commodore:

What a time to be a dean.

Royel Johnson:

Yes.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

It is a really interesting time to be an academic leader. But between being Dean of the School of Education at the University of Pittsburgh, I serve as the Executive Director for the Council for the Study of Community Colleges, which is nearing seven decades old.

Royel Johnson:

Oh wow.

Felecia Commodore:

Oh wow.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

And is the Affiliate Council of the American Association of Community Colleges, basically the researchers. And so that's headquartered at Pitt with us and proudly serving and looking forward to closing out my presidency as the ASHE president in another seven weeks or so. And hats that I wear, I might work extra time and overtime, but I am mom to Nia and Nala and Mrs. G to James all the time and every time. And so with the juggling act that is this thing called life and life living, what I have been trying to make sure is that with every hat that I have on, that I don't lose sight in that juggling act of what is the most important pieces and parts of this life and not confuse my things to do list with having a life. And so I think in this season of my career, while I'm still going strong and going hard, I'm also very unapologetically making time for myself and not leaving myself as the last on that list.

Royel Johnson:

Come on.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

So that's been real-

Royel Johnson:

Yes. And we want to hear more about that later. We were talking about this at dinner a little bit, just about, I know I was saying I have been trying not to work in the evenings and on the weekends and how difficult that's been, but we'll talk more later about-

Felecia Commodore:

I've been hiding under the covers, not figured that out at all yet, but I have a therapist, and so we're figuring it out. So Eboni, this year's theme is The Bend in the Arc, and it invites scholars to explore how academic work and creative expression can advance justice and systemic change in higher education. Could you share with us a little bit about what inspired this theme and what you hope it will spark as we approach the conference?

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

So the interesting thing about the theme is it actually was just front of mind and something that was resonating with me just in terms of the quote from Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. talking about it bends and it bends toward justice. And at the time I had been thinking about 2024. So this is Summer of '23, and I'm thinking about next year at that point, it was going to be the next year that's election year. And just trying to reconcile what I felt was this tension or pain point between progress and peril, and in post-secondary and how in post-secondary we're just but a microcosm of what's happening within the larger society.

And not knowing, trying to hold and leave space for what's to come and who would have thought that every time I would hear that word unprecedented during the pandemic and I thought, can we get something else to say for describing the sign of the times?

But yet again, it holds unprecedented times that we're having. And so I really wanted the theme to be one and I thought maybe this is prophetic that it came to me well in advance of understanding what our current reality is right now.

The other thing that came to mind was that quote really made me feel like it really captured the tension between the progress that we feel we have made and the stories of progress that have been told to us, and then the actual reality and that tension between what's rhetorical and what's real in terms of what we're experiencing, what we're having to navigate through. And so I said, "Hmm, that's interesting." Because on one hand, we're living during periods where for a lot of folks, they're experiencing it as dark, as deep, as depressing.

Royel Johnson:

A lot of folks including us, me, it's me.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Right. And so I thought we want a conference where we want to bring forth a critique, but we also want to bring forth critical hope at a time when it might feel like it's hopeless and that we've been here before.

Felecia Commodore:

I say this all the time.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

And that this is, like they say, "This too shall pass." And it will. And so as I thought about all of those things and trying to kind of come up with a tapestry for what we could touch on for the 50th, and understanding that that's a milestone moment for the organization, to be around five decades, it's the golden anniversary, even though it might not feel like-

Royel Johnson:

Golden times.

Felecia Commodore:

Golden.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Right. That all that glitters is gold. I just thought, okay, let's just try to have this as an expression and that I really wanted to kind of metaphorically take the arc piece to talk about the to and through and the to and through being the storyline of us as individual scholars, as us as a community of scholars within the association. And this is us in terms of America, to look at the various arcs in terms of our character and our journey and what the story is and the fact that it's still unwritten in a lot of ways.

Royel Johnson:

And that we have agency to write it as well in this moment.

Felecia Commodore:

And I think what really excites me about this theme and this idea of us coming together and really taking some time to do some introspection about where we are as a field, but as a field within this larger kind of project of the country and society, but this idea of critical hope and reminding, I think this is a really great time to remind us of our ability and power as scholars. And that we're not just doing this to publish and get tenure and to get positions, but that we can actually, through our scholarship, create change and form. I find this has been an amazing time as a higher ed scholar to be like, "Hey, let me tell you how this works or how it's supposed to work." And finding out how many people don't really understand.

Royel Johnson:

That our expertise matters. Now more than ever-

Felecia Commodore:

Our scholarship matters.

Royel Johnson:

... our scholarship matters. Exactly.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

That was one hat that I was wearing at one point.

