Jeremy Mhire_mixdown-for transcription

SPEAKERS
Les Guice, Tonya Oaks Smith, Gavin Kelly, Jeremy Mhire

Gavin Kelly
You're listening to Beyond 1894, a podcast dedicated to updating you on research, innovation and campus life happening at Louisiana Tech University. This past year has had its fair share of challenges, but one thing is for sure, your success takes top priority when you make the choice to Level Up at Louisiana Tech University. Build a career that suits you and your future goals at Louisiana Tech. With multiple course delivery options, you can accomplish your educational goals, earn credentials, and accelerate your career at your pace. So get ahead and Level Up this summer at Louisiana Tech. Visit laTech.edu/summer to learn more.

Tonya Oaks Smith
Hello, I'm Tonya Oaks Smith, Executive Director of University Communications for Louisiana Tech University. For today's Beyond 1894, we've got a guest host, Dr. Les Guice. Louisiana Tech's president since 2013. Dr. Guice talked with Dr. Jeremy Mhire, a professor of Political Science in our School of History and Social Science. He also serves as Director of the Wagner Center for Civic Engagement and Public Policy. In this episode, Dr. Guice and Dr. Mhire talk about the transformative power of higher education for two first generation students from small Louisiana towns. They talk about the civil exchange of ideas and the health of our University community, as well as their expectations for excellence that they share for Louisiana Tech students.

Les Guice
Well hello, Jeremy.

Jeremy Mhire
Hello.

Les Guice
I am glad to be able to have this interview with you. You know, when I got the opportunity to do the Beyond 1894 Podcast, I decided to choose one of the most fascinating people on our campus.

Jeremy Mhire
I appreciate that. I don't know if I can live up to that billing but, I do appreciate it. It's a privilege.

Les Guice
So, I appreciate you coming in for the interview, and I've enjoyed getting to know you over the past what, 12 years or so?

Jeremy Mhire
Yeah its, we're getting old. It's going on 13 now, 14 next year.

Les Guice
14.

Jeremy Mhire
Yeah.

Les Guice
I was trying to remember how I first met you.

Jeremy Mhire
You know, I was thinking about that today. And I don't remember the first time we actually met. I think I remember the circumstances though. Because I remember, maybe this takes us a little too far afield. But I remember when you were Vice President of Research, and I had just come in. I remember we would get emails periodically from you. And nobody responded to them. And I think one day I responded and you responded back and I think that was maybe the lead up. The first time we worked together, you might remember, Global Strike had their symposium. And the CIC at Louisiana Tech had a joint venture where we got to put on an event. And you did you know, we helped to write up your remarks because we put that debate together…

Les Guice
Right.

Jeremy Mhire.
… and it was on, really the future of education, and how that affected the Air Force. And I remember working together with you and Brian Etheridge and some of the other people and it was really fun. And you know, I think it just started from there.

Les Guice
You know, what I found fascinating was the fact that a political scientist would be interested in working on something dealing with the Department of Defense. So…

Jeremy Mhire
Yeah, well, that I mean, that's probably a good story that the CIC that I mentioned, that's the Cyber Innovation Center, one of our partners in the region. And when I got here, maybe to make that story short, I had been doing something, I came here from Virginia, and I was working there at the University of Virginia in a Civic Education Project. And so when I got here, there was already this, you know, sort of fertile ground where you all were working in this interdisciplinary way to, at the time, really to attract some attention to some of the things that we were doing with the Air Force. And it just seemed to me to be a kind of opportunity that was too good to pass up in the sense of, you know, how often is it the case- and we'll probably talk about this at another time- how often is the case where you get to really

work with other people that aren't in your discipline? And people- and I hope we do talk about this at another point- people probably don't understand that about modern universities that that just doesn't happen. And, Tech was the first place I've ever been where you really got to work with other people. And I'm not just talking about, I'm a political scientist, not just historians or sociologists, or something like that, but civil engineers and computer scientists. And that's just unheard of.

Les Guice
Yeah. That has been very fascinating. I know you've had a lot of good background, not only at the University of Virginia, but a couple of other universities.

Jeremy Mhire
Yeah, that's right.

Les Guice
You were at Harvard for a while as an instructor and…

Jeremy Mhire
Right.

Les Guice
… I know, was it a year and a half ago, two years ago? You went up to Columbia University…

Jeremy Mhire
Two years, that's right.

Les Guice
… to learn a bit about curriculum. Of course, you also got your own undergraduate degrees and graduate degrees right here from Louisiana. I did too, you know, I came from a small town in North Louisiana called Bastrop, a paper mill town, and came here in Architecture for my first degree and then got Engineering. But you came and stayed in Louisiana and started in Political Science, why don't you tell me a little bit about that?

