

159. Khalilah Kersey: This Community

Gavin Kelly 00:18

Hey everybody! You're listening to Beyond 1894. This is the official podcast of Louisiana Tech University. My name is Gavin Kelly from the Office of University Communications, and we are joined this episode by our guest from the Office of International Affairs here on campus, Khalilah Kersey. She is the International Student and Immigration Advisor in that office. Khalilah, thanks for joining us today.

Khalilah Kersey 00:38

Thank you. I feel so honored to be here.

Gavin Kelly 00:40

Yeah, we're happy to have you. We're going to talk a little bit about your role here on campus and the International Affairs Office. Let's start up top though with a recent development for you. So, just a couple weeks ago at the annual faculty staff convocation here on campus, you received the University Staff Senate's Student Outreach Award. First things first, as you expect that in any way. I know, like, there's a process where you kind of have to submit a packet and letters of recommendation. So, like, you knew you were nominated and you knew you were up for the award, but did part of you see that coming?

Khalilah Kersey 01:12

No. Okay. I submitted my packet and then I put it out of my mind. Yeah. I was like, done, moving on, and I didn't expect to. I actually didn't even expect to go to convocation. This was the first time that we were actually able to go our office. And I remember one of my coworkers being like, "You have to go to this one. This was going to be so scary. Of course, Sarah was like, "You have to go. This one's going to be so good, and there's going to be like a little cocktail hour after. Yeah, it's gonna be so fun. It's like okay, sure, yeah. And I remember the night before, I was like, I might take the day off tomorrow. Like it's been kind of rough, and she was like, yeah, you should do that. And I was like, oh wait, are we required to go to convocation though? And she she just stopped and she looked at me and she goes, you should go to convocation. Yeah. So I was not expecting that, and I also didn't expect the video. I had I have no idea when she recorded that, which obviously she wouldn't have told me. But as soon as she came up on the screen, my like head whipped to her because I was like, I mean, you know, I knew at that point, so I was I was surprised. Yeah.

Gavin Kelly 02:20

Well, yeah. So it's not a secret at this point, but she did. She was sworn into secrecy when she filmed the video up here with us, and then she told us that day she was like, "I'm going to make sure Kalila shows up, and she's like, "I'm going to be low key about it, but I'm going to make sure she shows up. So she did her part. She did. She did. She did a great job. Well, congratulations. Talk to me about kind of because you know there are several awards that the staff and faculty senates here give out, but they each kind of have a different focus and a different meaning behind the award. So the student outreach award. Talk to me about like what it means to you to receive that.

Khalilah Kersey 02:52

I think my job, on its face, does not look like student outreach. A lot of my work is about helping students maintain their status. We have a lot of students here on an f1 visa, which is academic in nature, and so a lot of the work that I do is trying to provide them information about how to be in compliance and how to follow rules and regulations. And I don't know about everyone else, but when I think student outreach, I think I'm thinking recruitment, or I'm thinking activities, or you know what I'm saying. And so, you know, emails about how many classes they have to enroll into full time, or what authorized employment looks like might not be student outreach. But and this is something that I put in my packet. But a lot of my work is also just doing a lot of one-on-one with students, inviting them into my office so that I can hear their specific situations and finding ways to make their dreams come true. Seems like a stretch, but just like make things possible within the limitations of the rules and regulations. And so, getting to talk to them and asking them what their struggles are, whether it's academic or whether it's personal, we have a lot of students who have family in other countries, obviously, and sometimes they fall sick. Sometimes there are things that they want to do and participate in that is just not available to them. So, a lot of my work too is is student facing, and I don't know that that is apparent on the face. Yeah,

Gavin Kelly 04:22

well, I mean, you can I guess spin the word outreach to mean a lot of different things. So I think it's you know in this case it's it's being a support system for for students here on campus and especially our international student population who have you know specific needs that are unique and and different from traditional students on campus. Absolutely. We we'll talk a little bit more about the international affairs office in a little bit. Let's talk about kind of your journey because your background is is in art, correct? Yes. So working in international affairs, kind of on paper, you know, there's something along the way there that happened. So let's take it back to the start. Talk to me about where you're from and finding those. Interests early on, and realizing that art was like your pursuit, your passion pursuit, and then why Louisiana Tech was the answer for that.