Royel Johnson:

Yes, yes, I remember.

Felecia Commodore:

And so I just think this is a really good time to say The Bend in The Arc is important and we need to be there, right?

Royel Johnson:

So what is the tagline? There's another tagline around creativity.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

So it's The Bend in the Arc and then kind of a sub theme to that is activist practice and justice through scholarly creative expression.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Royel Johnson:

Scholarly creative expression. Yeah.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Yeah. So The Bend in the Arc is both an invitation and a challenge.

Felecia Commodore:

Yes.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

I think as educators, as scholars to really think about, as you said, how our work can help move the needle, how our work can help lift the veil of misunderstanding, miseducation.

Felecia Commodore:

That's me on on Threads and Facebook every day.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Having people to unlearn. And that it's just the acknowledgement that the struggle is real, that we've made progress and we can continue to, but that it is something that is ongoing in terms of really trying to get towards systemic change and justice. And the other part with the sub theme, if you will, was wanting for us to understand that as scholars, that it is about a art and a science. And I think oftentimes it's lost on us that there's an artistry to what we do and that there is a way in which our socialization and our doctoral programs and the academy is such that it gets wrote and it can get mundane and it can feel stale. And because this is our 50th year, I wanted us to take some creative swings and to think about how we conference and how we caucus and how we do our scholarship in ways that might seem unconventional, like this podcast as one means of dissemination.

So when we talk about broader impacts, when we talk about how we disseminate our work, how we create knowledge and those knowledge contributions, that there's so many different layers and colors and mediums by which we can play in. And so I wanted that to be something that we really talked about, as well as the theme, because I think it's through that artistry that sometimes we could also refresh ourselves, and not get restless, and also to remind ourselves that at a time when our sector, so many sectors, but in particular our field is under attack, that this art form is one that will not die, and it's one that we're going to continue to resist and persist. And so ASHE is a story of persistence and progress as is each and every one of us in terms of our journey. And so I think it's going to be a really good time to come together, to fellowship, to be in community, and to do so in ways that, again, are just beyond what we conventionally would do in a convening and conference space.

Royel Johnson:

So you started answering the next question around the podcast and why this season, but part of the theme around creative expression I think is really important because so much of academia and how we've been, to your point, socialized to believe how our academic role should be is that it sort of stifles creativity, right?

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Royel Johnson:

That you're taught to not be creative, that there's a formula for how we write papers and there's no room for creative expression. And so I love that you leaned into it and shout out to former President Joy Gaston Gayles for conceiving the idea for the podcast and we've now at the fourth season, but maybe talk a little bit about why it was important to continue the podcast under your administration.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. So the podcast to me, well, one, I love podcasts.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, me too.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

I love podcasts.

Felecia Commodore:

I have a problem.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

And I very much enjoyed my opportunity to be a featured guest in the podcast. When Madam Past President Joy had envisioned this and it has been an audio experience and wanting to build on that foundation with this that she created, but also wanting to step outside the frame and blend in my own color palette to the podcast, I wanted us to be live. I wanted you to see us. And I also felt like I just enjoy being able to have a format that sparks reflection, critical, honest conversation and dialogue where we can, unlike when you present at a conference and everybody has the three or four papers in the 15 minutes, or when we are able to just let our hair down in some ways where we can share who we are as scholars, but understanding that we aren't just what we do.

Royel Johnson:

Exactly.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

I think sometimes with the scholarly identity, people will conflate what they do with who they are. And I think that a podcast allows for us to show a little bit more of our humanity in and outside of our classrooms, our campuses, to be a little bit more vulnerable around how we enter the space and the place and the work we do and what really jazzes us, what really gets on our last nerve. And so I thought

that this was a really kind of case in point of that kind of tagline in terms of the sub theme around scholarly creative expression.

Royel Johnson:

Got it.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

This is just one example of a myriad of ways where we can be in community, we can learn together, we can continue to know and grow, but do it in a format that doesn't just box us into, okay, call for proposals to mention a conference and present your conference in this capacity or submit your article or your book perspectives, but just to... And I think that when we do that, when we allow ourselves to be more creative, I think we're able to reach a broader-

Royel Johnson:

A broader audience, yeah.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

... audience.

Felecia Commodore:

Absolutely.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

And so we get into this whole thing with promotion and tenure reviews around impact factors and fours. And for a lot of practitioners or even lay people that, because there's a value proposition, we still have not quite made fully around higher education has impact and the public good that is our sector. But I think through having venues like this, that we can bring more folks into the fold, kind of pop the hood so they could see what we're working with, look at this engine, see what fuels us to understand a bit more about why what we do is very necessary.

