

Devonia Love-Vaughn: Our Human Statue of Liberty – Season 1, Episode 7

Amy: You're listening to Beyond 1894, a podcast where we hear from Louisiana Tech University scholars, innovators, and professionals on their personal journeys and the impact they are making in the world around them. I'm your host, Amy Bell, and my co-host is Teddy Allen.

Teddy: Hello Amy.

Amy: Hey Teddy. So, I have a question for you.

Teddy: Go.

Amy: Have you ever been in a social situation where you felt like you didn't fit in?

Teddy: Yes. Daily.

Amy: Daily?

Teddy: If we're, if I'm around an upper class group of people, a lot of them and I'm not good at small talk, I feel a bit out of place in that regard and I have to kind of fake my way through it. I'm not, I'm not good at the small talk and stuff.

Amy: Yeah. I don't think I'm that great at it either.

Teddy: Well, on our campus, there's, there a tremendous amount of very intellectual people. And sometimes I'll realize, all of a sudden, that I'm in the middle of some of them, and I don't have much idea of what they're talking about. Now, all of them that I've been around, are very gracious and don't flaunt their intellect, but you know, every different group has different lingos and stuff. And I get lost in some of that sometime. And I say, 'Hmm, I'm not an engineer and I'm not a bio nanotechnology person,' so I have to get them to dumb stuff down for me to understand it.

Amy: Yeah. But that's good. Cause I think, like, I don't really know about any of that either. And if you're going to tell it to me, then I'd like it to be dumbed down. But this episode we're going to talk about diversity and we're gonna talk about inclusion. And when it comes to diversity, there are a lot of reasons I personally could check off the diversity box. I am Hispanic, I'm a woman. But, I think the label that has made me feel the most alien throughout my life has actually been, uh, being called a geek or a nerd because I don't know, you don't really see a lot of geeky women and, and maybe it's also just my personality, like I think is also probably just my personality.

Amy: And after graduating with my bachelor's degree, I didn't expect to have trouble fitting in certain workplaces due to my personality. And when I'm surrounded by a new social group, I like to observe for a while before I choose to engage. And I think people will notice that and they make assumptions about me like that I'm stuck up or that I don't like people, which is far from

the truth, because I like people. And I think those misconceptions make me feel even more uncomfortable because then I feel like I have to prove myself to them. And then, if you don't fit in the organization, you start to realize that sometimes you don't have equal access to the resources or opportunities that people that do fit in get. Because you aren't making those personal connections and people don't really understand what you can bring to the table.

Teddy: All that makes sense to me. And other people are quick to judge. We're all quick to judge people. And that's why it's good that people like Mrs. Love-Vaughn, our own campus, who you're going to talk to, is our Dean of Diversity. And she's one of those people who knows exactly what you're talking about and can recognize it in young folks. And, you know, she loves helping people realize, 'Hey, you do fit in and people are in place to help you, to let you know that you're not an outsider.' I think is a lot of what she brings to our campus.

Amy: Yeah, for sure. And I think, actually, one of the reasons why I chose to work at a university was because I, well, I assumed that at a university, at a place of learning, people would be more open to diversity and inclusion. And I was right. Like, I looked for a job at any of the universities and I was lucky enough to find one here. And, you know, I definitely feel like I've fit in. If not, I've at least talked to people that are inclusive and are open to different mindsets, different personalities. So, I'm really proud of the way our university is going forward and seeking to improve the inclusion of diversity.

Teddy: I think that's one of the strongest parts of the Louisiana Tech culture, from my experience. If you don't think you fit in or, you'll run across somebody who will help you find your place. There's a spot for you. And it's people like, you know, Mrs. Love-Vaughn who, who can see that probably quicker than some of the others since she's been trained and everybody brings something to the table, and when it all gets mixed together, it seems to turn out pretty good.

Amy: Yeah, for sure. So, like you said, I had the honor of interviewing Devonia Love-Vaughn who was formally known as the director of Multicultural Affairs and is now the Dean of Inclusion Initiatives and Student Success. Interesting fact: she is the first African American woman to become a Dean at Tech. So, you know, we talked about her background and social work. The meaning and importance of inclusion and how the office of multicultural affairs is helping diverse communities on campus feel like they belong.