Khalilah Kersey 05:08

Okay, okay, yeah. So I grew up in a very small town called Convent, Louisiana, and you know, before we started the podcast, you mentioned being from a small town, so you might understand as well. But most people have not heard of Convent, and if you have, it probably is also in relation to Cancer Alley. So there are these series of towns along the Mississippi River down south that just have kind of been subject to a lot of power plants, lots of pollution, lots of chemicals. That is where I'm from, and I grew up across the street from a sugar cane field, and down the street from the levee. So, like for fun, we would just like kind of cross the street and just walk along. We would, I mean, during Christmas time, like have bonfires. Yeah, and I remember my childhood very fondly, and I remember like playing outside a lot, and a lot of my family was there. My family on my mom's side, so we would gather together, and yeah, I really enjoyed that. I would never go back.

Gavin Kelly 06:14

Right, I feel I feel very similarly about you know my hometown, Sykes, Louisiana. Like I, it's always home in in very many ways, but it's also stuck in time. Not just from a personal perspective, looking back at it, but like when you go back there, drive through it, I'm like, this is the same place and the

same people, exactly, and the same. And it's because it's a small town. It's the same 100 people and the same. You know, it's so. It's just like really easy to get stuck there, and so like it will always be a special place to me. And I'm not talking down about it, but like it's it is stuck in time.

Khalilah Kersey 06:49

Absolutely, yeah. And we had like I don't think we had a stoplight.

Gavin Kelly 06:53

Right, we didn't either.

Khalilah Kersey 06:54

Courthouse, yeah. There wasn't elementary school. It got replaced with a power plant.

Gavin Kelly 06:57

Uh huh.

Khalilah Kersey 06:58

So yeah, no, when people talk about Ruston being small, I'm like, this is huge. You have a Walmart.

Gavin Kelly 07:04

I exactly. I say the same thing all the time. So I I know better. Like when I when I came here, I started college here in 2014. I like Ruston was the big city to me. Like I knew I knew it wasn't you know like Dallas or Houston or New York, really, these places like those are the big city metro areas, or even like in the current in Louisiana places like Alexandria, Baton Rouge, they're they're so much bigger. But even Monroe down the street, Shreveport, you know, the other way. But I was used to the nearest Walmart being 30 minutes away growing up. Yeah, so like when you go get your groceries for the week, you better not forget anything because we're not going to just make a trip and come back for fun because it's not so living in Ruston, where not only is Walmart a five minute drive away, but there's restaurants to eat at and fast food and like a movie theater and a gas station. I'm yeah, I'm telling you. So I I think that's one of the reasons I've stayed in Ruston is because you know growing up where I was, like Ruston, very quickly became like everything I needed.

Khalilah Kersey 08:04

Absolutely, very

Gavin Kelly 08:04

close by.

Khalilah Kersey 08:05

Yeah, and I had actually never heard of Ruston down south. Like in my mind, this place was not even in Louisiana.

Gavin Kelly 08:13

Okay, fair enough.

Khalilah Kersey 08:14

And I ended up going to boarding school in Natchitoches to LSMSA, so Louisiana School for Math, Science, and Arts, and my art teacher there was like, "You don't want to go into debt for school, yeah, but you want a decent education, right? And I said, "Yes, you should look at Louisiana Tech. I said, "Okay, and I waited until the very last orientation because I was like, "I'm gonna get in somewhere else. I'm gonna go somewhere else, and I did. I got in to some other places. So expensive, yeah. Even with scholarships,

Gavin Kelly 08:46

was the hope there to, like, was in in your mind were these other places more prestigious of a place to get an education? Were they further from home, and that was what was appealing about it? What was the thought process there?

Khalilah Kersey 08:57

I wanted experiences, okay, and in my mind, I thought I had to go. I had to change things completely. And like I said, I had grown up in Louisiana my entire life, and so I wanted like a clean departure from that. And I wanted to say that I was doing something completely different. So I had applied to Memphis College of Art. I applied to SCAD. I applied to SAIC in Chicago. That's where my dad's from. So expensive.

Gavin Kelly 09:26

Yeah.