Royel Johnson:

And I can't tell you how many people I know who have listened to the podcast who are not in higher education, who told me I love the episode or people in our field who use it as part of their instructional practice, they include it. They have to listen to it as part of the syllabus. And yeah, it's been intriguing.

Felecia Commodore:

What I love about the podcast is that I also think it makes us as scholars more human to folks.

Royel Johnson:

Yes. I am a human.

Felecia Commodore:

Humanizing higher education. I am a scholar. We're doing all the things.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Yeah, coming full circle.

Royel Johnson:

It's a through line.

Felecia Commodore:

And so for emerging scholars, grad students and even our peers, I think it helps us not feel like we have to perform being scholars.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

There's a lot of performativity.

Royel Johnson:

You don't have to tell me.

Felecia Commodore:

And so it's like you can be human and normal and yourself and still be a scholar. And I think it also, when I've talked to folks, it makes what we talk about and the research we do, by doing it in this format or having the conversations format more accessible.

Royel Johnson:

More legible, yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

... and more ... It helps emerging scholars see how to be conversational in what they do because I do think a lot of the socialization is how do I get up in front of people, I want to make sure I'm saying the right things.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Pontificate.

Felecia Commodore:

And you know what epistemological stance means.

Royel Johnson:

I ain't saying nothing. Aint saying nothing.

Felecia Commodore:

Tell my students.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

What you talking about it?

Felecia Commodore:

I didn't know what epistemological meant for four years.

Royel Johnson:

Exactly.

Felecia Commodore:

And I sat there and was like, yeah. I had no idea what people were talking about, but I think it makes it like you can just talk about this stuff in ways that you talk around any kitchen table or sitting on phone or in your living room with folks so that we can make this what we do and what we know more accessible, which is so important right now with so much misinformation about what higher ed is and its value going around.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

I think what we can always use more of are spaces that kind of bridge scholarship and leadership and experience, but do it kind of wrapped in this package of authentic and thought-provoking conversations, right? I don't know. I always have an appetite for authenticity.

Royel Johnson:

Same.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Same.

Royel Johnson:

I can tell you what I don't have an appetite for. A lot of things. Arrogance and...

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Oh, and we see that in the academy. I mean, we do have some colleagues whose heads are so big. I don't know that they would clear that doorway. And so that's the thing is keeping it real, keeping the 100 and also understanding that this I think is a way that you can have an example of how do you bring your whole self?

Felecia Commodore:

Your whole self. Yeah. Your whole self. There's so many interesting
Through lines.

Royel Johnson:

I'm thinking about the past conversations and the season themes. I am a scholar and humanizing higher education

Felecia Commodore:

Because we've been wrestling with all of these conversations about what does it mean to be a scholar who gets assumed to be a scholar. The multidimensions of ourself that we sometimes have to silence or relegate when we enter academic spaces. And I think about this year's theme and this bend in the arc and the original quote of any towards justice. And my whole thing is, how are we supposed to get to this desired hope or place of justice and inclusion and realizing the best version of what higher ed can be if we have not even created spaces for us to get to the best versions of who we are when we are trying to keep parts of ourselves outside of the academy or trying to do work with communities and advocate with communities when we're bifurcating ourselves and can't even advocate for ourselves. So I think it's important for us to have these spaces to develop ourselves so that we can do better work.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. And role model to the next generation too, what it means to show up in this space that you can bring the fullness of yourself.

Felecia Commodore:

Because I want to know who you really are because let me tell you what's going to happen. What's going to happen is the real you going to show up one of these days and all of us are going to be like, "Who is that person?"

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

I know, right?

Royel Johnson:

Exactly. Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

So let's just meet you from the beginning so we can work with that person.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Yeah. And that's been me from day one. A1, day one is what you see is what you get, there's good, there's bad, there's ugly or whatever. But I also, deep down, I think of myself as kind of a griot, and I think part of why I like podcasts is there's a storytelling component within a podcast, right? Again, that intersection. And so for this podcast, it's the intersection of our lived experience with our scholarship and our personal lives and our leadership or what have you. But I think just overall, again, that gets back to that term arc. When I think about, if you were my series runner, my story runner, my director, my Debbie Allen.

Royel Johnson:

The showrunner.

Felecia Commodore:

The showrunner.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Right. Showrunner. And that's what Shauna's been with this conference. I call her my showrunner, my Debbie, AKA Debbie. But again, what is the storyline and what is the character arc?

Felecia Commodore:

Oh yeah, what is it we're trying to say?

