

Vincent Munoz:

I think what we need to do is explain how our principles of free speech, free inquiry will help serve the cause of justice.

Betty Friendan:

The First Amendment, the constitutional freedom of speech and freedom of conscience that is the bulwark of our democracy.

Bettina Apthekar:

There was a passion in what was being said, affirming what people considered a sacred, constitutional right, freedom of speech and freedom of association

Michelle Deutchman:

From the UC National Center for Free Speech and Civic Engagement, this is SpeechMatters, a podcast about expression, engagement, and democratic learning in higher education. I'm Michelle Deutchman, the center's executive director and your host. In this terrifying, challenging time for higher education and democracy, leaders with vision, integrity and the ability to inspire others are in high demand.

And we have not just one, but two such leaders as guests on this month's podcast. We are joined by Josiah Beharry and Sonya Brooks. The two students who represent all 300,000 UC students on the UC Board of Regents, which is the governing board that oversees the entire University of California system. The California State Constitution gives this board full powers of organization and governance to oversee key financial decisions for the system.

Our conversation will delve into what it means to represent tens of thousands of students in key decision-making spaces, while the challenges come with the role and how any student can make an impact on their campus. Before we dive in, let's turn to class notes, a look at what's making headlines. Since current events in higher education are changing swiftly, please note that these class notes are being recorded on March 18th at 10:00 AM.

Columbia University remains center stage as it goes toe to toe with the Trump administration about expression and anti-discrimination efforts on campus. It began on March 7th when the administration told the university that it was canceling \$400 million worth of grants and contracts because of what government described as the school's failure to adequately address anti-Semitism on campus.

Doctors at Columbia's Medical School have already received notices that their funding has been terminated, meaning many types of life-saving research are stopping. About \$250 million of the \$400 million in cuts involved funding from the National Institutes of Health. One week later, a letter from federal officials at the US Education Department, Department of Health and Human Services and General Services Administration threatened Columbia with an ultimatum.

Ensure and document compliance with nine conditions if Columbia wants to continue this financial relationship with the United States government. These conditions included abolishing the university judicial board, the university wide panel that hears charges of violations under the university codes of conduct, and centralize all disciplinary processes under the Office of the President.

Ensure that Columbia University's security has full law enforcement authority. And begin the process of placing the Middle East, South Asian, and African Studies Department under academic receivership for a minimum of five years. Academic receivership is a relatively rare event, in which a department chair is imposed from the outside by a dean or provost when the department is judged unable to govern itself effectively.

All conditions must be met by March 20th. In between the cancellation of funds and the ultimatum, Immigration and Customs Enforcement arrested Mahmoud Khalil, a Columbia University graduate and

pro-Palestinian activist at a university-owned apartment building. According to reporting, Khalil is a green card holder, which grants him permanent residency.

His arrest is one of the first instances of ICE detaining an international student who took part in protests connected to the war in Gaza, an action that President Trump has promised would take place. Khalil has not been charged with a crime. His arrest and detention in Louisiana, where he's still being held and was unable to be in contact with lawyers for days, is not just a crisis for higher education.

It is something that should alarm every American, who values their ability to engage in political expression, without fear or sanction from the government. Columbia is far from the only college or university under investigation. Last week, the Trump administration issued a warning to over 60 higher education institutions that they may face penalties from pending investigations into anti-Semitism on college campuses.

In addition, this past Friday, the administration announced that it will be investigating over 50 colleges for alleged racial discrimination caused by diversity, equity, and inclusion programs that the administration claims exclude white and Asian American students. These investigations touch on every type of higher ed institution, large publics, small privates in both red and blue states.

In other legal news, a three-judge panel of the US Court of Appeals for the Fourth Circuit overturned a nationwide injunction issued last month with regard to executive orders in diversity, equity and inclusion. This allows the Trump administration to carry out all of the provisions of those executive orders, meaning all equity-related grants or contracts will be terminated by federal agencies.

And federal contractors will be required to certify that they do not promote DEI as the litigation continues to unfold. So much of this class knows segments has been grim, but turning to today's guests will leave you feeling better about the future. We are pleased to welcome Josiah Beharry and Sonya Brooks, the UC Student Regent and Student Regent-designate.

If I shared all of their respective curricular, extracurricular and community engagements and leadership, we would have no time for the actual conversation. So I will share a short bio and let them tell you the rest. Josiah is the current Student Regent and therefore, is a voting member of the UC Board of Regents for the current term.

He's a first-generation student and the first student from UC Merced to be appointed as the UC Student Regent. A graduate of UC Merced, Josiah obtained his Bachelor of Arts degree in Critical Race and Ethnic Studies. He is currently pursuing a PhD in interdisciplinary humanities at UC Merced. Sonya is this year's Student Regent-designate.

Before officially stepping into the voting role, Regents-designate spend a year participating in board meetings and discussions. Sonya is the first Black woman to serve in this role. She's also a first-generation student and is currently pursuing a PhD in education and a Master's of Public Health and Community Health Sciences at UCLA.