Jeremy Mhire
Yeah. So the pathway into political science maybe is not the easiest one to talk about, or to explain, because I don't know that that was a sort of moment. I remember maybe making the decision. I took a class, it must have been probably my freshman year or sophomore year, it was fairly early on, it was in Introduction to International Relations. Now, I'm not in international relations, it was never what I studied, but it was the first time that I had sat down and I had somebody explain to me, as if they had to explain it that, you know, people fight with one another, and they kill one another. And it's often over big questions about who gets what, where this boundary gets drawn, who gets access to this resource, who believes in this, who doesn't believe in that. And I guess it just, it really changed the way I think, thought about things. Because it was at that point where I said, you know, I've got to take that seriously,

because that really involves some of the most serious questions that people have and, and that they ask of themselves, and if it involves, you know, life and death, then at some level, somebody's really got to think about that. And I really wanted to think about it seriously. I didn't think that that meant at the time… In fact, if you had asked me, I wouldn't have told you that it meant that I was going to end up being a political scientist, I wouldn't have known what that was. But it just so happened that I got into it. And the more I got into it, the deeper I got into it, the more interesting I got. And even when I went to graduate school, I wouldn't have told you that I was going because I wanted to be an academic, I just went because I wanted to know more about it. And at some point in the process, I realized, "Oh, you're supposed to do this", and it just continued on in that way. So…

Les Guice
Was there someone in your early life that kind of inspired you to move towards the intellectual side?

Jeremy Mhire
Not quite in that way. I would say that, you know, I do have a really good family who, you know, they didn't come from, you know, my family is very blue collar. And so none of them went to school or to University. But they always knew, or they were always really pushed me to try to do whatever I could to be whatever I could. I mean, you know, coming from Lafayette, the way that I did, most people, their horizons are the oil field, right? And so somehow you think about what you can do within that sort of broader perspective. You know, maybe from young, from early, on having a little extra incentive to try to maybe do a little bit more, to try to cheat a little bit more, whatever that meant, you know, put me on that pathway. And then it was really when I got to school, to University, that you started to meet people, your faculty, your, you know, your professors who made a difference. Because, you know, they're, and I think this is probably true for, you know, just countless people that they see things in you that you don't see, or that you couldn't have even understood, and they see possibilities and potential that, you know, your parents can't see, or your family can't see, and again that you can't see. And they really push you. And that doesn't always mean, you know, just flattering you, sometimes it really means pushing you. And I think it was really at that point that it was like, okay, you know, the world's a big place. And maybe I'm not giving it enough credit for, you know, how many differences there are, how many opportunities there are that are sort of more than what I grew up with.

Les Guice
So you completed your doctorate at LSU. And you said you went to a couple of large, kind of private type of institutions. And where did that change and influence you?

Jeremy Mhire
Yeah that's, that's an interesting question, too. Because I think it was all maybe in keeping with this sort of basic, which was, you know, once I got into it, and the more the more you put in, the more you get out of it. And so, by the time I had graduated, I finished my graduate work, it was clear that I thought I wanted to do this. But I also knew enough to know that I needed to know more. That, you know, I really wasn't prepared to be an academic in the real in the real wide sense. And so I took a postdoctoral fellowship for a few years at the University of Virginia. And that gave me an opportunity to really start to teach and, you know, to be a little bit more mindful of what I teach and why I teach it. And to also do it in a maybe in a little bit more of a competitive context. And what I realized, pretty early on there, was,

you know, that kind of competition is something I thrive in, and I actually kind of seek out. And it took me a long time to admit that to myself, but I have to put myself in those positions sometimes because you have to really sort of see what you're made of, and see just how, what kind of potential that really is and to see whether or not the way you think of yourself is justified, either positively or negatively. And so it was really there, where I kind of get the gist that I wanted to do this and I really wanted to make a career of it and be good at it, you know? But then when the opportunity to come home presented itself, my wife Simone and I sit down, and we… So we always knew, I think, that we wanted to come home. And we want it to be part of, you know, I guess maybe if I had to explain it, it's, we wanted to be part of moving Louisiana forward, right? To really try to unravel its potential and to get out of it everything that it could be, to make it fit the state that it really shouldn't be in a way, given all of its potential. And so, we wanted to be part of the reversal of what's called the brain drain, right? So we export, and we have years, so much of our talent. And so at some point, somebody was going to have to make the decision to you know, "No, we're going to have to, we have to reverse this". And so we said, you know, this is, this is a really good shot. And it was perfect, too, because we were just starting our family and we wanted to be close to our family, but not too close, right? And so it ended up being the best of all worlds. And here I am.