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

And we all some characters.

Felecia Commodore:

A lot of characters.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

But what does that trajectory look like in terms of ... And so I think the podcast is reminiscent of that for me. Some of the highlights in the conference that we're going to have that Wednesday after our pre-con, I'm calling Wednesday edutainment night.

Royel Johnson:

Nice.

Felecia Commodore:

Oh, I love it.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, I'm looking forward to it.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Edutainment, because here's the funny thing. When I was a kid growing up, I wanted to be an entertainer. I remember telling my mom, whenever I would see Facts of Life and I'd see Kim Fields on those roller skates and I was like, "That should be rolling."

Royel Johnson:

That's what I want to do.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

I should be rolling.

Felecia Commodore:

Thought you wanted to be Tootie.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

I could be making you some money ma. And she'd be like, "Go get in the book." I would write little monologues and riffs and ...

Royel Johnson:

So people don't know that you are a poet though. I do like to write poetry and it's so interesting, I would write jokes, I would sing it, I was in a made for TV movie actually with Red Fox and Curtis blowing on. We had rapping roots. I was rapping. Had the little ... Well, it wasn't little. I had the big old boombox on my shoulder.

Felecia Commodore:

That boombox had to be big as you Eboni.

Royel Johnson:

We need to add that to this frame. We need to see that in the drop.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

But I really, really ... We talk about Cedric the Entertainer. I was going to be entertaining.

Felecia Commodore:

Eboni the entertainer.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

To entertain. And my mom, that whole notion of, like Maya would say, I am the dream and the hope of the slave, but I am that dream deferred from my mother. She wanted college.

Felecia Commodore:

She said she singing does not pay the bills.

Royel Johnson:

She said, as for me and my house.

Felecia Commodore:

There's plenty of people on the corner with their shoulda, coulda, woulda.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Everybody would expect you to entertain, but educate? And so because she was like that vast majority of folks, a lot of times we talk about some college, no degree, "Pop quiz. Eboni, what you going to do in the future?"

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, yeah.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Go to college. Or what? Go to college. She's like, "Good girl. I'll feed you now."

Felecia Commodore:

That was real for a generation.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Yes. All that.

Royel Johnson:

Especially for [inaudible 00:28:22].

Felecia Commodore:

Education was the great equalizer, liberator.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Exactly.

Royel Johnson:

It's a pathway. Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

It was our pathway to better.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

She thought it was a panacea in so many ways. And so for me, I still, I said, "Well, I guess I'll have to ... I told her, I said, "Well, I guess I'll have to just educate my students about entertaining them." Edutain.

Royel Johnson:

Edutain, yeah.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Okay. Edutain. So Wednesday night's edutainment night, we're going to have a storyteller's lounge.

Royel Johnson:

Wow.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

So this podcast is one means of storytelling. We'll have at the conference Wednesday evening where folks can come to Say it With Your Chest uncensored.

Felecia Commodore:

Oh, wow.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

And then following that, we're going to have the Laugh Lounge, a comedy hour.

Royel Johnson:

Some comedians in the association.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

But look.. but listen.

Felecia Commodore:

There's comedians walking around the conference all the time. They just don't know it.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Cracking me up. But here's the thing.

Royel Johnson:

Don't sit in the front row. You'll get roasted.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

The state of affairs, we need it. We need joy and release. We got to laugh to keep from crying y'all. So that's what we're going to do.

Royel Johnson:

I was centering joy in that.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Yeah, we're centers hope. So again, the arc, the piece of a storyline, yeah, that's the through line.

Royel Johnson:

Okay.

Felecia Commodore:

I love that. So you did talk a little bit about this and we've been kind of talking about throughout where we're at right now with what's going on in this country, particularly regarding higher education. And so we're at this interesting inflection point in our nation's history, there's been attacks on higher education as a whole, attacks around diversity, equity, and inclusion. And some would say we're not sure if there's an arc towards justice at all. And so I wanted to know, as our association celebrates this 50th anniversary and we're thinking about this theme, what do you see the association's role in responsibility and responding to the challenges facing higher education today?

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

So that's a great question. And I think that as a professional organization, it is definitely part for the course that we rallied the troops. And what is happening too is reminiscent of, I'll never forget when we had our conference in 2016.

Royel Johnson:

On, in Columbus?

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

In Columbus, Ohio.

Felecia Commodore:

Oh yes, yes.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

And that was the day after the 2016 election.

Felecia Commodore:

It was so heavy.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

I'd never experienced ... I've been a member and engaged with ASHE since 1997.