She will be a triple threat since she has also received her bachelor's degree from UCLA in history and African American studies. Josiah and Sonya, welcome and thank you so much for being here.

Sonya Brooks:

Thank you for having us. This is wonderful.

Josiah Beharry:

Thank you for that introduction.

Sonya Brooks:

Yeah.

Michelle Deutchman:

I feel like it hardly captures all of the different facets of both of you, but that's what we're here for. So to start things off, I'd love to hear what motivated each of you to apply for this role.

Was there a moment where you realized you really wanted to step into this particular leadership position? Yeah, what inspires you to serve your community in this way? And you get to decide who goes first.

Josiah Beharry:

Well, ladies first, Sonya, I'll tell you.

Sonya Brooks:

He always does this to me, but thank you for the question. I think what really motivated me was that although there was representation for students, I think it didn't quite have the zest in the field that I thought it should have. I thought that there were a number of issues, especially at the graduate level, that just seemed like they were not being addressed.

What I came to learn was that graduate students were really not thought about when we start discussing equations and algorithms into how the UC system should run. So a lot of times in meetings, they had a plethora of data for undergraduate students, but then when I would ask the question, "Well, how do graduate students fare in this particular topic?" And it was silence, it was crickets.

There was really no answer. So that became very problematic for me, because how can we give an informed decision about what best meets the needs of students, without having great and accurate representation of both undergraduate and graduate students? Because we know that graduate students face a myriad of different problems.

And saying all of that, I thought that this would be a wonderful platform upon which I could not only elevate the needs and the issues of both undergraduate and graduate students. But also pave the way for a lot of students who did not know what a UC's Regent was, or what a Student Regent was and that that position even existed.

So yeah, why not try and join forces with those who make the decisions for the backbone of the UC system, which are students? And here we are.

Michelle Deutchman:

Okay, that's great. Thank you for starting us off. All right. So Josiah, what have you got to tell us?

Josiah Beharry:

Well, I don't know how I follow that up, one, let's start with that because that was incredible. But I would say it really comes from what you talked about, Michelle, which are those firsts and why it matters so much. Not only am I the first Student Regent from UC Merced, but I'm also the first undocumented Student Regent.

And both of those identities came with such a blessing to be in this role, and an honor and a privilege that I never take for granted. I think when I went on that Wikipedia page. Well, I know when I went on that Wikipedia page with all the past Student Regents and I was looking for, "Oh, who was from UC Merced?"

And I didn't see UC Merced in the picture. I looked closely and I saw that UC Merced really wasn't in a lot of conversations, period. And here I was in this region and I saw that reflected not only for the school, but for the San Joaquin Valley where we're often neglected, we're diluted, and everyone thinks we're a homogenized group of people.

And they don't realize that there's a diversity and a love, and a care and a community in Merced, but in this region in general. So when I saw that it was lacking representation, there was no representation from Merced, I said, "Well, there has to be, because this is where the future of education is going." UC Merced is doing what higher ed's purpose is, to be the great equalizer.

To serve HAIL recipients, to serve diverse students, to be the number one for social mobility that we got this year, to really serve its core values. And I think also being undocumented, there's so many conversations around what the value is that we bring to this country.

And beyond the monetary value that we bring in money, in taxes, in our hard work, I know that we bring an immense amount of love. We're the people who care for other families, who care for communities, who take care of the food, the houses that our neighbors and people around us own. So there's just a level of pride we have in coming to America.

And I never take for granted what my parents sacrificed to come to America and what it means to be part of the UC system. And knowing that there's a privilege and an honor in that, because these are spaces that they never got to go into or that any of my family being a first-gen student. And when I think about why I wanted to be Student Regent and why I'm so passionate about this.

I think about my mom and I recently told this story. But when I was an undergrad, worked multiple jobs to put myself through undergrad as an undocumented student. And one of them was I cleaned houses alongside my mom, scrubbing floors, dusting in homes we would never ever be able to live in or afford. And I remember one day, I'm looking for her around the house and I find her and she has the bathroom door closed.

And I knock and I'm like, "What are you doing?" And she was like, "I'm ashamed to let you see me cleaning this toilet. I feel very embarrassed." And I remember telling her that moment, "We're in this together. Every success I have is because of you, but not only is it because of you, it's with you. So when I become Student Regent, it's just not me becoming Student Regent. It's you becoming Student Regent."

It's my grandparents becoming, it's every single person in our communities who fought for us. And I know Sonya and I always talk about being both the first, it carries so much value and we don't believe in just being the first one through the door. We leave it open so there can be a second, a third and a fourth, because that's what we need to see in our system.

Michelle Deutchman:

This is not the first time I have been privileged to hear both of you talk about what brought you to this role. But I am as moved each time and appreciate your sharing that, because your story, like you said, is everyone's story, everyone can relate to a piece of. I believe what you're saying, and it's amazing that you're bringing your energy and care to the UC system.