Teddy: Love her. That's great!

Amy: So, you ready to hear that interview?

Teddy: Please.

Amy: So, are you from this area?

Devonia: I am not. I was born in Appalachian town in Kentucky. Middlesboro, Kentucky, actually. Nobody ever really knows of it. It sits on the border of Tennessee and Virginia. And so, I, I lived there for quite a while. Well, I lived there for the first five years of my life. My mother and I then moved to Springfield, Massachusetts. I lived there for I don't even remember how long before we came back to Kentucky. And I then spent most of my childhood there in Kentucky; not in Middlesboro anymore. But in Lexington, Kentucky. So, when I talk about home nowadays, I talk about Lexington, Kentucky as being my home.

Amy: Okay. Yeah. And what did you want to be when you grew up?

Devonia: So, that's interesting, because originally, I wanted to do something in the medical profession. I thought about being a pediatrician. By the time I'd graduated high school, I thought I was going to college to be a physician's assistant. And I even thought about doing physical therapy at one point, being an athletic trainer at another point.

Devonia: And so, I spent my early years in college, and I attended the University of Kentucky in Allied Health Professions. And then one day I woke up in my senior year and was like, 'You know, I'm really not doing well at this. And academically, this is not going well for me. I need to figure out something else to do. And something that I'm actually enjoying and would enjoy studying and enjoy my time,' and I thought, 'I am a senior by credits and I'm not enjoying this. This is not good.'

Devonia: And so, I discovered the world of social work and felt like that was my calling. What then led to me.... Gosh, I don't know, I met my husband while we were in college. He was an athlete; he was determined to be a coach. And when we decided that we were going to get married, I thought, 'Well, it's great that I'm getting a social work degree.' Because social workers are needed everywhere, right?

Amy: Yeah.

Devonia: And in all types of fields and arenas. And so, with his career, we, we've moved quite a bit. And so, we've gotten to experience quite a few things. I got to dabble in higher ed while I was still working as a social worker in very vast arenas. I've worked both private, for profit and nonprofit. I've worked public and civil service.

Devonia: And then when we moved to Los Angeles, California, I decided that I wasn't going to do social work in LA. You know, there was a lot of things at play there. Plus, the Los Angeles, California social service system just looks different than what my other experience had been. That's when I was like, 'You know, I've kind of toyed around with higher ed for some time. Let me see what, what opportunities exist there.'

Devonia: And Cal State LA, which is in East Los Angeles, had a position for a TRIO program coordinator. And it was in their disability services office, and so really felt like that job was ideal for me. Applied for it, got it, and enjoyed it immensely. This March, actually, will mark my 10 years of being in higher ed. It's been a lot of fun. I've been at, now, four universities.

Amy: Wow.

Devonia: And so, um, coming to Louisiana Tech was again because of my husband, and he was coaching here at the time. The only position that I even entertained, and it may have been the only one open, I'm not sure, was the, at the time, the coordinator for Multicultural Affairs. And, after doing some research on Louisiana Tech, I thought, 'Wow, this would be an, a really good opportunity to use all my 16 years of social work experience, as well as, you know, what I had gained in higher ed to that point.' And just, it took off from there. So, that was just four years ago, actually.

Amy: Wow. So, what kind of social work did you do?

Devonia: So, I, I started out working for Big Brothers Big Sisters in Florida. I also knew when I was doing my academics for social work that whatever I did had to have a diversity focus onto it. That was one of my areas of concentration. And so, diversity work is always kind of been in, in my bag.

Devonia: When I was at Big Brothers Big Sisters in Florida, I came in as a case manager, and within six months, I was a supervisor. So, there was a lot to do with, you know, you know, you understand the concept of Big Brothers Big Sisters. But behind the scenes, you know, there are personality exams and tests that we do with the mentors, and then there's proper screening. And so, you're a professional matchmaker, right? But you're thinking constantly of the welfare and well-being of children. And seeing to it that there are people that are going to be reliable and who will have a positive image impact on the kids. Not just the kids, but the family's lives as well.