Felecia Commodore:

[inaudible 00:31:12].

Royel Johnson:

You didn't need to say that out loud.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

I'm like, "I'm vintage." For sure. I know I'm vintage. And I guess I could be... And if I was a team mama maybe your mama, what I'm saying is, this that good Black that don't crack.

Felecia Commodore:

That's right. That's right.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

But in reminiscing and thinking about just six ... What is it? No, 2016, almost 10 years ago. When I walked into the space, the first person I saw was Sean Harper as I was headed to the registration table. And I was given a keynote for CEPs. Oh, I remember. Business meeting. Were you in there? I was in there. Yeah. That's one of the few times rare where I had a standing ovation. And what I ended up doing was not what I intended to do, but it's because of what Sean had shared with me as I was heading to the table.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

He said, "So you're doing the keynote for CEP?" I said, "Yes." He said, "I hope you got some elixir and a balm to put on this hurting that some folks are feeling."

Felecia Commodore:

People were feeling it.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

And I went back to my room and that's when I wrote this poem called Our Scholarship. And then I kind of just was in this mood like, "Okay, well, I guess we going to go to church."

Royel Johnson:

And we did.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

But that was what we needed.

Royel Johnson:

We needed it.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

And it feels reminiscent right now in terms of where the space and the heaviness of the place. But again, I think as an association we'll rally, we're going to continue to do the work in terms of advancing knowledge, scholarship, practice, belonging, equitizing spaces. We're going to continue to try to do that work. And I think part of it is just where this, I hate to use that word unprecedented again, but I swear it does not want to crawl out of my skull.

Royel Johnson:

It continues to be unprecedented. Yeah.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Because it is so accurate, a depiction of where we are. But ASHE as an association is one that is leaning in and toes down relative to our values and our mission and supporting our members.

Royel Johnson:

And shout out to Jason. Our co-executive director.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Our members and shout out to our ED.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. And the team.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

And the home team. Because certainly as we're convening, much of what's happening in the background, in the back room-

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. This is hard work for the board.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Is them really helping to keep things moving. But yes, this has been an interesting and challenging year to be in the presidency for ASHE, as well as to be steering a school of education.

Royel Johnson:

And another association where you're an executive director and, and, and a mom of college students.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Yes. And trying to keep my girls encouraged, right?

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. A lot of them was their first election.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

It was. It was.

Felecia Commodore:

And it wasn't what they thought it was going to be, I think.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

No. And I think some folks are wondering, will it be our last election?

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Royel Johnson:

Well, that too. Well, talk a little bit about the way in which you've sought to bend the arc in your own work as a scholar and now as a leader of an academic unit, as a school of education.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

So I think in a word, marginalization is kind of what I would say is a thread that you could weave throughout, I think, the body of my efforts in terms of any written work or how I show up and try to advance initiatives or policies, show up for students. I have very little tolerance for folks being on the margins and not feeling like they matter. And so I think early in my career, I remember when I was going up for promotion and tenure initially, my assistant to associate, and one of the colleagues that was on the P&T committee, I come in that Sunday, I went on campus and he was in, and back then we had to put all the binders and numbers.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah, you had print everything out.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

He's like, "Oh, I'm happy to see you because I'm going through your things and I don't get it. "

Felecia Commodore:

Oh.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Yeah.

Royel Johnson:

What?

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

I said, "I'm sorry."

Royel Johnson:

Wait, what?

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

And he said, "So what do you do? Who are you?" I said, "Who am I?" He said, yeah, "It's so eclectic."

Felecia Commodore:

Eclectic.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

He said, "Eclectic." And I said, "Eclectic?" He said, "Well, I mean, I get that you want to study stuff about Black folks."

Felecia Commodore:

Oh.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Yeah. But the way he did it, the posture was, it felt very-

Felecia Commodore:

That's cute.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Dismissive. And he discounted the fact that just because I'm a Black woman that wants to make a knowledge contribution, understanding, exploring and furthering others, understanding of pathways for black collegians or black faculty or what have you, that somehow that was happenstance, it was hobby, it wasn't trigger, it wasn't trivial work. Trivial work. It was like, that's cute.

And so I told him, he said, "Well, I mean, because you did that and then you got this piece that's around disability and then you got ... And now it looks like you're kind of doing stuff around LGBTQ or have interest in that. And it just feels like it's all over the place." And I said, "Well, I guess from your vantage

point, it might appear to be all over the place." I said, "Because you study and you are from the dominant culture."