Khalilah Kersey 09:28

And I had tops. Yeah. And so while I did want that experience and I did want to move away from Louisiana, I didn't want to go into debt, and it was that was a non-negotiable for me, so very respectable. I mean, at that

Gavin Kelly 09:44

age, I think it's like it's a lot of strange pressure in this country, in this economy, to like tell an 18-year-old like, if you want to go into a couple \$100,000 in debt for your education, feel free, like just sign this here, and so. Like when you're 18, it's you know you don't think about it as hard as when you're. But so like good on you for having like being conscientious about it at that age.

Khalilah Kersey 10:07

Why did you come

Gavin Kelly 10:08

to Tech? It was either going to be here or LSU. And going back to the small town thing, I was a little bit worried about being overwhelmed in a place like Baton Rouge, and you know growing up in like the country back roads, it's like I don't want to end up in the city traffic, and I don't. And so, part of it was the feel of it. You know, I talk all the time about so many guests on this podcast say when they came to campus, they first stepped foot on campus, it felt like home, and they liked the you know community

feel of campus, and that's all very true. And the other part of it was to piggyback off what you're saying about your decision making is scholarships and being able to essentially get paid to go to school here. That was huge. I think like 100. Yeah, strip away the the rest of it, and on paper I'm like this. Just financially for my future is the right decision. So,

Khalilah Kersey 11:01

and in my mind, I wasn't going to stay. I had this plan. I don't know what I thought was going to happen after that first quarter, but I told myself that I was not staying here. And and for me, stepping on campus did not feel like home. It was very different from home to me, and enough so that I was like, actually, I can't have an experience here. Even if I'm here for a short time, this can be something fun. This can be a new experience that I've never, you know, done before. And then after that first quarter, I just found my people. Yeah, and for me, that I mean, that's the only experience that I need. I understand when people say that there's nothing to do in Ruston, but I just wholeheartedly disagree. Same. And I have so many beautiful, wonderful friends in my life that are now my family, and we make things to do.

Gavin Kelly 11:53

Yeah, exactly.

Khalilah Kersey 11:54

So I mean, that's why I'm in Ruston. I stayed at Tech because I really enjoyed my program. It was really challenging. I had come from a background of excelling in school,

Gavin Kelly 12:08

right?

Khalilah Kersey 12:08

And I mean, you

Gavin Kelly 12:09

were at LSMSA, so that you know that doesn't happen on accident.

Khalilah Kersey 12:12

And I remember, I mean, even growing up, my dad wanted me to be an engineer.

Gavin Kelly 12:17

Interesting, just because it sounded good on paper. I think

Khalilah Kersey 12:21

it's the way that people's parents wanted them to be doctors.

Gavin Kelly 12:24

Fair enough, you

Khalilah Kersey 12:25

know. And he was like, "Engineers build the world. And I was like, "Yeah, okay, sure. And when I was 12, I like wanted to be a scientist. And then I got older, and I said, "I'm

Gavin Kelly 12:35

sure not going to do that.

Khalilah Kersey 12:37

That's not for me. But I and I don't even consider myself an artist, really.

Gavin Kelly 12:42

Okay,

Khalilah Kersey 12:42

I would say I'm more creative, so I move in and out of different artistic practices. I really enjoy writing. I've been crocheting a lot, sewing, painting, not drawing so much. But a part of that is just because it takes a lot of time.

Gavin Kelly 13:01

Yeah,

Khalilah Kersey 13:01

it takes attention and slowing down, and that is hard for me. So when I spoke to my art teacher at the time, I remember being hesitant to go straight into the arts, both because I doubted my ability, but also because money.

Gavin Kelly 13:19

Right.

Khalilah Kersey 13:19

And so he suggested graphic design, that it was like a good way to bridge those two things. And graphic design also seemed to put me in contact with people more than maybe just like being the solitary artist. You know, that's what I had in my mind. So that is what I pursued when I got here, and I loved the program.

Gavin Kelly 13:40

Yeah. Also, too, going back to you know, ending up at Tech, but almost ending up at other places. You know, I think when you're in your formative years of school, pre-college, you know, like high school, even as far back as junior high, and you're thinking about college and the future and what you want to study and where you want to go, and I think when you're a gifted student and your teachers and school counselors and everybody can see that, and you know it's kind of their responsibility to help you figure out what you're going to do. I think a lot of them like to, and not wrongly so, but they, you know, they let you know that like the world's so much bigger than Louisiana. I heard that you know so much, and I'm sure you did too. And so it kind of does put a little bit of pressure on you mentally, like, well, if I stay here and go to college here, and then graduate here, and I'm still here, it's like, well, then I'm doing a

disservice to myself. But that's that's really not true, and I think you have to live through it to realize for yourself that that's not true

Khalilah Kersey 14:36

wholeheartedly.