And you've already mentioned so many firsts, so many ways that you've broken new ground, and I wondered if you could talk a little bit about what that's been like? I know everyone introduces you that way, and with that, I think, comes a certain amount of expectation, and I anticipate it hasn't necessarily been easy. So maybe you can just share a little bit about what that's been like.

Sonya Brooks:

Yeah. Yeah, every time I get this question, I have to read the room, because I think it means different things to different people. So I will just say at the beginning was, I think, one of the most difficult periods of my life. And the reason why I say that is because I entered into this space, and at the time, I can honestly say I really did not think about the gravity of what not only this position was.

But then being the first Black woman in this position as a student, and then being at the table that is really where a lot of the decisions for close to a million people in the state of California occur. So when you

couple that with people who don't expect me or someone who looks like me to be seated at the table, and to actually be invisible in a lot of these meetings, it really weighed heavily.

It weighed heavily on who I was as a woman, as a mother, a woman of color, a scholar, and in all of these other different attributes. And then it weighed heavily upon those who may follow in my steps afterwards. Because research shows, and anyone can type up the word Black woman in Google, and it will say a host of negative things.

And not really knowing who in this crowd or at this table may believe these things, especially by being the first Black woman as a student, are they going to consider me aggressive? Are they going to consider me abusive and all of these other wild and crazy things? So does that mean now I have to code switch? I have to tone down my tone?

In my voice, do I have to modulate? And if I modulate too much, is that going to be seen as a sign of aggression? Can I wear braids? Must I always have my hair straight? Can I wear my natural curly hair? So there's all of these different things. I'm a person that loves big earrings, I love big earrings and I like to hug people, and I'm really energetic.

So it really made me look at myself and do this scan from the top of my hair all the way down to the soles of my feet. So it really, really sent me through this warp. I don't want to say a time warp, but just a warp. And I really had to start questioning a lot about, "How can I not only be my authentic self, but be accepted?"

A lot of the times in the spaces, I was either considered the help or I was lost. Did someone need me to help them find my way out of these spaces and into the spaces in which I belonged? So it really weighed heavily, so much so that after the first meeting, I was really going to quit. I was going to resign.

And it just so happened that Josiah wasn't there at that meeting, and I was just going crazy. Because in this position, we have really become really, really close and able to bounce a lot of things off of one another, and just use each other as that support system. So I learned to just, look, wrap myself up in all of the beauty that I possess, and if they don't accept me, they just don't.

I think I was nominated and awarded this position because of everything that not only I've done, but I've been through, that I have to wear on my shoulders and wear it like a coat. And I can't take off my coat because if I do, then it really, I think, does damage to those who have paved the way for me to be here.

For those who have sacrificed blood, sweat and tears for me to be in this position, not only in this position, but also in this institution that was not designed for me or someone that looks like me. So I think I did a lot of growing, I call it a beautiful struggle. And I tell Josiah this a lot, that it's just preparing me for the next level.

And I think whatever that level is, if I don't pass the test now of being able to absorb everything and not let it impact me, so much so that I now begin to negate who I am and the ancestors before me, that I've done all this for naught. So now it's beautiful. Now I walk into every meeting myself, I'm smiling, I'm loud.

Hey, I wear my fingernail polish on my nails real cute. So I think the perspective has changed considerably from when I started to where I am now. And it's basically because this is me, love me or leave me, but you can't leave me alone because now I'm at the table.

Michelle Deutchman:

Thank you.

Josiah Beharry:

That's so beautiful. I'm so glad you went first, Sonya, because you always unzip the vulnerability code so I can then open up and be vulnerable myself because I'm a wall builder. I like brick after brick, just build

it up. So when I was asked this question before, I'm always answering it like, "Oh, it's been a great experience," because we want people to apply.

But being vulnerable about it, it's been really, really, it's a difficult ride, because I'd never been in a space like this before. And I've never been around people like this before, just who come from such high statuses, who know so much and have so much knowledge, and just have so much in their pedigree. So what Sonya was talking about, about being the first, it's not a luxury. It's really a responsibility.

And I think it's a weight that we carry, and it's not only ours, but it's the weight of those who will follow. And sometimes, now I'm going to get real, real, sometimes we're axed and sometimes even berated by our constituents, whether it's students, faculty, staff, whoever it may be. Other people around us like, "Why aren't you raising more hell? Why aren't you yelling? Why aren't you calling them out, flipping tables?"

Some want it metaphorically, others want it physically. And what I think they don't know or never seem to consider, for me, it's just like my heart doesn't have the capacity to do that. I don't hold that kind of rage, and it's not because I don't feel that fire, but it's because I spent my entire life containing it. I don't want to be what the world already believes me as an undocumented person to be, and Sonya touched on that.