Felecia Commodore:

There it is.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

And so when you are ... One of the quotes I love most that I want to say it was sociologist, Jason Katz, that said, "One way that dominance functions is by remaining unexamined." And so I said, "So sir, part of what I do in my work is I examine those that are on the margins, and really would love to matter." And I don't think that it's hit or miss or it's whatever I think that is, and I don't think it's eclectic because I think that for marginalized and minoritized communities, that we get it, and many of us have multiple memberships, but I'm like, "Dude." So that was interesting because his career was, I studied this one thing, this is where I live and this is where people meet me, but it also had, it was no bearings in terms of like, even that work I thought was interesting, but I'm like, "How are you unpacking that?" In terms of within and between group differences or contextualizing it more or ... So it was interesting.

Royel Johnson:

But so many of us have had these same kinds of questions. I mean, think about the people we've talked to over the podcast.

Felecia Commodore:

Oh yeah, yeah, absolutely.

Royel Johnson:

Students who have wrestled with these things. I remember when I was a junior faculty member at Penn State, an unnamed colleague said, "Well, you don't want to be the foster care scholar. I think you need to broaden. You need to do something else." I should send them a copy of my book.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Yes, you should. Yes, you should. I mean, that happened to me early on too. I remember the early years of my membership in ASHE, you couldn't count on one hand fully any type of session you could find that dealt with community college matters. And so I think that was also part of what attracted me to community colleges. I thought, "Oh, I'm going to be a maverick apparently." Because I think this is so dope that we have these institutions that are really trying to be democracy's doors in a sense because-

Royel Johnson:

Right. The access portals.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

... prior to community colleges, there really wasn't this mass or massification of higher education. Education really was about, again, still perpetuating the interest of elites and not thinking about broader participation or access. And once I, at that time, it was 30 years ago, it was 1995. I remember that was when Alicia said, "I think I'm falling." That's when I fell in love with community college scholarship. I fell in love because ... And I was like, "Yo, I'm tripping." Because I felt like I saw reflections of myself. I'm in

the literature, I'm immersing myself in the literature and I'm going, "Well, that was not what I thought where the Black collegiate was, or where most brown folk were."

And so I'm like, wait a minute, they're not at places like R1 this university by and large, but then the data also year after year after year, and I'm now 30 years doing this work, but still folks want to have, or they have goals that exceed the tier of education that they enter. And so my thing is, it's not just that they enter, it's where they enter and how do we support them and how do we close the gaps to help students have more mobility, educationally, financially. And so it was because community colleges had been at the margins of the larger higher ed land-

Royel Johnson:

And continues to be in many ways. Yeah.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

That also was part of what attracted me. So again, that whole piece around at the margin.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. One of the reasons I love ASHE as well is because those of us who may be doing work that at a particular time is not dominant in the literature-

Royel Johnson:

In vogue, yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

It's at ASHE where you can meet folks who you're like, "Yeah, I'm interested in that too." That's the story of me and Recover All and Dimitri Morgan. We were each kind of interested in board work and looking at it in these critical ways because it had not been looked at in critical ways and a lot that had to do with who was doing the research. And we found each other at ... It was so funny, me and Dmitri were in the hallway actually complaining like, "There's never sessions about orgs, never sessions about boards." And we went into this one session, Raquel was one of the presenters, she was presenting a paper and we were like, "Who's this Black woman doing board work? We must talk to her." And that's how we met. And when we first started doing this critical governance work, folks were like, "Nobody cares. This isn't important." And look at where we're at now, where now everybody cares.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. It's the same with me with system-impacted populations. That wasn't language that we use. It wasn't legible in that way. We weren't talking about formerly incarcerated students or young people impacted by the foster care system, but stick to it. If you're watching this podcast, listening

Felecia Commodore:

Beyonce told Chloe, and maybe it's worked for her or not, or she told Chloe, we'll leave that for you to decide. But she told them, "Do the music you want to do, people will catch up."

Royel Johnson:

People let them catch up.

Felecia Commodore:

Let them catch up. And I have found that to be true.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

I have a T-shirt that says, "Do you, they'll catch up."

Felecia Commodore:

And now shout out to Dimitri and Raquel, they have the Center for Study of Inclusive Governance. We've been able to do work around this and now we're having more people who are like, "Oh, maybe we should pay attention to who's on these boards, how it intersects with power." And so yeah.

Royel Johnson:

There's so many people who are inspired and empowered to do the work because you all have been doing it, so that's a blessing.

Felecia Commodore:

And we found each other at ASHE. So go to ASHE. So it's important. So Eboni, as you reflect on this moment, what gives you hope, because it talks about critical hope, what gives you hope about the future of higher education. And what legacy do you hope to leave with this 50th year anniversary?