Les Guice

Well it was, in my view, it was a great addition to be able to get you up here at Louisiana Tech. As we said, I had met you when I was the Vice President of Research and really enjoyed the interactions with you on a number of fronts. But, you know, you were one of the first professors outside of Engineering and Science and invited me to come sit in on your class. And you've done that several times. And I've thoroughly enjoyed it each time I came in. The first time I think we were over in University Hall, and I have a great opportunity to listen there. And then just recently, a couple of weeks ago, you invited me to come and hear the discussion about Nietzsche?

Jeremy Mhire

Right, Nietzsche.

Les Guice

A book on good and evil. Just fascinating. You have a different kind of teaching approach that really engages students, you know. There's a lot of ways to engage, but the way that you approach that is really extraordinary and…

Jeremy Mhire

Yeah, I appreciate that. I do. Because it's a, it's a craft, and you have to hone it. And it's never a finished product. You know, you try to get better at it every time you do it, and you learn something every time you do it. And I think one of the things that was impressed upon me early on, and I try to do with my students, is to say that, you know, if you really mean what you say that this matters, that you should spend time thinking about this. You have to do more than simply tell students that. It can't be just an argument on authority, just because I'm saying it. You have to go beyond that to say, we're going to do this because it matters because it matters to me, and I'm going to show you why it matters to me, and I'm going to show you I think it matters to you too. And in that process, I can invite you into the kind of conversation I have with myself and with other scholars who debate these kinds of things,

and hopefully show you why, those aren't just academic questions, I mean, they matter in your life too. And you know, my students have always been really good. Our students, you know, we have fantastic students in I mean, we know that, but sometimes you have to say that, and you have to let people know that. And they're just like I was. And, you know, at some level, I regard my obligation, my duty as being one to give them what I was given. And it's to invite them into a conversation about specific things, but it does so in such a way that you're really sort of asking them to come to grips with what their potential is, you know, and who they are, what they want to be, how they're going to do it, how they're going to fit into the world, how they're going to make a difference. Questions that people, not just young people, but people want to ask, and this is this is the setting for it.

Les Guice
I enjoyed your class. I sat in there for two hours, almost two hours, and it felt like 30 minutes, you know, it was just, it passed. But you came in, and just you were talking about chapter five in your book, and you just kind of let the conversation flow. And I think the ability to prepare for that has to be a real challenge. But I don't think any of the students were discouraged by asking really tough and challenging questions during that time.

Jeremy Mhire
No, no, they weren't. And you know, it's, it is a testimony to what we do here because the listeners may or may not know that it's really not common for the present of a University to come into a class, you yourself, I don't know how often you get a chance to do that, outside of when I kind of harangue you into doing it. But it's just not common. And, you know, to my mind, I think is important. And it's important, not just because it shows the students that everyone here is committed to what they do and what we are, which, is in its own right, very important. But I think it also is a way of keeping the conversation going from the top, the very high, the offices on the 16th floor all the way down. And it keeps our mission right in front of us constantly. And again, I don't think most people realize that I have never been in a situation, and you're right, I've been in other places. The idea that a University President would be in a class, you can forget about it. And so that's, that's a real testament to your administration.

Les Guice
I was, I was impressed with the way you ran your class. And it's always enlightening for me to come in and see those things firsthand. I also really have enjoyed seeing you collaborate with a lot of other faculty across campus. In fact, many of them are outside of the College of Liberal Arts, and you probably spend as much time with some of the other colleagues and other, other colleges doing some real meaningful and impactful things, like working in this area of cyberspace.

Jeremy Mhire
Right.

Les Guice
Could you tell us a little bit about that?

Jeremy Mhire

Yeah. I think some of our colleagues would probably say that I spent too much time over on the side of campus. But no, that's right. And so that goes back to something we were talking about earlier. That when I got here, there was this emergent field that was occurring, not just academically, but in this particular area of our country, because of the Air Force, and what was going on with Global Strike with some of their initiative, the Air Force's initiatives in cyberspace. And so when I got here, you all had already sort of laid the foundations for, you know, getting a lot of people involved in this particular field, which is not just computer science. And that's always what's been interesting to me that this new field that we call "Cyber" is really about the ways in which Information Technology and society intersect. And that has innumerable consequences, not just in how Information Technology affects society, but also how society affects the development of technology. And, when I saw that there were people working on that, and they were historians, computer scientists, mathematicians, engineers, architects, right? I just thought, "Man, I've got to think about this". Because this is just a fantastic opportunity to think about the world as it is today. And so that part of me is still the political scientist. But also just in a more ecumenical sense, you know, think about different ways in which other disciplines you don't know anything about really affect your life. And, I mean, that was 13 years ago, and we're still doing it. And honestly, I think we're probably doing it better than we ever did do it. And it's a, it's a real remarkable achievement that we have, right?

Les Guice
13 years ago, there weren't a lot of people talking about cyber.