Gavin Kelly 14:37

Yeah,

Khalilah Kersey 14:37

and I think that I mean, for me, it really just is about the people, and you can find such a beautiful community here. At least I did, and maybe that's possible anywhere. But I would not move unless all my friends and I moved together. Yeah,

Gavin Kelly 14:56

and going back to what you said about people say. You know, there's not that much to do in Ruston. We've talked about that with other guests on this podcast before too. It's like, well, that kind of it kind of depends, because I would argue that like stuff to do in Ruston versus like, would I rather be here or rather be in a big city with a million things to do but no one to do them with, and you know, not if people if like oh, there's only the only thing you can do around here is hang out with your friends. Like, what's so bad about that? Like that, you know, like exactly like that's part of the charm. And you know, Rustin is growing, and I think you know it it's headed to greener pastures in a lot of ways. But it's also kind of I don't know about you, but I get sort of a little bit protective over my idea of what wrestling is because we've been here for over 10 years now, and so I'm like, it's good that it's growing, but it's almost like when an artist you like they stop playing little clubs and stuff and they start playing arenas, and you're like, I'm happy for them, but I also am clinging to this idea of the artists that I remember from early on.

Khalilah Kersey 16:00

I've actually been thinking about this because when I first got here, Rustin had already changed so much from what it was before I ever got here, and people talked about this like underground rave scene that was here. Never experienced that same, and so it definitely has had like lots of different iterations, and what I'm getting to witness now is very exciting. But I also do remember when I first got here and how like my friends and I would just go for walks, or we would just go thrift shopping, or we would get together and make a meal together. You know, people. Something that I think that is a valid criticism is maybe like the lack of food options, which I think has changed. Unless you like

Gavin Kelly 16:40

Mexican food, and you're in the right place.

Khalilah Kersey 16:43

I think that's changing. Yeah. Um. So that's exciting.

Gavin Kelly 16:48

Yeah.

Khalilah Kersey 16:48

But yeah, I mean, I love I love this community.

Gavin Kelly 16:52

Yeah. It's we we toss around the phrase, you know, in working in marketing and communications. You know, part of our job is taking these like sort of intangible feelings about Louisiana Tech and about Ruston and putting them into words, but and spinning them as something that sells the university. Oh yes, right. But you know you can do that without being insincere about it. So when you say you know like Ruston's an idyllic college town, you can say that and and mean it. Yes. But also you in a way it's like you got to come see for yourself because we can show you all the pretty pictures of the city and of the campus and of Lincoln Parish Park and like we can put all this stuff on paper for you. But unless you're here like living it, which is why again, you know, our admissions office and I'm sure you've seen a little bit of this in international affairs. You know that once someone comes here for a tour, like this success rate of getting them enrolled and turning them into a student is really really high. Yes, because like campus and the people that show you around campus just have that effect on you.

Khalilah Kersey 17:51

And that is something that a lot of our international students have said, and some of them just prioritize different things. And so Ruston just isn't for them, but they always say the people were so great. Like I really did enjoy my experience here. I really did enjoy my time here. So I think that that really is something that is special about Louisiana Tech specifically,

Gavin Kelly 18:12

right? And you know, also international students. I would imagine I'm going to let you talk about it more in depth than I can. But you know, for a lot of people, Ruston, in terms of the scope of the city, if you want to call it that, is a is a downgrade. You know, even people coming from other places in the state. I love when we, you know, still kids from Baton Rouge who don't end up at LSU and they end up here. Yes, but Ruston versus Baton Rouge, in terms of like the scope of the city we've kind of been talking about a little bit, you know, it could feel like a downgrade on paper, but I think more often than not, these people get to campus and they integrate themselves into the community that we've been talking about, and just take it and run with it, and it doesn't matter, you know. Let's talk about international affairs a little bit more. Actually, scratch that. Let's talk about. So you're studying graphic design. Yes. At what point does like, oh, I need to start thinking about what I'm going to do with my degree and my future and my career? Like, for me, it was like I got to graduation in 2018. I found out before we started recording. You and I graduated tech at the same time. Fun fact, but I was in my like last few months of senior year, spring quarter, and I'd been doing an internship that was relevant to my degree, but like didn't have a job lined up. So I'm kind of like I I might have dropped the ball like waiting too long and hoping things just fell into place for me, and then they did anyway. Yes. But what was it like for you, you know, getting through your graphic design degree and thinking about what you wanted to do? Did the did the international affairs job come about while you were a student in a way? Where the founding? Okay, talk to me about that.