Devonia: And so, it took a lot of judgment and discernment, learning not to be, not to base decisions on stereotypes. It really challenged me in that way, that I got to see people for being people and being human beings who want to do good in the world. And so, it gave me the opportunity to really kind of hone the skill of seeing people for who they present themselves as individually and not as the stereotype. When you see that you have a doctor who is applying, you know, it's not the doctor that we're looking at, we're looking at the person behind the doctor, or within the doctor.

Devonia: But social work, you know, it touches over 175 different professions. And, um....

Amy: So, you've worked a lot with children.

Devonia: I have. Although, my preference has always been older kids and not necessarily younger kids.

Amy: What do you like about working with older kids?

Devonia: I love the fact that they can tell you what they're thinking and what they're feeling. You know, I may not like what they have to say, but they can definitely articulate. But I, I felt like usually these are kids who don't have people who are willing to invest time in them. History reasons, whatever the case may be, past experiences, whatever the thought may be around why they don't have as many influences anymore. And I liked being one of the few who was still willing. I liked being able to plant the seed whether it took effect immediately or not, whether I was going to see it grow or not.

Devonia: I, I felt that they were, they're not seen as the most vulnerable because of their age. But mentally I think they are. Because they're still trying to figure out, you know, they're, they're figuring, they're more at a place of trying to figure out who am I? And how do I grow from whatever my past has been whatever I've been void of.

Devonia: And so, we would oftentimes, with my clients, have these philosophical conversations that I found was quite therapeutic because we didn't focus on, a lot of times, the problems that they were experiencing right then. It allowed them to think more futuristically. And oftentimes, what I found is that they were so concerned about just getting basic necessities, that they never had time to dream. They never had time to think about a future. And while that was not always the paramount thing, but it was nice to be able to create that space for them where they could.

And we would have some dialogues around, 'How then do you take what you would love to aspire to, to impact where you are currently?' And what that would look like.

Devonia: And so, I just found that, you know, there's a lot of hope for our youth. But I don't know if they get those messages all the time. And, and so I liked being a part of that piece of it.

Amy: Yeah. And I think sometimes, I know for me anyways, when I was in high school, I definitely didn't know how to verbalize the things that I needed. The things that I emotionally needed or to stimulate my mind. All I could say is like, 'I just want to have a conversation with someone,' but I can't specify, 'Ooh, I want to have a philosophical conversation with somebody,' or, 'I want to talk about, you know, metaphysical things?' Or, you know, it wasn't very specific.

Devonia: Yeah. And I think sometimes as adults, we make the mistake of just not creating space. For those things to happen. And to be able to create the space for that. You know, anytime I, I had to pick up one of my clients for, say, a hearing, so they had to go to court, we would talk, you know, we would spend time in the car talking. And after, you know, and me taking them back, oftentimes, depending on how long we had to wait for our hearing, or what have you, we might go get ice cream or get something to eat afterwards. And so, I would give them time to kind of decompress or to just kind of talk about what was on their mind. Or if they didn't want to talk.

Devonia: But I found sometimes right after court, it was nice to sometimes just have an opportunity to not necessarily go back to the foster home or the group home, but to maybe just sit in a restaurant or sit at the park and just kind of breathe. You know, before they had to go back and face whatever it was that they were facing.

Amy: So, you went from, primarily, doing social work to higher education in Los Angeles. That must have been a big difference. What was that like for you?

Devonia: It wasn't really that big of a difference. One of the things I tell people about having a background in social work is it prepares you for so much. The skill set that you gain from being a social worker transitions beautifully into other areas. So, you're still working with people. And the fact that my transition was into an office for students with disabilities, I was using those skills every day. The Student Success Services Program is designed for first generation college students, students who are underrepresented, students who have a financial need, who have unmet need actually. And so, I got the opportunity to work with students who had seen and unseen disabilities, as well as students who were of all different ages and all different backgrounds, but who all had in common that they were first generation college students.

Devonia: And so, I used all of my skills as a social worker in that position. I did, and it was awesome. You know, it allowed me to connect them to resources. I mean, that's the other thing about the field of social work is that you understand how important resources are. And you're constantly connecting people to those resources, so that they can improve upon their systems and their lives and, and their families, and whatever the case may be. And so, it was, it was it was not a hard jump at all.