Jeremy Mhire
There weren't any.

Les Guice
There was a political scientist from Louisiana Tech was in the midst of those discussions and thinking about the political implications or social implications and all, not just the technology things.

Jeremy Mhire
No, that's right. And if you think about, since then, the countless collaborations that have spawned from that, you know, you don't always perceive as you know, you can't always perceive the ways in which things are going to bear fruit. And one of the remarkable things about that is, I've been able to collaborate with so many people and to, you know, co-teach classes, for instance, with other people in other disciplines, that I never would have thought possible. And in fact, if you had been at a more traditional University, in the sense of having more traditional silos, right, that would never have happened. It just wouldn't. And so when we think about what our genuine strength is, I don't think there's any question that is always been that. And our students benefit from that in ways that I don't know that they'll be able to perceive until, you know, they've been out in the world for many years.

Les Guice
Yeah. It's really great to see the great collaborations. And I know I've participated in some of the summer camps that you've been involved in where you're actually bringing students with from the eighth grade, I believe it is, in and exposing them…

Jeremy Mhire

Right. So we do, there are a number of age groups we, for the most part, the ones that right now that we're working on are students who are rising juniors in high schools, although you're right, we've done it all across the spectrum. And so we bring in students, high school students, middle school students on occasion, from all across the state and even across the region. We have some now from Arkansas and Texas as well. And we bring them in for these camp settings where we give them a feel and a flavor for the kind of educational experience they get here. Which is, they're going to meet people in Engineering if they're engineers, but they're also going to meet architects, and they're also going to meet philosophy professors. And when they get here, they don't have any idea what's going on. But it doesn't take them long to get the sense that "Oh, yeah. All right, this matters". And you can't possibly think about this thing called cyberspace if you think about it just in this way, or just in that way. It's not just social media, it's not just computer science, it's not just whatever it may be, it has to be thought of multi-dimensionally. And you'd be surprised, students pick up on that very quickly, I mean…

Les Guice

I think your approach there's real innovative as well. I've seen you do scenario, right? And so, they have to come together and figure out what caused that bridge to collapse? Was it a cyber-attack or was it something else?

Jeremy Mhire

That's right. That's a great example, as matter of fact. We did that particular, those camps that we run here, you're talking about the AICS camps, the one I was just describing a moment ago were the cyber discovery camps. And they, they're meant to be stackable, so rising sophomores and rising juniors. And the idea with the AICS camps is it takes it another step further. And that was an idea that goes back a few years where, a couple of our faculty members, Travis Atkinson and Galen Turner had done a CIA module. And the CIA runs these training modules for their own agents. And they put them in these essentially simulations where something has happened in the world. And the agents have to figure out who did it, why they did it, and what the United States should do about it. Well they came back and they said, "You know, this would be a good idea" to think about the next evolutionary step in cyber discovery. And so we all got around the table. And basically, what came out of it was to use cyber as the context of that. And to say, "Something has happened in the world. It was caused by a cyber-intrusion", some kind of effect from a hack, or something of that sort. And the students, we put the students in these teams, and they have to figure… We design the scenario for them. And they have to go figure out what happened and who did it, why they did it. And it requires all sorts of skills, I mean, you obviously have to have the technical skills, but you have to have the kind of skills that a historian would have to be able to parse documents, you have to have sociological skills, sometimes you even have to have literary skills. I mean, one of the things that, you know, students are often taken aback by is that they learn how to read things. And they have to read them very carefully. And we bring literature professors in to really think about and talk about how the form of something will affect it, and the ways in which have to be sensitive to that. And I mean, the students, we've been so successful and we're still doing it, because they really, not only do they react to it, but they end up coming here to study some of these things.

Les Guice

Yeah, we're seeing a lot of those students show up on our campus in the future, when they get ready to go to college. And, I know it's a lot about being exposed to you all and exposed to that kind of experience. And that's the kind of teaching and learning that I think is really special for Louisiana Tech. I know we bring it to, to our classrooms, as you do, but others across campus are using more innovative approaches, I think, to teaching and learning. I know you learned some more about curriculum when you went up to Columbia University a couple of years ago got selected, what one of the only two in the country to go there and, and talk about, you know, revisioning, your general education curriculum. And do you want to share a little bit about that?