Royel Johnson:

It's a heavy question. What legacy.

Felecia Commodore:

The legacy. Legacy. Legacy.

Royel Johnson:

Legacy. Legacy. Exactly.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Okay.

Royel Johnson:

I'm double barreled. It's a survey.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

It's a survey researcher.

Felecia Commodore:

I was thinking something else because I'm country. I won't say what it was.

Royel Johnson:

Double barrel gun?

Felecia Commodore:

I was like, are we talking about that?

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

The barrel pants. You know they're trying to bring those back, barrel jeans.

Felecia Commodore:

We all have different locations and positionality.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Yes, we have. So trying to unpack, I know one is you said the legacy of the conference, but what was the front end?

Felecia Commodore:

The other was what gives you hope about the future of [inaudible 00:45:51].

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Oh, what gives me hope. Well, I think part of what gives me hope is just understanding that there's an ebb and a flow. There's going to be peaks and valleys. And that there's always where we come out on the other side of it. It's just a matter of time. And what gives me hope is that folks are filling agency.

Royel Johnson:

Increasingly.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

So even in the midst of the whole stuck in shock and awe or looking like deers in headlights with all that is happening on the national stage and the news cycle and just globally even. But I think at the end of the day, what gives me hope is one, is if we can all just see the humanity in one another, even when we keep getting bombarded with images and messages to dehumanize one another, that within our space and our sector, that we still try to err on the side of that. I think what also gives me hope is the fact that I understand who I am and whose I am.

Felecia Commodore:

And let me tell you, that's important because everybody don't know who they are.

Royel Johnson:

No.

Felecia Commodore:

And these are the moments you got to find out who you are because that's all you're going to have to hold onto some days.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

That is all you going to have some days. And it's very important. I think part of why I say that in terms of hope is that this field and going the faculty route, higher ed, it's a trip and it's a real... I mean, literally and figuratively.

Felecia Commodore:

It is a voyage.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

And we talking about the journey and the trip that it is, I remember the front end of my career thinking it gets easier. No, it gets different.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah, it gets different.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

I don't know that I call it easier per se. Kind of like I remember as a new mom asking somebody like, "Tell me it gets easier." And they're like, "No. Why I'm going to tell you that?"

Felecia Commodore:

Suck it up buttercup.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Because at that time, they, forget the terrible twos. It was the tripped out threes.

Felecia Commodore:

Threenajors?

Royel Johnson:

And she has twins, by the way, too.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Yes, yes.

Felecia Commodore:

I've had to hold my friend's hands and be like, "You love your child. You love your child."

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

I was like, "Mama's in timeout." Everybody's knocking on the door. I'm like, "Mm-mm. No." I had to do a timeout. But I think that is a good segue in terms of talking about hope and timeout and bridging those two. We have to take the time to not just have all of this stuff seep into our souls. Like Beyonce said, "You won't break my soul." So much of what's happening right now, it feels soul wrenching. It feels soul breaking, but when you know who you are and whose you are...

Felecia Commodore:

That's it.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah. And what you're called to do.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

And walking in your purpose, understanding your purpose.

Felecia Commodore:

Your role in this as a movement and not just as an occupation.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Royel Johnson:

You don't have to be passive. I was thinking you said the 1997 version of yourself entering ASHE for the first time. Last question. What would you say to that version of Eboni? Seeing all that you saw, doing all the things that you've done, what do you tell her?

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

That's interesting. And then I'll try to see if I can bring connective tissue between that last question you asked me about the legacy, because what you just provided me with are bookends. One of my favorite African proverbs is if you want to know the end, look at the beginning. What I can say is for my beginning with ASHE in 1997, there was very little diversity, but I had this immediacy in terms of feeling like I think I found my people. In terms of home.

Felecia Commodore:

That's right. That was me and ASHE too.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

And I know it's different for everybody.

Royel Johnson:

Of course.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Everybody has their own story. But so Lynn Foster and Wynetta Lee and Jan Guyden and Caroline Turner. I miss Caroline. But those four, they just kind of welcomed me with open arms. And I was introduced to ASHE by my mentor, M. Christopher Brown and King F. King Alexander. And so King and Chris were new tenure track, just firecrackers.

Royel Johnson:

Up and coming.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

They came to Illinois and were rebuilding our higher ed program at the time.

Royel Johnson:

That's Illinois. Illinois Connection.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Shout-out. Great minds think Illinois. I'm always an alumni.

Royel Johnson:

I-L-L.