Devonia: You know, when I was in social work, particularly when I was working in foster care, you know, technically I was the person responsible for this, for this child. So that went away when I went into higher ed, right? I was no longer legally responsible for someone. But I think I still carried with me that I have this responsibility to help you succeed at this thing in college. But

I think the responsibility to see them be successful and creating a, a space for them where they can thrive and be successful in that was key.

Amy: Yeah. And so, now you work in Multicultural Affairs. What is that like? Also, what is the Office of Multicultural Affairs?

Devonia: So, the Office of Multicultural Affairs here at Louisiana Tech is, has taken on, I think a different role with each person that has occupied the seat as, as its director or coordinator, whatever the case may have been. So, what we do, mostly, now is we focus on retention of minority students, in particular, but we also act as a conduit for the entire campus to raise their awareness of issues pertaining to diversity, equity and inclusion. We have....

Amy: Oh gosh, what does that mean?

Devonia: It means a lot, actually. There's a lot going on.

Amy: Yeah.

Devonia: We have, we dabble in a lot of things. With the retention piece, so it's all around academic support for students. Scholarship, accountability—is huge—and engagement, and seeing to it the students are connected. And not only connected to our space but to other spaces that are important for them on campus as well. So, we act as a referral service many times.

Devonia: When we're talking about diversity, equity and inclusion. It is a mouthful, right?

Amy: There's a lot to unpack there.

Devonia: There is a lot to unpack there. And so, I try to break it down and looking at, diversity is about: Who are all the different types of folks? So, numbers, if you will. And then equity is: Of all of this difference, are we inviting everybody into the table? And then when we're saying inclusion: Are we allowing all of those who we invite in to have a voice at the table? And it be heard, and that they'd be seen, and that they'd be valued at the table. And when we say table, we're talking about the entire campus, right?

Devonia: I think where we find ourselves is, we are constantly working on diversity. We're constantly working on diversifying what our difference looks like. Right? So, that's, and it's not just limited to race and ethnicity. It encompasses gender, religion, as well as knowledge and thought, and education when you're talking about faculty. Right? So, you're talking about faculty who are coming from all over the world, even, to come to this institution to impact the diverseness of it.

Devonia: And when we're talking about equity, we're also talking about, you know, not just do you have your fair share, but do you have all the resources that you need to contribute to this greater thing that we have going here. And, you know, are we allowing that space and those opportunities for everyone?

Devonia: And then inclusion is, are we really being intentional in what we're doing when we are developing policy, when we're developing curriculum, when we are creating new clubs and organizations and things like that on campus? And people feeling that they are welcomed here

and that they, not only once they get here that they have, they are given value to the voice that they speak.

Amy: Mm, hmm. So, can you give us an example of what it would look like for someone to have their voice heard on campus?

Devonia: Well, I think the Office of Multicultural Affairs is, is an example. So, when the office was first created, and the first director was Mert Douglas. And upon her retirement, the office, it went from being a department with a director to being an office with a coordinator. And there was a point in time in history where the thought was, maybe we don't need the office. And the African American students on this campus was like, 'No, we absolutely need this.' And it kind of harkens back to the very reason why it was created in the first place.

Devonia: And so, what that that example shows is that, you know, we had African American students on this campus who expressed that 'Okay, we're here, we have a need, and what we need is, we need a safe space, essentially. We need a space where, because oftentimes we're, we may be the only person of color in our classroom, that there are just times where I, I need to be around people who have common issues that I have. And who can lend voice to those issues, who could either validate them or invalidate them without race being a part of it.'

Devonia: And so the fact that the office didn't go away because the students were able to articulate what the need was, and the campus was able to hear that and respond to that, I think is a testament of, or an example of, when you exercise inclusion. When you exercise inclusion, and you create space where people can be. And it's not so that people can be segregated from others. It's so that people can be recharged to be a part of the greater whole.

Devonia: And so, I think what we're doing now with developing the LGBTQ Resource Center within Multicultural Affairs is our campus responding to that diverse student body that is saying, you know, we need, and we need this space. And I think that is also us demonstrating an inclusiveness here. Not just because the students asked, but because it's, it's it's necessary, sometimes.

Amy: And what does it mean for it to be a safe space?