Jeremy Mhire
Yeah, that was a great experience for a lot of different reasons. And so, it came on our radar screen. And, you know, I think it's important to keep in mind that it wasn't just about me. And that matters because it was a relationship that Columbia created with Louisiana Tech, and so you know, the audience might not appreciate just how instrumental you were, and how much you participated in that too. And so, Columbia, is, is known for having in the United States, the oldest what's called "core curriculum". And that dates back to the teens. In fact, in 1919, that's why when I went in 2019 it was the centennial project of this. And that matters only because most schools in the United States today have something called "Gen Ed" requirements. And, those come from, they derive originally from Columbia's originally, initiative back in the teens, to create something like a common intellectual experience that all students have, regardless of their major. And what they were interested in doing is to help schools again, to think about what they can do to put those pieces back together again, to give students those kinds of experiences that, not only enrich their academic careers, but also help to make it clear how different disciplines fit together, or how they're related to one another. Which, the general education requirements at most universities don't do anymore because they've evolved over time for different reasons, but they've lost that original route. And so, Columbia selected us as being open to this, because of our history of innovation and curriculum. And so, I got to go up for a year to really study it, I got to teach in the core, I got to attend the administrative sessions to learn how they, they make it work, how it fits in the general scheme of the University. It was a great experience, mostly because it taught me or it helped me to think about the ways in which you can do different kinds of things, and also to think about why, if you're not getting what you want, how is that a function of the way things are currently designed? And therefore, if you want a different outcome, how do you design them in a different way to get that kind of outcome? And so that has spawned conversations that we've had, and that a lot of people across campus have had, about really asking not only "Why do we do this?" but if we want a different outcome, "How do we design it to produce a different kind of outcome?" And I think that's anytime you engage faculty in that, I mean, as you know better than I do, it'll lighten them up. And that's a kind of remarkable thing, in its own right.

Les Guice
You know, great professors are going to be successful in, in their classrooms. But what I learned back when we were rebuilding curricula in Engineering and Science, Jim Nelson, and many others back then said "We need to change our freshmen curriculum" And, and the impact on that has just been huge. I mean, you just empower great faculty to be even more impactful when you can do that.

Jeremy Mhire

Right. No that, that's so very important to bring up. Because, as we talked about when I was applying to this, the only reason I thought that there was a real good chance that we would be selected is precisely because of what you all had done in Engineering. Because what you did as an engineer was basically to say, "There is this core sequence that everyone in the college needs to have as the foundation for what's going to come later" And I think that's right. And in a way, what you all were doing in the 90's when you put that together was already harkening back to what Columbia had done in the teens. Which was basically to say "Let's give our students that core experience" and then let's let them blossom out from that. And let's see what they can do as they matriculate into their majors, but also as they see the ways in which majors related, disciplines are related to one another. And, it's just amazing how much it works.

Les Guice
Yeah, it is. And I know you've got some colleagues around campus that are having some interactions. You received a grant from the Teagle Foundation, as I recall, to give you some initial funding to help explore the new curriculum development. I know COVID has kind of set us back a little bit just because we can't get people together and, and have meaningful discussions in quite the same way. But, I hope we can get that back get rolling here pretty soon.

Jeremy Mhire
Yeah. And they've been really good, most of the support we've gotten have been really good about, especially last year, saying that, you know, we're going to give extensions. In a certain sense, everybody, keep working however you can during the circumstances. But hopefully, when we hit the ground running in, in the late summer and early fall, we're going to be really ready to go. And, I mean I think all of our colleagues that are involved in this, they're past ready to go. And so I think, you know, that's, that's really energizing.

Les Guice
I know, another one of your responsibilities around our campus has to do with the Waggonner Center, named after…

Jeremy Mhire
Joe D.

Les Guice
… Fourth Congressional District, Tech Alumnus Mr. Waggonner.

Jeremy Mhire
That's right, Joe D. Waggonner. Right.

Les Guice
And what are you, what are you involved in there?

Jeremy Mhire

Yeah the, the Wagner Center is a kind of interesting initiative that we have, mostly because I think we've done some really great things with it but it's best days are yet to come. And so when I got tasked with, sort of basically taking it into the future. You know it was, it was clear that what we needed it to do was to somehow the, the kind of thing that would enrich our students is experiences on the side. And so for the most part, what we have done so far, not only but mostly is to bring in speakers, to host roundtables, to have people come in and talk in classes, about topics that the students are either studying in their classes, or that link classes together. And so, we use it, really primarily, as an enrichment feature. But we've also done interesting other things too. And so we've hosted community outreach events, you know, we've had debates of different sorts, we've had speakers in for the community specifically, and we've also used it here at Tech as, or I've tried to use it in different respects here at Tech as, a meeting place for faculty to come together, to give them their own space to talk about research that crosses the boundaries. And so you have to develop, going back to what we were talking about a moment ago, you have to give people space to get out of their boundaries, because otherwise they're going to stay in them. And so what we do in the Waggonner Center is to try to use it as the conduit where a political scientist or historian can join together with a biologist, or someone in business, or someone in education, to talk about things that are germane to all of us. And so it really has a kind of three-part structure to it. And so, what I hope to see and do in the future is to really take each one of those three parts and to really push forward to really enhance our, our position, our brand, and even our pursuit of excellence, because I think it is… And we've got a lot of centers like that. And in fact, we can talk about any number of them and they all do the same thing. It's really to try to put people together in different ways to bring them into conversations that help the University do its mission better. And I think it's a fantastic opportunity.