You look us up right now, and there's so much around who we are in the media and other people writing our stories, and I don't want to be like people in my life, family figures who have exhibited that. So we know going into that room, the anger that people may anticipate or how they expect us to be. So I feel that burden to be the proof that we're not every stereotype, and they haven't met people like us sitting at the table.

So yes, we get mad. Yes, we get upset, but what hurts is when our restraint and our professionalism is met with judgment and anger from our own. And I think that's been a really tough process to learn throughout this, is how do you balance both and how do you have space for both of them? Because we're just in such a politicized and angry time where nuance has left the conversation.

And for us, being in that room trying to make a difference, it's been a journey, for sure. I'll say on my first Student Regents, I sat in the back of the bus, had my headphones on. I'm thinking to myself, "Rosa done fought this hard, and here I am back in the back of the bus not making my space." But I felt so trepidatious because I didn't know how to have certain conversations.

I would literally have sticky notes where I would write conversations and jokes down before I talked to certain people in the room, because I was like, "Okay. I got to get this right and frame it perfectly," because I want them to think that I know what's going on and I need to help function these conversations, but it's been a lot of beautiful growth.

What Sonya said in that last part, we've been able to see ourselves grow throughout the process, the pain, the knowledge, the inner workings. And for us and for myself, whenever I see something that I would do differently, I just remind myself, "This is just the beginning of my journey and eventually, I'm going to be in these spaces in the future and I'm going to do it differently."

I'm going to set the standard for the way I want it to look like, but right now, it's just a learning experience. And it's been one of the best experiential learning experiences that the UC system can offer to see the inner workings and get an understanding of every single segment. So yeah, I hope that answers all that.

Michelle Deutchman:

You couldn't answer it better. And to do it with openness and candor, I think, is so important to showcase it's beautiful and worthwhile, but also hard and that there's struggle in that. I want to come back to that in a little bit, but it's interesting when you mentioned turning over tables literally and metaphorically.

It makes me want to turn a little bit to something that's near and dear to the center's heart, which has to do with expression. Listen, I don't imagine that when you applied and were nominated for this role, that you were envisioning global pandemics and a year of protests that have been the most significant in 60 years.

So I'm wondering, being in your role following October 7th, both observing and responding to the varying responses of different campus stakeholders, did being part of that impact or change how you conceive of the First Amendment and free speech? And if yes, then how? And if no, why not?

Sonya Brooks:

Your turn.

Josiah Beharry:

I'm waiting for Sonya to go. No, that's a beautiful question, because it has been a huge learning experience. We always come in with things we want to work on, but that has taken up so much of our time is understanding what expression free speech looks like. I think I've learned a lot throughout the process, what is protected speech, what is not protected speech?

What is protest, what isn't protest? What is allowed on our campuses reevaluating rules and laws? But I think what remains throughout the conversation and what Sonya and I have had to thread behind the scenes, is that there may be disagreement about the method of the protest. But the care and the fight for what's there should not be evaded in those conversations.

Because the world is responding in a visceral way to what's happening overseas, and we have to listen to that. So that's what really this process has been about, is about listening. And sometimes getting through all the yelling and getting through all the flipping tables, and see what do people care about and what are they trying to tell us? And what are we missing as a body?

And trying to elevate those conversations, and we've tried to do that and we've tried to explain where our students are coming from in this compassion. And I think that's why having Student Regents on the board is so important, because we are on the ground. Sonya was there when that huge event at UCLA happened that took over media across the country, across the world.

And having perspective in these conversations when we're talking about moments like that, when we're talking about this administration right now, what's going on in terms of free speech. It's important to have people like Sonya who was on the ground at UCLA. It's important to have myself contextualize some of this history, being an ethnic studies undergrad, and trying to add context.

And I think sometimes the public don't always see those conversations because a lot of it happens behind either closed doors offline, and we're trying to explain the bigger picture, and so that's been a little bit of the process. It's about a lot of educating the public, educating ourselves, and listening, truly and honestly listening.

And when it comes to the First Amendment, it's made me appreciate it even more. I worked for the ACLU before I joined the board, and so we know the ACLU is all about protecting the rights of Americans. So I always learned from them and they taught us that tenon of whether you agree with it or not, it's people's rights.

So we've had to learn what is the rights of our students? What is protected and what's not? And communicating that to them, but also communicating to them the plight of people in the past and what they've gone through advocating for the things that they care about.

What it looked like being resistant, waiting out the timeline, knowing that change doesn't happen overnight, et cetera.

Sonya Brooks:

Yeah. Well, this one is difficult.

Michelle Deutchman:

I do know I do free speech every day. So yes, I'm glad to know it's not misery loves company, but I'm like, "Oh good, I'm glad I'm not the only one that finds it really hard."

Sonya Brooks:

No, no, and I think Josiah really hit the nail on the head. There was so much learning that really came with this position about free speech and First Amendment. And I can honestly say that after I was, I guess, inaugurated into the position in July, it was like all hell broke loose. We had so many things coming and didn't know that there was more to come.