Khalilah Kersey 19:54

Yes, so I got to the end of my degree and. I remember thinking, I believe it was my senior year. We had gone to Dallas and we had toured a few like graphic design studios there, and that was so exciting to me. I was like, "Whoa, this is so cool! That's awesome! And we came back, and I was like, I don't know that I want to do that.

Gavin Kelly 20:25

Yeah, and I'm sure that's a thought that like feels like you feel guilty in a way. I just went

Khalilah Kersey 20:31

through this four years. Yeah, yeah, yeah. But I was like, I just want to be with people, and I remember on that tour a lot of people talking about actually, like my job is pretty isolated. It's kind of just me and my computer. And even if it's like this huge cubicle with 50 people in the building, everybody's kind of siloed, and that just made me so sad. I said I don't want to do that. So I was like, maybe if I could figure out a way to like work at a firm that just is a lot more collaborative, but at that point I had met my people,

Gavin Kelly 21:08

yeah,

Khalilah Kersey 21:08

and I didn't want to leave them. And maybe that's like childish or stupid. I don't know.

Gavin Kelly 21:13

I mean, you feel how you feel. That's

Khalilah Kersey 21:15

I know that's

Gavin Kelly 21:16

right. That's just the way it

Khalilah Kersey 21:17

is. And I was married. I was married before I graduated, and I remember us talking about it, and we decided we don't have to stay here forever. But right now,

Gavin Kelly 21:30

yeah, what's the rush, right?

Khalilah Kersey 21:32

Let's just stay. Yeah, and I actually ended up doing two years college ministry.

Gavin Kelly 21:36

Okay,

Khalilah Kersey 21:37

at the Wesley now ACF,

Gavin Kelly 21:39

right.

Khalilah Kersey 21:41

So that was kind of another reason to stay. And after that, I worked at Fine Line downtown, which I loved.

Gavin Kelly 21:51

Yeah, that's because it kind of is in line with your interests, and you also get to work in the community. Yes,

Khalilah Kersey 21:55

with artists and people who just like want to get their photos printed and wedding photos and photos of their children. It was very it was very sweet, and I enjoyed. Oh, this is like like a great plug for me, but I've been wanting to talk about this. But I loved I loved working for Henry. He is such a great boss, and he's so genuine, and he cares about this community so much, and he gives so much to it. I really learned a lot from him in that, and so I really enjoyed my time at Fine Line. But there comes a point where you're thinking about your life and what you want,

Gavin Kelly 22:31

yeah,

Khalilah Kersey 22:31

and then money,

Gavin Kelly 22:32

yep.

Khalilah Kersey 22:33

And so that really was it. Like I would still be working there if I could, but my friend Sarah called me one day and said, "Hey, there's an opening in our office. Would you be interested in interviewing for the position? She told me a little bit about it. I didn't know anything,

Gavin Kelly 22:51

right?

Khalilah Kersey 22:51

But I enjoy learning things. I think learning things is my second passion, and so I was like, "Yes, absolutely. I would love to try. Right. So I went for the interview, and again, I love chatting. Like I love chatting with people. So interviews don't usually. I mean, if it's like really high stakes, I suppose. But

interviews just like you can you can relax and be yourself and just talk. Yeah, a time for me to connect with other people, and so that's what I did. And later that day, my director Jay Lagan called and said, "Do you want the? He actually offered me a different position.

Gavin Kelly 23:31

Okay.

Khalilah Kersey 23:31

He was like, "Do you want the position you interviewed for? But we also have this other position. If you're interested in that, and I said, "I want the

Gavin Kelly 23:38

one I fair enough

Khalilah Kersey 23:40

for. And so a good

Gavin Kelly 23:41

sign, though, a sign of faith that he was like, "We we just want you to work in this office. We don't. You can do what you want to do, but we we we want you as part of the team. That's good. Yeah.