Devonia: So, when it's a safe space, first, we treat everyone with dignity and respect. Secondly, it's a space where you can feel comfortable expressing your highs, your lows, the in-betweens. It's also oftentimes when we think of our safe spaces, we think of home. This is your home away from home. We've created these spaces on campus. We have these communities in all the offices, really.

Devonia: And so, we have several of those that we don't necessarily go around and say are safe spaces, but I mean, the BARC is an example, I think, of that as well. There are certain students who are extremely comfortable in that space. Their needs are met with the staff and other students who occupy that space. So, I think you have different areas of safe space, you know. The Counseling Center, the Career Center, those are also spaces that are, allow for students to feel safe. And to feel like their voice can be heard, and that it matters to those listening and hearing.

Amy: Yeah. So, for minority members, why would they go to the Office of Multicultural Affairs? When would they go? And what would they do when they get there?

Devonia: We're open eight to eight, Monday through Thursday, eight to five on Fridays. So, the way it's set up now is we have a lounge. So, you because, 'I need somewhere to sit, I need somewhere to eat. I want to talk to somebody. I want to play a spades game, or I want to watch television.' I don't know or, 'I want to have a conversation,' you know, or 'I need a quiet place to study.' But really and truly not just a minority student, any student, really.

Devonia: We do have a set group of students because of our scholarship. We have book scholarships, as well as some tuition assistance scholarships. And with any scholarship that is awarded through the Office of Multicultural Affairs, we require students to do study hall. We require them to meet with one of the staff to just kind of review how they're doing, what's going on. Just some general advisement and counseling. And then also if we need to make referrals to the Counseling Center, or to the writing center or wherever it may be on campus, that is a resource to them. And so, their study hall is about five hours a week. And so, the majority of the students who utilize the space will be scholarship students.

Devonia: But what happens is word travels, right? And that's always something that we're working on. Is getting people to understand that we are not just an office that is just for minority students. And I know that's probably a hard concept for people when the that was its original intent, right? But it's also a space where we have conversations around diversity. And we challenge one another on expanding what diversity looks like. And when I do some of the diversity training with different student groups on campus, I'm like, you do know that I do diversity training with Black Student Union as well. Right? Diversity is a two way street. It's about all of us doing our part in creating this inclusive excellence.

Amy: Do you have an example, maybe a success story, of a student, that of course you won't name, that has gone to the Multicultural Affairs or that has sought services and that has flourished?

Devonia: Yes. So, in particular, an African American male who was academically, he was okay. I felt, and some of the others who work in the office, did not feel he was living up to his potential. And not on scholarship with our office but has a great relationship with our office.

Devonia: We sat down with him; we had some conversation with him about what his hope was for his future. And the major that he's in is extremely challenging and competitive. And really just kind of pointing to him about, 'Okay, look here, this is what we offer here: We offer a space for you to study, we offer a space to support you in that study, to encourage you, to mentor you, whatever the case may be that you need. We're going to challenge you, because the student that you were when you stepped out of high school is not the student that you're demonstrating here in your first few quarters.'

Devonia: Fortunately, he took that to heart. He disappeared for a little bit. And we were like, 'Oh, goodness, we've run him off.' But he came back, and he said, 'I just came back to tell you that I got a 4.0 this quarter. And I like the way it feels. And I'm not stopping.' He is a senior now. And while he has not gotten, I think, a 4.0 every quarter after that, a majority of the quarters he has. It was like, night and day.

Amy: Wow.

Devonia: And what he shares with us is that, that conversation, that ability to sit in a room with people who looked like him, who told him of his value, and of his worth, who weren't related to him. Just had a profound impact. And then he felt like it was more than just him that he was

working for. It was him, it was us, and it was those who are coming after him. And that right there was like, 'Okay, we're doing something right.'

Devonia: One of our processes that we changed was for our students who are on scholarship. We track their retention, whether they get the scholarship continuously or not. We found that our first year of doing the scholarship, we had about a 78% retention rate, which was right around with the University for that same group. Mm, that didn't sit well with me. It's fine to be at the same level, but I was, 'I want to exceed this.'

Devonia: And so, what we did was we implemented a progress report that kind of forces our students to go before their faculty and have them report on how they're doing three times a quarter. Well, at that time, we did four times a quarter. And we sent out notifications to the faculty. We met with the associate Deans, to let them know that this was coming. And we needed their help in spreading the word to the faculty and everything. And after doing that, we were able to look at that cohort. And the retention rate was 100%. And so, those are our tangibles, right. That's how we make it concrete for people.