We didn't know at that time that the administration was going to turn. We thought it may, but we didn't know that. We didn't know that LA was going to get hit with the fires. We didn't know a whole bunch of stuff, and I was like, "You guys set me up. You put me in this position on purpose," because it was almost the perfect storm.

So many things that I had not only not thought about, but been experienced in handling or talking to students about because it was a first for all of us. So I remember attending one of the Regents meetings last year. Oh my gosh, it pained me so much because I remember one of the public speakers, they were protesting, of course.

And it was around the encampment time, and they said a negative comment about President Drake's mother. I could not believe it, because I know there's no way in the world I would've been able to keep my cool, "You talking about my mama?" And there's a lot of things that you can talk about, but you can't talk about my mama or my kids, regardless of the relationship.

And the way that he sat there and took it was just the epitome of not only grace, but understanding what free speech is. And every time I hear free speech, I think of him because the student had every right to say what she did. It was protected speech. However, the impact is what really bothers me.

So that's where I have this battle with what is protected, what is free speech, but then the impact that it has. And how do you sit with that and then how do you shake that part off? And I don't know, I don't know if I have that answer, but what I tell students when we're in these spaces and we're talking about protesting what's right and what's not right.

And what's the TPM time, place and manner, policy and being arrested, I tell people, "Look, we all have different perspectives, but the challenge is sitting with the impact of something that they have said." And I think that's where a lot of people have a problem with understanding and/or accepting free speech, because you've now hurt me to my core by something that you've said.

Now, a lot of times people want to exact that same hurt, hurt people hurt people. So it's a matter of how do you now absorb that, and then also now have a frame of mind to where you can't let it hurt you? I tell my students and my children, "You have to have the skin of a duck and let water roll off your back just like ducks do, water off of a duck's back."

It's difficult, but it's a skill that has to be perfected. And I think by being in these spaces, I see the Regents and the chancellors, and the administrators, they have perfected that skill. Students, we still got a little bit of ways to go. And I think the more opportunities that we're in those spaces, of course, it will definitely come to fruition.

But in all honesty and transparency, those are the two battles that I see. It's the free speech, knowing that this is protected, but then the impact that it has. How do we really sit with that and then be able to articulate it in a way that it doesn't continue to damage us, but it helps us build from?

And then not be so sensitive about it the next time it happens because it will, so I think that's a skill that I need to learn how to.

Michelle Deutchman:

I think if we're all being honest, well, I can say I know it's a skill that I could use. I just want to say it makes me think of this nursery rhyme that I never understood and never liked, which is sticks and stones can break my bones, but words will never hurt me. It never sat right with me and I don't think that it's true.

And one thing that I think a lot about is this rights versus responsibilities. This idea that just because you're allowed to say something doesn't mean you should. And how do we inculcate this idea of being a responsible member of the community when we use our voices? And I was going to ask you both something about listening.

Because you both talked about, not just now, but in our last conversation when you met with our voice cohort, about how much of your day-to-day Regent life is listening. And I'm wondering if your experience has been that the people that you interact with, whether it's in the actual meetings or as you travel around campuses, are able to do that reciprocally and how that plays out?

Josiah Beharry:

That's an interesting question. I think I'm going to touch on that, but I want to say something that Sonya just touched on right now about President Drake. And this goes into listening because I've really seen this from him, is his ability to listen. I've seen it from him, I've seen it from a couple of the chancellors, especially Chancellor Gary May out of Davis, they do what my mom says so well.

You got two ears and one mouth, so you listen more than you talk. I would say Sonya and I have such an immense respect for President Drake, because we are here because of him. As the first Black UC president, we have to respect what it takes and the plight of Black people in this country with all that's against them to continue to thrive to those lengths.

So there's a level of respect that I will always, always have for my elders and people around me. And that's just how I was raised in a Pentecostal household where you say, "Yes, sir, yes, ma'am," and church every Sunday and that's just the type of community. But you really understand that there are people who paved the way for you, and you are here because of that.

So whether it's him, whether it's Regent Emeritus John Perez, the first openly queer speaker, those positions matter because it opens doors. So regardless if we may disagree on an issue, and I think at the end of the day, there has to be a level of respect. But when it comes to listening, we try to do that a lot on our campuses and we try to explain and sometimes that doesn't go over well.

And I did something recently, and I really learned this from Sonya where I was at a campus and students were really upset about a certain issue. And I switched the question and I said, "What would taking care of the situation, what would solving the problem, what would support look like?"

And I remember they went quiet for a little bit, because I think we've taught our students really well how to talk about the complex issues and the problems that they see, but what we haven't taught them is how to talk about the solutions. And Sonya and I always tell students, "If you're going to bring the problem, you've got to bring the solution too."