Khalilah Kersey 23:49

And so I've, I mean, I've been here ever since. It's that was four, almost four years ago.

Gavin Kelly 23:55

So what was it like learning the ins and outs of of your position? Because you know, in talking to you now, it's obvious that you know you're not working directly in graphic design, but an element that's followed you and your passions throughout your life is you know being able to be a people person and and just like work with people. So you're getting to do that. So you you you are completely aligned with your your interests and your skill set. It seems, but what was it like, you know, figuring out, getting your foot underneath you in a in a different industry, if you even want to use that word?

Khalilah Kersey 24:27

I was very lucky because the person who did my job before me continued to work at Tech. Okay, it's Vaughn. So she trained me for a week straight. I just would watch everything that she did, and I would write it down on a legal pad. Yeah. So every single, I mean, and I still have those legal pads just in case. Yeah. Like go back and refer to them. But she was very thorough in her training, and I would call her. I mean, for the first year, almost every single day, and just ask questions. I did a lot of reading. She gave me a lot of resources. I would go. Home and I would read manuals and rules and regulations, and there also is a Facebook group for people in our field. So if we have specific cases or unusual cases, we can kind of post them there and just like kind of collectively figure out what the industry thinks. So I had a lot of support and I had a great team behind me helping me learn the ropes. So I'm really grateful for that. And I know that some positions don't have that. Like that transition is a little bit more difficult. But because she continued to work here, I had I had so much access to her that I could I could really

ask her anything, and she could really show me the ropes. And since then, I mean, like I still call her, and we still talk about how we can collaborate between grad school and the international office. But some of the process processes look different now, just because of technology. Like I think we like still had a typewriter in the office when I first started working there, and did use

Gavin Kelly 25:56
it. Yeah.

Khalilah Kersey 25:57
So you've been there

Gavin Kelly 25:59
since when?

Khalilah Kersey 26:00
2021.

Gavin Kelly 26:01
Okay. 2022.

Khalilah Kersey 26:04
So sorry.

Gavin Kelly 26:05
Okay, no, that's fine. Speaking of processes, just to add a little color, the when COVID happened in 2020 and everybody had to go home, we had up to that point been filling out timesheets on a Scantron.

Khalilah Kersey 26:20
I heard

Gavin Kelly 26:21
here. Yeah, here at Louisiana Tech, and so that COVID was the thing that was like we have to actually maybe it's not 1980 anymore. We should start doing this on a computer online. But anyway, it's just yeah, interesting to think about even in a short the short term how many processes have had to been modernized out of necessity around here. Let's talk about international affairs a little bit more. So, you know, it's clearly you're confident in your role, and that obviously you're also good at it because you don't win awards for it without making some sort of impact. But

Khalilah Kersey 26:54
thank you for saying that.

Gavin Kelly 26:55
Deserved the nature of international affairs in higher education, especially over the last several years, is complicated and complex, and comes with lots of struggles and ups and downs. And when international

students is at the forefront of the focus of what you in the office is doing, I know it's easy to maybe keep in mind that that's who you're serving, but also on top of it is that complex, complicated in and out of the state of international affairs in higher education. So, talk to me about what it's been like you and the rest of the team in international affairs here, sort of navigating the challenges of what's been happening over the last few years and keeping that mission in mind as you do,

Khalilah Kersey 27:41

absolutely. So, something that I love about the office that I work in is that we all want our students to succeed. I think, I mean, I think anybody in higher education,

Gavin Kelly 27:54

yeah,

Khalilah Kersey 27:54

would say that, should say that, right? Don't know if they always feel that should as good, but should say that. So we have a lot of compassion for them, and I believe we advise and work with that in mind. We're always thinking of ways that we can uplift them, and so one of the challenges that I'm thinking about is just like a matter of opportunity, and a lot of our students are limited in ways that obviously domestic students aren't, especially when it comes to work.

Gavin Kelly 28:28

Yeah.