Les Guice
Yeah, we appreciate the generosity of our people that have put the investments there that allow us to retain you through a special title, and the Jody Wagner professor, but also just the resources to have broader impacts across more faculty, more students, and…

Jeremy Mhire
Right. No, that that's absolutely true. And our, you know, our, our alumni, our alumni base, our donors, our future donors, our would-be donors, you know, they're instrumental in that. Because as they see you do more with what they can provide, that inspires the confidence to provide more, to be able to do more. And so in that sense, we really want to do, and maybe even talk more about the kind of things that we do on a day to day basis that maybe most people don't see. But if they did they, not only would really appreciate it, but it would inspire confidence. And also create a culture of giving, that is, that we sort of give back. In a way that maybe we do, you know, because we're here because we're trying to give back. I mean, we have roots here, and we're here because, you know, we want to make a difference. And if people can see that we're doing that, then maybe they can join into it too. And that's really what we want to have happen.

Les Guice
I know you have a couple of children?

Jeremy Mhire

I do. Gabrielle and Camille.

Les Guice
But, being able to educate them right here on our campus is pretty good too.

Jeremy Mhire
It's no small thing. Yeah. No, it's, it's tremendous. You know, they've got great teachers. Actually Camille's teacher, Miss Harvey, she's great. Gabriel's teachers, Miss Kramer, Miss Schaefer. They're great. Yeah, it's fantastic. And it's, it was one of those thing that when we came back, it was really important to us that they were going to be close to us. And that, you know, we were really going to be able to be in an environment that, in a certain sense was really a community. And so, having them right next door, we live just right down the street in a way, and, you know, that, that really matters.

Les Guice
Yeah. And still close to your roots back in Lafayette.

Jeremy Mhire
That's right. Yeah, that's right.

Les Guice
Of course, I've been fortunate to be close to my roots here in Bastrop. I still have a brother and family members over there, so it's nice to be there. But, I think there's a little bit of similarity in our interests and, you know, the impact that education has had on our lives, certainly much different than what we had initially perceived it to be.

Jeremy Mhire
No question. I don't know about you. Oh, we probably are similar in this way, you know, that in a way I, I grew up in a really strong and loving family, but in other respects, it was, it was a difficult background. I mean, I, I didn't come from a family that had a lot. You know, the idea of going to college was always one of those where, if you were going to go you're going to have to figure out how to get there. Because, I mean, I was going to get moral support, but that was about it. You know, my family struggled to, to make ends meet. And, and so in that sense, you know, I do take it seriously that, you know, the University's function is multifaceted. And you know, we have to do a lot of things, and the University is asked to do a lot of things, and we can do a lot of things. But, giving those opportunities to students who, you know, this might be their one shot, or, you know, they came from situation very similar to mine. I mean, I, you know, I go into my classroom, I… And in fact, the other day when you came to class, we were talking about this the next day, because my students are always interested to ask after the fact why you were there, right? And I said, you know we, I think he comes because we share this that when we're in the classroom, we see ourselves. And, you know, we're going to, we're going to do everything we can to provide you the opportunities we can, and we're also going to fight like hell to make sure that you, you keep them, because that's the future of the state. And, you know, for the state to be, like I said earlier, the kind of thing it should be and it needs to be, it's really got to invest in its future and in its young people.

Les Guice

Education is transformative to our lives. And, I felt the same thing coming here from Bastrop. You know, I had parents that encouraged me even though they had not been college graduates. And it really… You know, as I came here and grew and gained that perspective on life, I was, it kind of guided me along the way. And I had good professors that mentored me and reached out to me and said, "You can do this, you can get a master's degree, or you can become a professor" and things like that.

Jeremy Mhire

Would you have ever thought going to high school that that would have been possible?

Les Guice

No, never. That was not on my radar so… But I think that's one of the things that connects us together. I enjoy your passion for, for learning, and just for influencing the young lives of people that choose to get their education at Louisiana Tech.