Because like Audre Lorde, "The master's tools cannot dismantle the master's house." So if you're expecting us and the institution to dismantle the problem that you're experiencing, it's always going to let you down because it's not what you're looking for. So when I switched that question to them and no one really could answer it to me, and they said, "That's your job, that's the role you're in."

I look and I say, "But I'm not experiencing it firsthand like you are. So yes, I can come up with my creativity. I could hop on ChatGPT and find out some solutions for the problem. We could do that all day,

but that's not going to satisfy the support and need that you're looking for." So sometimes we have to tell ourselves to really sit down in what we're experiencing and also really identify it.

I was just at a restorative justice training and we talked about how we really need to be critical about the words that we use. For example, when we say we feel unsafe, are we truly unsafe? When we say we feel harmed, are we harmed? Are we hurt? Are we just having a difference of opinion? Because what we've done in our world, is we've diluted the essence and the importance of words.

If you're saying you're unsafe, are you sure you're unsafe? Because I can tell you, my parents and people I know who are undocumented and immigrants, we fled situations that were truly unsafe. That's what unsafe looks like in some of these countries, so are you feeling unsafe? Like really being attuned to the way we're talking about it.

So when we talk about listening, I think it also is intended of teaching our students and our generation how to communicate. And maybe I'm wrong about that, maybe I'll wake up and be on the wrong side of history. And Sonya, you could tell me your perspective, I'm very curious.

Sonya Brooks:

No, I think you definitely hit the nail on the head again. It's all about communication. And another thing that I definitely tell my students and my children, and you can ask them and they will tell you verbatim what I say. Is that you need to listen to understand someone, as opposed to listening just to respond, two totally different things.

And when they want me to understand their perspective, I won't say anything. But then when it's time for them to listen to mine, all they're doing is you can see that they're just waiting to jump in. It's almost like they're waiting to play double Dutch and waiting to jump in so I can respond.

I'm like, "No, no, no, no, no. I want you to listen to what it is that I'm saying." Because I think that value of communication is so essential, because when you listen to someone, especially if there's an issue or a hot topic, there is pain there. There is some type of either injustice or pain or a wrong that has been done to someone, and a lot of times they just want you to listen.

Just listen to what it is that I'm saying, so you can understand where it is that I'm coming from. Because if I don't know where you're coming from, how can I tell you where to go? So it's such an essential task and skill just to be able to listen to understand.

And I think a lot of the angst and the challenges, and the wars and the fights that we find ourselves in could be so easily resolved if we just do that. Like Josiah's mama said and mine too, "You got two ears and one mouth."

Michelle Deutchman:

I have been using that because I did not know that maxim, but I think that you both are so incredibly wise. And I'm a little embarrassed to share this, it reminds me of being in school and I was really into school. And I remember a teacher told me, "You can't be raising your hand and listening to what somebody else is saying at the same time."

And in my mind, I was just excited to share whatever it was that I thought. It really impacted me because it made me realize that probably yes, by raising my hand and being focused on how I was going to either respond or what question I was going to ask, I wasn't taking in what the other person was saying, and so that's a life skill.

Sonya Brooks:

It is.

Michelle Deutchman:

I want to circle back to something that Josiah said about, gosh, maybe both, I don't know which of you said it. But one of you two brilliant people said about being part of the solution and asking people to think about how they want to be part of the solution.

And I was curious if maybe you have a couple examples to share with our listeners about student engagement or student activism that made an impact on Regent? Either decision-making or how things were framed as examples of how being part of the solution can actually change things, maybe each of you has one example you want to share?

Josiah Beharry:

Well, I'll say first off, and Sonya needs to tell the story.

She got this position because of that in and of itself, how she framed it, and she can tell that story.

Michelle Deutchman:

I don't know that story. Okay.

Josiah Beharry:

Yeah. No, it's incredible to hear the power of how you bring something to the room really matters, and it helps you when you're trying to advocate later. But what we always tell people is three things, definitely that when you're going to bring the problem, always talk about the solution. Two, you got to be data informed and bring that as well.

So for example, we had something at our January meeting where one of our graduate students, her name is Sarah Bacon, brought up police accountability boards. And she was just saying, "These haven't been operating much on our campuses. This is the data on the last reports. They're supposed to be reporting every other year, whatever it may be.

"I went and talked to other campuses, this is what I collected on how long they've been meeting. This is why police accountability boards are important. I'm ready to do some work." So then we had an item later on in that day, and Sonya could verify this, that was the main topic. It was, "Hey, this student said this during the public comment, this was the data she provided. What are we doing about it?"

So it really got our people at OP to think about, "Okay. If these police accountability boards don't have anything to report at the moment, what could they be doing proactively? How could they be engaging with the campus community to build better relationships? How can accountability look different than a slap on the wrist or punitive in nature?

"How could it look like if you're going to be accountable, how do you be accountable before you need to be accountable? How do you be accountable to the protect and the serve part? How are you serving your community?" So it was really beautiful to have that conversation with Jody and hear him say, "This is what we're going to start to do." Jody's from UCOP and in charge of safety for those of you out there.