Khalilah Kersey 28:28

And a lot of, I mean, for these particular students, they're here on an academic visa, and as far as their visa application goes, you know, they shouldn't they shouldn't be trying to work in the first place. But even for domestic students, a huge part of our academic training is getting real life experience in that field. Even if we're not going to stay in Louisiana for them, even if they're not going to stay in the United States, they want to be able to take something back in their home country. And so we try as best as we can to encourage them in that, while still staying within the limitations of their visas. I think, on a more personal note, so many of them come here and they don't know anyone else,

Gavin Kelly 29:16

right?

Khalilah Kersey 29:17

And their families are very far away. Homesickness is real, and it isn't just that you're in a new place with new people. It's a completely different culture, a completely different educational system.

Gavin Kelly 29:30

Yeah,

Khalilah Kersey 29:31

and if people aren't compassionate toward that and aren't willing to work with our students, then it can make things very difficult. I will say a lot of professors and advisors are very willing. Yes, and we have had so many hiccups and challenges along the way, just with students getting enrolled and currency conversions, so paying for classes, and I mean the comptroller, the registrar, every single college. Exactly, we have to collaborate with them all for international specific issues, and they have been great. And so I feel very grateful again to be part of this community for those reasons. Something else too is just that, like we want everyone to know that we have international students here. So visibility, I think that our students, just by virtue of being here, are stepping outside of their comfort zone, and I would love to see more domestic students do the same and collaborate. Come to our events, like international scholarship dinner, and we just had like a fall picnic for our international students, and just come see what we're about and what we're doing, and yeah, be involved.

Gavin Kelly 30:43

Yeah. Also, too, I think even if you take away the the more intricate details of what you just said, and you know, you put an international student side by side with a more traditional domestic student, you think about things like not having a car, or you know, like just just just like the experience outside of transportation is

Khalilah Kersey 31:02

a big one. Yeah,

Gavin Kelly 31:03

just like existing in Ruston and being able to do the things that you and I have talked about that kind of make your college experience. Those are roadblocks for a lot of these students. So the Office of International Affairs being a safe space for community and creating community where, if for some reason, you know, the student's college experience is very difficult outside, you know, in the classroom and in the community, they'll always have the office of international affairs and and the team there. So it's obviously critical to to the to the mission of of what you guys do.

Khalilah Kersey 31:38

Another big challenge, I think, specifically right now, is how quickly things are changing. Yeah, and so of course we want to be privy to the news that's happening here in the United States. But there's also things happening in Nepal. There's also things happening in Iran. There's also things happening in Pakistan. There's also things happening in Madagascar. There's also things happening in Turkmenistan, and so I'm like, I have students in mind when I'm saying these countries because all of that affects what's happening to them here in this place. So we want to be privy to not just our national news, but global news too, so that we can advise as best we can, not just in an immigration sense or an academic sense, but in a very social, personal sense as well, so that is a big hurdle, I guess. Yeah. Just for me, as somebody who isn't used to like keeping up with news from everywhere all the time, I think that was like a that was a big change. And then,

Gavin Kelly 32:35

well, let me ask you this too, not to cut you off, but it's hard enough, I think. Keeping up with U.S. news because it, you know, the nature of it now. It's it's intentionally geared to be so doom and gloom, and

you know the bad headlines get more clicks than the good ones, and so that on a global scale, where there's there's you know there's a lot of bad stuff going on everywhere, and so, and the news just like amps it up to 11. So, what's it like for you? Like having to digest all that? Like, I'm hoping you you're making time to keep your peace a little bit.

Khalilah Kersey 33:11

That's a good question. Keep my peace. I will say I'm pretty decent at leaving work where it is. There, compartmentalize a little 100% There have been a few cases outside of work that have required attention, and I've made myself available to students after hours if that if I felt that that was necessary. But when I'm here, I'm here and I'm available for them and whatever they need, but when I'm home, I'm home. Right, and I do think that I do a okay. I do a pretty good job of that. I think right now that is very difficult for me because what is happening in immigration. Yeah, I don't know if you've heard, but there was this big proposal that got passed. It was a final rule to end what's called duration of status, which basically allows international students to stay here as long as they're maintaining their status. And the end of that means that they would only be able to stay here in four-year increments. For PhD students,

Gavin Kelly 34:20

right,

Khalilah Kersey 34:21

that takes much longer time. Yeah, so they end up having to file what's called an EOS application, so extension of stay. That does come with a filing fee, so there's a financial burden associated with that. So we're preparing, we're reading this final rule. It's hundreds of pages. We're going through to make sure we understand it, and then injunction is filed the day before it was supposed to go into effect, so right now it's postponed. They're going to meet on october 2 to see how it's going to move forward,

Gavin Kelly 34:50

but not for nothing in terms of like you and the team being prepared and doing your due diligence and your homework for stuff like this, because I imagine too any sort of legislation. Or big changes in immigration or international affairs beyond this campus, a lot of times these students are going to look to you guys first, right?