Felecia Commodore:

I-N-I. I know how to do it now.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Has it common, has in common. Because as a proud alumni, I mean, I couldn't be more pleased that you have joined the faculty.

Royel Johnson:

Yes. Lucky to have you there.

Felecia Commodore:

I'm very happy.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

But yeah, I think what I would say is my 1997-year-old self at ASHE came into the space, bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, not knowing what to expect and have made lifelong friends. My cohort, Jolando Jackson and James Minor. What a cohort. James Kochson and Barbara Jackson. That was the group, because Eugene Anderson, they would have the ASHE graduate student policy seminar. So my first ASHE also coincided with, we were in San Antonio, 1997. I would not have thought that I would have had this career. I would not have thought I would have been president of the association because it wasn't on my Bingo card.

It wasn't on my bucket list per se, but I have found an academic home in ASHE and I've been fortunate to also have felt a sense of kinship in the academic home with CSCC and with ACPA. And so those three entities in particular have been very nourishing so that as we go through those peaks and valleys and you have the ebb and flow of what is this academic career, you are steadied by the fact of the folks that you have known and grown with, right? So that we keep each other honest because it's like, I knew you win. And that there is a care about colleagues and friends beyond just our products and our productivity. How you doing? How your babies doing? Your brother? That's cool.

Royel Johnson:

Or you texted me the other day and say like, "How are you recovering from this car accident? Are you doing okay?"

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Yeah. You've been on my mind. And so we all we got. And I think part of why ASHE at 50 feels so special for me in particular and the legacy that I want to have with ASHE is one of building community, one of each one, reach one, pour into and love upon each other because people leaving here, life is short.

Felecia Commodore:

That's so real.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

And this work matters, but we need to make sure that we're always letting each other know that you matter. I care about you beyond the pages of what you've just written, right? And so I think that's what I'm most excited about every year when I come to ASHE is this family in a lot of ways. It's an extended family. You feel like you at a family reunion, everybody can't have a red solo cup, I'm just saying that-

Felecia Commodore:

Or should have a red, so some of you all need to put the cup down.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Right, right. Because some of them, we've seen some of those in the lobby, they get, put the cup down, put the cup down.

Felecia Commodore:

That's love. That's community also. Is me tapping you on your shoulder and telling you, "Put the cup down."

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Put the cup down. But all that to say that if you want to know the end, look at the beginning. And the beginning, yeah, it was a good beginning. And so it's no doubt that I'm feeling good about how all of this is going to wrap up.

Royel Johnson:

Yeah.

Felecia Commodore:

And thank you. I want to say from at least our generation of scholars, because I think you and the Sharon Freesbritz and the James Davis' and then Lori Patton Davis and Sean Harpers and just that generation, Darren Stewart, you all modeled community and caring for us in a way that I think it became a goal for us beyond getting tenure and publications and presentations.

Royel Johnson:

Oh, we can actually be in community with one another.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Royel Johnson:

We can like each other.

Felecia Commodore:

We can care about each other. And even if we don't like each other, we don't have to be violent towards each other. We can still exist together. And I think that has made a difference, at least for me, and I believe a lot of the colleagues that I've been able to come to ASHE and find ASHE also to be a place of community as opposed to a place of competition and violence.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

That's been so important to me to cultivate and to make sure that those ethos of care really cut through because like you said, I've been on the receiving end of that. You just mentioned unc. I affectionately called James Earl. That's unc. Mary Howard Hamilton, Sharon. I mean, again, you're mentioning these are Vanguards, iconic in many ways. And so like... Right? I am. Because we are. And it's because of them. And so it's incumbent upon all of us to create that and try to protect that and foster that space for those to follow.

Royel Johnson:

Well, to use your words.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

And I'm so proud of how y'all are showing up and doing it.

Royel Johnson:

We are because of you and what you've role modeled for us.

Felecia Commodore:

Absolutely.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

I've had good role models.

Royel Johnson:

Yes.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Thank God.

Royel Johnson:

So thank you.

Felecia Commodore:

Thank you.

Royel Johnson:

Thank you for being a part of this conversation. Thank you for investing in this vision.

Felecia Commodore:

Yes.

Royel Johnson:

And we look forward to the conference.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah. And you kicking off the presidential podcast.

Royel Johnson:

Yes.

Felecia Commodore:

Season four.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Season four.

Royel Johnson:

Season four.

Felecia Commodore:

Yeah.

Eboni M. Zamani-Gallaher:

Yeah. Four and final.

Royel Johnson:

Four and final.

Felecia Commodore:

Four and final, at least for us.

Royel Johnson:

For us. Boom, chop. That's it.