Devonia: But I think that our president, Dr. Guice, is amazing in that he is completely supportive of all inclusion initiatives. That he is open to what we can do and what we can become. I think what people have to understand is that it's not easy. It's not easy work. It's not something that happens overnight. That it is a marathon and it is a long one. But it is, it is one that it's also not stagnant, right? And I think we're just going to keep moving forward.

Amy: Yeah. You're about to sit in a new position.

Devonia: I'm sitting. Currently. This is my, what, fourth day?

Amy: Oh, really? Okay. Do you want to tell us a little bit about that? What is the title?

Devonia: So, I've been appointed as the Dean of Inclusive Initiatives and Student Success. I really kind of jockeyed for a shorter title, and I tell you in higher ed, we like our long titles.

Amy: You need an acronym.

Devonia: DIISS. That's what I told my daughter. I do a little bit of diss and a little bit of that.

Amy: That's hilarious. Yeah, you get double I's and S's. And you're going to be the first African American woman to be a dean here at Louisiana Tech University.

Devonia: That's correct.

Amy: What does that mean to you?

Devonia: Well, it, it takes me back to the legacy of the first African American students on this campus. It has been 55 years since this campus integrated, and so, we started out with James Potts. And then the following fall semester, Bertha Bradford Robinson came to school here. And then, if I'm not mistaken, either the following spring or the following fall, there were eight students who came.

Devonia: It, it's one of those things that for me, moving into my new role 55 years after the first African American male stepped on this campus, it is to be able to share in their legacy. And to do this work on this campus is a deep honor and a great privilege for me. And it says that there is progress. It says that there is openness to diversity at the senior most level of administration on this campus.

Devonia: For me personally, it's extremely humbling. And I feel a great sense of responsibility, accountability, and the desire to ensure that I'm not the last, if that makes sense. I think it's important when you are a first that you create space for others to follow and to become a part of. I should not be the last one. And so, I'm excited. I'm not nervous. But I am curious as to how the position will grow and develop because this position never existed before. And so, the work I do in it, if I don't do it justice, if I'm not serious about it, if I don't make it professional, if I don't ensure that it is sound, and it's credible, it won't survive. And so, it's about continuing a legacy and building a legacy all at the same time. A lot of responsibility, and I don't take it lightly.

Amy: Is there anything that you want to say about this position? Or maybe even just Multicultural Affairs that we haven't already touched on that you'd like to touch on before you leave?

Devonia: You know, I know that I could not have done the work in Multicultural Affairs if it had not been for Mr. Sam Speed hiring me and believing that I could do something with it. You know, it's always been kind of like a blank slate, like there's this basic formula that was given, but then you can do what you want to with it. And so, he allowed me to be as innovative as I wanted to be, and encouraged it, quite honestly.

Devonia: Jimmy Washington who is a coordinator in the Office of Multicultural Affairs, we have had a great time working together. Not that we won't continue, but we've been able to come up with some pretty interesting kind of things to keep our students entertained and retained. I would be remiss if I did not thank the two of them in particular, for just, you know, being there, going with the flow, riding the wave with me, and encouraging it, and definitely seeing, too, that it grows and that it develops and it continues to grow.

Amy: Well, it was a pleasure having you. Thank you so much for making time to do this, and after this conversation, I am really excited to see what you're going to do.

Devonia: I am, too. I am, too.

Amy: Thank you for listening to this episode of Beyond 1894. If you liked what you heard, please rate and review us. It will help others find our podcast. If you would like to find details about the episode, check out our show notes. To find our podcast webpage, go to 1894.latech.edu/beyond. If you have suggestions for future episodes email us at 1894@latech.edu. We would love your input, so tell us what you would like to hear!

Amy: Beyond 1894 is produced by the Office of University Communications, with help from The Waggoner Center and The School of Music, at Louisiana Tech University. Dave Norris is the executive producer. I, Amy Bell, am the producer and chief editor, and Teddy Allen and I are cohosts. The sound engineering for this episode was done by Jensen Gates and the music featured was arranged by Kaelis Ash.