Jeremy Mhire

Yeah, and we, we've got so many good students. And you know, we actually have, I don't know that people really appreciate this, but we have so many faculty here who are really driven by the same thing. And they unite around this common purpose. And sometimes it's not always easy. As you know and as we all know, especially given what it amounts to, as long as I've been here, we, you know, we we've had some tough times. But, what rallies people together is really preserving those potentials or those opportunities that we can give students. Because I, you know, one of my students asked me the other day, he said, "Could you ever, could you have envisioned the situation in which you were living in Manhattan and teaching for a year, when you were in high school?" And I said, I don't even think I could have told you where Manhattan was on a map, much less envisioned being there. Right? But the whole point is that if it had not been for people who simply wouldn't let you rest on your laurels, or forced you to take seriously what your potential was, I wouldn't have been here. I don't think any of us would have been here. And so you know, we really have people here that are committed to that in a way in which, I kind of sound like a cheerleader and I don't mean to be that at all, but you just don't find that at other places. Especially as you sort of go up the perception of the ladder, that's just not how life works. And so I think this is… When you talk about how you can make a difference, it's at places like this, where we are. Right? At other places it's not clear to me that differences can be made in the same way.

Les Guice

Well you're definitely making a difference here. I've seen it in the classroom, I've seen it in your research activities, your service activities. So, I'm really appreciative for all that you've done to get us to this point as an institution, and I know there are positive things ahead for us here.

Jeremy Mhire

I think that's true, and I think it's just a matter of not only doing what we do, and continue to do it, but also being more open and maybe talking a little bit more honestly about what we do, how we do it, why it's different, why it makes a difference, and to really invite the community more into seeing that. Because I think, you know, for a number of years maybe more generally, especially in the state, we

haven't done a good job of that. For different reasons, we haven't really focused on it. But I think we, you know, we can do a better job of that. And I think we do do a better job of that, and we can keep that up, and really lead the conversation in the state. And, and I think the state needs that. And I think we're positioned to do it. And I think we should, I think your administration has done that, and is going to continue to do that. And I think some of the people you work with at the system, they do a real good job about that. And, you know, I, and the listeners, we, you know, we have a little rapport between the two of us, you know, sometimes we go back and forth about education, and what we're doing, and what purpose of it is, and, and I like that. Because I think, you know, having those back and forths, you know, show us that things aren't static, and that…

Les Guice
I like to disagree with you.

Jeremy Mhire
Yes, of course. Well, and you know, I think this matters… The political scientist in me, this comes out, right? Because I think that matters. Because people need to see that disagreements don't mean that at the end of the day, we're not on the same page. In fact, it means that you are on the same page, it just means that sometimes you disagree about the means, sometimes you disagree about the immediate priorities. But disagreement is healthy, and you need to have that. Universities have to have it, that's who they are. And political communities have to have it too. And there's nothing, there's nothing wrong with that. And we have to welcome that at some level, not because you want to be disagreeable.

Les Guice
No, right.

Jeremy Nhire
I think that we agree on that. Nobody wants to be disagreeable, disagreeable for its own sake. But, you know it's healthy. The exchange of ideas is, is very important.

Les Guice
That's what universities are supposed to be about.

Jeremy Mhire
That's what they're supposed to be about. It's also what healthy communities are supposed to be about. And universities are embedded in healthy communities and they reiterate the health of those communities when they help to facilitate that. And I think we, again, we can do that as well as anyone. Because it's in our structure, it's in our DNA to do that in a way in which I'm not sure it is of other universities, even in the state.

Les Guice
And you get to teach students from all across campus. I know you have a lot of disciplines that come in your classrooms, political science, and…

Jeremy Mhire

That's right, and many of my classes, in fact, the one that you were in, the majority of those students are not in political science. And sometimes that's just by word of mouth or reputation, and sometimes people just stumble into it. And regardless, it doesn't matter how they get there. The question is, is when they find their way out of it, is it meaningful to them? And I think the answer so far has always been "Yes". And you just, in a way, you kind of want to see more of that, you know? You, you want to see more people from other disciplines in your classes, and not just from your own discipline, because, in a way, if you're talking to your own discipline, you're preaching to the choir, right? I mean, you can, you take yourself for granted, but no serious thinking takes itself for granted. And that's what you try to instill in your students. That, you know, being serious means questioning things, being serious about them, but also having a good time. I mean, being mean playful, being, you know, being serious and being playful, they're not always at odds with one another.

Les Guice
You know, my first degree came from the, our College of Arts and Sciences at that time, which was really our Liberal Arts College. And I dealt with teaching architecture students and interacting a lot with them and others in those disciplines. But, as I moved on into engineering, I felt like my background in architecture really allowed me to focus in a little different way in the classroom, and you know, the kind of things I was able to expose the students to. So, it turned out to be a strength. So I really appreciate the diversity of experiences that students get when they came here, and it's why I'm so passionate about the curriculum changes that you're looking at, and others across our campus are looking at.