So it was just really beautiful to see how when students bring something and provide the data, provide the solutions, provide the stories and the empathy behind it, how it translates. And we can verify behind the scenes the conversations that then happen afterwards where people say, "No, this is something that's important and we need to critically look at."

So that's just a small example, but we really do see it all the time. And I'd love for Sonya to tell her story on how it helped her.

Michelle Deutchman:

All right, with that introduction.

Sonya Brooks:

I think it really goes back to this communication piece. And a lot of times, and this is another thing that I really live by, it's where my passion and my persistence meets the poise and my perseverance. But a lot of times it's that poise that really gets you in the door, because you can have this passion and be persistent, but the way that you deliver it not really be receptive.

So here's the story. So attending the Regents meetings and just really taking it all in, I see students and just the public during public engagement or public speeches just really going off, just everything is bad and it's this and it's that. And then I noticed that there were a number of others who had stories and those really caught the attention of the Regents.

But then when the posters were coming up and when they're talking about President Drake's mama and all this other stuff, I see that the Regents really have this wall up. And either they're on the computer, they're looking but not really engaging, or they're on their phones or taking care of something else. So I knew that it was really, really on my top list about graduate student housing.

It made no sense why at UCLA, only 22% of graduates had housing and we had a number of students sleeping in cars and just a horrible situation. So about a week before, I could not come up with a speech, and then all of a sudden, something just rung in my mind and I started writing it down. I'm like, "This is the most stupidest thing that I've ever done."

So I get mad at myself. I was embarrassed that I was writing it. And I'm like, "You know what? I'm just going to speak off the cuff." I'm really good at just talking about things and so on and so forth. I left to go to this meeting to give the speech in front of the Regents. Here I go, so I have no clue of what to say. I read the speech, the Regents clapped.

I sat down and I'm still kicking myself in the butt. I'm like, "That's so stupid. I can't believe I did it. I can't believe I did that." Anyway, so now lunchtime is there, so I see people in the rooms eating lunch. So I peeked my head in and I was like, "I'm just going to go sit in the corner by myself, eat this good food because I'm not going to turn down the food. And then I'm just going to leave because I'm just so embarrassed."

And everyone at the table were like, "Oh my God, Sonya, your speech was incredible. Come sit at the table with us and eat." And I'm looking around like, "You guys are talking to me?" And they were like, "Yeah." They were like, "We've never seen the Regents clap nor smile for a speech ever." That was also the meeting that I saw myself at the table of being at the Regents.

So here come applications, and a friend of mine, who was Josiah's predecessor, was trying to get me to apply, and I was like, "Absolutely not. I'm just not the type." And he was like, "No, just go ahead and do it anyway." So come to find out that the Regents remembered my speech from the previous year, which helped me become noticed, I guess, so to speak.

And just so you know, I did an all-time Elvis Presley speech that used the titles of his songs, but it talked about graduate housing and the Heartbreak Hotels. We're tired of living in Heartbreak Hotels, so Don't Be Cruel. So it ran through a list of his greatest hits, but it talked about graduate housing.

So even to this day, the Regents still remember that speech, so that's how I got here. So I think I say all that to say that it's about the delivery, it's about the poise that you have with the delivery. The passion is definitely there, but it's how you deliver it and you have to read the room.

And you have to know the audience to which you're speaking, and craft those speeches or those pieces and those products that will be receptive to your audience.

Michelle Deutchman:

That's a great story, and I think maybe you need to take all the songs and make a playlist.

Sonya Brooks:

Exactly, for the Regents.

Michelle Deutchman:

Yeah, for the Regents and I'll take a copy.

Sonya Brooks:

Okay, good.

Michelle Deutchman:

So I'm feeling so upbeat and so I'm sad to turn to this particular moment, which I don't need to tell both of you, is incredibly terrifying and overwhelming and exhausting for people in higher education. And I know that sometimes it can slow you down, some days it's almost paralyzing.

So I'm wondering, especially when the pace of change can be slower than the rate of undermining of values in institutions, what keeps both of you going? And it doesn't have to be everything. It can just be one thing today that might keep you going.

Josiah Beharry:

It's really, and this is a motif through what we're saying, is knowing the backs of which we stand on to be in our seats. And I said this when we had our voice conference, that if federal funding is what's going to stop us from doing the work that we're doing, then you're not really in the work.

Because like I said at that meeting, Harriet Tubman didn't have federal funding when she was going above the Mason-Dixon Line and back to free people. And Huey P. Newton didn't have federal funding when he started the Black Panther movement in Oakland, and was helping with free lunch and healthcare and helping with economic inequality.