Jeremy Mhire
Right. I mean, in the College of Liberal Arts, I can tell you that, in a way, I admire the School of Design, which is the home of architecture, in 1000 ways. And it's not just because Karl Poljak, the director, is one of my best friends, but it's also because some of the things they do there with the ways in which they put art and architecture and design together, it's just sort of fascinating to see what really creative people can do. And that's what I have in mind when I think about unlocking people's potential. You know, potential comes in 1000 different varieties. And for us to be the kind of place we need to be, both as an institution and as a state, we've got to unlock that potential. I mean, that's, that's the key to our growth. And I admire them so much for what they do. I admire my own unit in the School of History and Social Sciences because, you know, normally when you put together historians, and sociologists and political scientists, you don't get good mixtures. But my colleagues, I, I mean, they're just fantastic in a way. And you know, I adore some of them, you know, Crystal Bella Seenu, and Irene Casas, and Jason Pigg. I mean, they're just sort of models of collegiality, because not only are they great people, but they like to think across all sorts of things. And I know what you're talking about, with your own trajectory from architecture to engineering, you know, some of my best friends Heath Tims and Kelly Crittenden, and some of those guys over there. I mean, they're just sort of fantastic people that do the same thing. And so that's why it's always been easy. Going back to your original questions, you know, "How can you work with engineers?" And it's actually it's not as hard as you think it is because we do it all the time. And sometimes the hard part is to, you know, constrain it. You know, you can't always do that. But sometimes you do when you want to. Right? And, and it's so it's, it's fascinating what people on campus do. And I know you do a really good job and Communications does a really good job of, of trying to tell the stories of like VISTA with with Nick and Jamie Newman do. I mean, that's, that's fantastic. And we're also going to do that? You know, and Kirk St. Amant and his health

communication. I mean, that, that's, that's just amazing. And, you know, that's the key. We've got to really double down on that.

Les Guice

Well I know, your, your core curriculum committee, I think is what we call that, consists of some of those same people and we get together. And I really want to see you all continue to explore that, and how we can change Tech even more for the future for our students that come here, to make sure that they get this diverse set of experiences that are, have become a hallmark for Louisiana Tech.

Jeremy Mhire

Yeah, no, I agree with that, obviously. And, you know, you put those people together. And it's never about putting them together and saying, "You've got to do this". It's about basically saying, which is the question every academic wants to ask him or herself, "If you could design the best possible academic experience, that would be the envy of the world, what would it look like?" And those are the people you could put around the table, and they'll do it for you. And, and not only they'll do it for you, but they'll reverse engineer it and figure out how you got to do it, how it's got to start, how it's going to have to grow. And that's the exciting thing. The problem is not getting people excited about it. The problem is, is like we were talking about, constraining it sometimes because there's so much passion, on campus about doing things like that, that are really student-focused and help, therefore, the brand of the University more generally, and its research portfolios, and its community engagement, and its economic development, I know, that's something that's key for you…

Les Guice

The retention of our faculty. You know, I think the fact that you all have those discussions helps a lot.

Jeremy Mhire

I think, I don't think any question about that. That, you know, every University, it's not just Tech, every University has problems with faculty retention because we live in a market, and that just happens. But if you can give somebody an experience that's not quite monetized, but that's more about giving them an opportunity to help to create their own identity over time, that's priceless. And not only can you retain people, but you can recruit people that maybe just, in a monetary sense, you didn't think you could? But, it actually is an incentive structure that's remarkable.

Les Guice

So are you going to invite me back to your class?

Jeremy Mhire

Yep. You're not invited, you have to come now. It's, it's mandatory!

Les Guice

Okay. I don't know if I'll be able to make one before the end of this quarter, I'll try to, but certainly make sure you let me know when there's a good time for me to pop in and disrupt your class.

Jeremy Mhire

No, no not at all. Not at all. In fact, the students, they adored it so much as I was, for the listeners, you know, I was remarking to president Guice that, I haven't heard the students that engaged, especially about practical matters… Because again, for me, given what I do in an academic sense, it's not usually very practical in that sense. But when you were there, they had very practical questions, and I was really not only impressed with their level of engagement, but the clarity and the courage with which they would ask them in a thoughtful and respectful manner. And, I think the more you were open to answering them, the more it empowered them to think seriously about not only what they were asking, but how that goes forward. And so, you're on the hook now, you got to come back.

Les Guice
Well Jeremy, thank you for being here today. Thanks for letting me probe a little bit more into what excites you and what looks forward to for the future.

Jeremy Mhire
Of course. My pleasure. Thank you.

Kelly Cole
Louisiana Tech University's Waggonner Center of Civic Engagement and Public Policy fosters engagement through research, curricular initiatives, and community outreach. Its design allows the center to bring together faculty from across Louisiana Tech who focus on the intersection of American principles, institutions, and public policy. By working across traditional disciplines, the Waggonner center creates an experience that engages faculty, students and community stakeholders. The center is funded through donations to the Louisiana Tech University Foundation. To donate please visit latechalumni.org.

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