All these civil rights leaders who paved the way for us, did it under the most stringent conditions, to try to dismiss them and take them out of the picture. And if they can do it under those circumstances, then we have no excuse. We truly have no excuse. And if it's going to take federal funding for me to stop what I'm doing, it's never going to happen because I'm so passionate about this work.

We both are so passionate about our communities, about our students, about the content that we teach. So every time we hear a new executive order telling us we can't say certain words or we can't have diversity, equity and inclusion. We can't have this, we can't have that. I told someone recently, "If they come up with something else, something we can't say, you tell them to check the clock so they know exactly what time we're on, okay?"

Because we're on the time of I'm coming to the table, I'm going to speak my truth because people before me did it so I can be in these spaces. And I'm going to speak it so our children and our generations after us can have those spaces too. So it really comes down to the fact that we have too much on the line right now to not speak up.

So any way that you can get involved, you got to just find that one issue, whatever it may be that you're very passionate about and you see being attacked for and you got to fight for it. Because there's too much on the line to be passive right now.

Sonya Brooks:

Yeah, beautifully said. I think what keeps me going is seeing three pairs of eyes looking at me, and then the other pairs of eyes that are looking at me that I don't even know are there. But just thinking of what

my experiences have been up until this point, single mom of three, formerly homeless, experienced food insecurity.

And just knowing how not only resilient I had to be, oh my gosh, I'm getting emotional. I can't believe it. How resilient someone has to be to utilize resources that are told are not for them, that's told that are not for them. That you can only move within this box, within this box, and in this box are so many nos. "No, you can't do this. No, you don't qualify. No, we don't want to give it to you."

No, just no. And knowing if I had a nickel for all of the times, or even a penny for all of the times that I was told no, I would definitely be a millionaire. But it only takes that one yes, and not stopping until I heard that one yes that really changed the trajectory upon which I would've found myself if I believed that I was not worthy of that yes.

So you ask what keeps me going, I think it is knowing that this too shall pass. This time and period that we find ourselves in, it is not new. We've been here before a few times, and the time and the period and the things that we were fighting for may look a little different. But then when you peel back that onion, you'll see that the root of what is going on now has been going on for a number of centuries.

And the way that we've overcome them is the way that we're going to be able to overcome these situations as well. But I think in all of that, it is essential, it is very much essential that during these periods, we don't lose sense of who we are at our core. Because this administration, this period of time is so divisive and it is pitting us against one another.

People who have been friends and neighbors for years are now looking at one another with a side eye. If we don't lose sense of who we are at our core, we will come through this fight unscathed. But if we allow it to permeate through the weaving of humanity that I would like to believe the majority of us have, then we will find ourselves in for an uphill battle.

But I know that at the end of this battle, we will be victorious and we will win. That I do know, but just getting there, it may take us not only some time, but some collective activity, some collective activism, which is really going to be the beacon that is going to get us through this period.

So just knowing that, and I believe that with all my heart, that that is what's going to happen. I'm very optimistic about it, so I'm okay. This can happen, but yet this too shall pass.

Michelle Deutchman:

I feel like if we're going to end up closing on a note of light and optimism, the yacht locks. Josiah, do you want to have another quick last word, because I could talk to you all day?

Josiah Beharry:

I just wanted to say this one last thing if I can, if that's okay? And I think this is a great point to add on, and Sonya and I are very spiritual and God has really put us in this position and we're so blessed to be here. And my mom and I, we talk all the time and I saw someone say the other day, and we talked about this.

God saw me rushing in life and made me start all over again, not because He wanted to punish me, but because He knew I was building something too fragile to last. He isn't delaying me, He's just preparing me, and right now I feel like we're being prepared and He isn't taking away from our progress. He's giving us the foundation to carry something greater.

So sometimes what we feel in this moment feels like a setback is really just grace in disguise, and a chance to rebuild stronger, wiser, and more unshakable than before.

Sonya Brooks:

Microphone drop.

Michelle Deutchman:

That's right. Well, I think I'll just end by saying I'm a proud graduate of UC. And I'm even more proud to be part of an intellectual community that would wisely choose to have the two of you representing the hundreds of thousands of students that are part of UC now.

And also, ultimately representing all of the people who have been students at UC. And the fact that you were able to take an hour to spend with SpeechMatters, I'm really grateful. You bring meaning to those words that speech matters, and we need to be thoughtful and critical about the words we use. So I just want to say thank you so much.

Sonya Brooks:

Thank you.

Josiah Beharry:

Thank you. Thank you for this opportunity.

Michelle Deutchman:

Thank you. That's a wrap. Thanks again to Josiah and Sonya for joining us. Next month, we'll be joined by Jeremy Young, a historian and leader who's been speaking out against educational censorship. In the meantime, applications for the center's 2025, 2026 fellowship program close this Friday at midnight.

If you're working on your application, be sure to submit by then. Additionally, we look forward to seeing you all online at the center's upcoming annual SpeechMatters Conference. Register at freespeechcenter.universityofcalifornia.edu. Talk to you next time.