Khalilah Kersey 35:10

It's really hard. They come and say, "Is that true?"

Gavin Kelly 35:12

Yeah.

Khalilah Kersey 35:12

Or like, what's

Gavin Kelly 35:13

going to happen? What am I going to have to leave? Yeah.

Khalilah Kersey 35:16

And they have asked that.

Gavin Kelly 35:17

Yeah.

Khalilah Kersey 35:17

What's going to happen to us? Is it worth it to still be here, I don't think that people want us here anymore. And I mean, it's one thing to be able to say we want you here. Louisiana Tech wants you here. I feel very confident saying that, and not just our office, but I mean, even President Henderson, like he's made that very known to our office and to students. But then there are just some things that are out of our hands that we can't, you know, really do anything about. So supporting them as much as we can, and you know, letting them know that we're with them and we stand with them.

Gavin Kelly 35:51

Yeah,

Khalilah Kersey 35:52

you know, is about as much as we can do when rules and regulations change that are not in their favor.

Gavin Kelly 35:57

Yeah, we're gonna do what we can.

Khalilah Kersey 35:59

Exactly.

Gavin Kelly 35:59

Yeah, and also like, you know, we talked earlier about people tell us you know the world's so much bigger than North Louisiana and whatever. And in this case, that's true. You know, we can we can control a certain bubble of things here on campus and to an extent in the city. But you know, as as the world is bigger than here, so is the scope of what's affecting our international student population. So yeah,

Khalilah Kersey 36:25

and that's a very real conversation that is happening. Students asking, maybe I should go to Canada, maybe I should go to Germany, the UK, Australia. You know, because those places right now feel a lot more hospitable to them,

Gavin Kelly 36:42

and we don't want to lose that. We don't want to lose. We don't want to lose them. We don't want to. You know, they bring so much to our campus and and make up a larger portion of our student body than I think a lot of people might realize. Absolutely

Gavin Kelly 36:52

integral to the Louisiana Tech, the makeup of our student body. This this has been great. I appreciate you being you know candid and opening your responses. Thank you for giving

Khalilah Kersey 37:02

me the opportunity.

Gavin Kelly 37:03

I kind of said it already, but it's clear to see why the student outreach award ended up with you because you care about what you do and take it very seriously, but also are very relaxed and being a people person and being able to interact with our students and our campus community seems like something that comes very naturally to you. So

Khalilah Kersey 37:22

I love it, and I love them.

Gavin Kelly 37:23

Very good. Well, I we're kind of just in the beginning. I guess it's two weeks into the school year, so things are have picked back up. But what is like the busiest time of year for for you? Do you think

Khalilah Kersey 37:37

that is so hard? People ask that a lot. They're like, "Do summer slow down? And every year I want to say yes, and every year that is a lot. Yeah, it kind of doesn't. It doesn't really. And every year has been very different. When I first started working, we were kind of coming off of COVID rules, and then we kind of felt like we were settling in. And then there was a quarter where we had a huge influx of international students, very unprecedented, and then we had a big decline, and then all this stuff with immigration. So at this point, I have no idea. Yeah, I don't know what the bus. It has all felt like busiest times. I think there are weeks at a time that things kind of slow down. So

Gavin Kelly 38:15

no, no shade to our nine month faculty out there, but you know, not having three months off in the summer is you know things. I I do think too. Like you talk to people who just know that you work at a university, nothing else. You know, they just the assumption is, well, it's summer, school's out. You know, and it's like, yeah, in ways, but it never it never ends. But that's fine because we're all you know we're all here for similar reasons,

Khalilah Kersey 38:40

exactly,

Gavin Kelly 38:40

and we're all working towards similar goals. So, Khalilah, thank you again for making time for us on the podcast. Thanks for what you do in international affairs, and yeah, we'll see you around. Can I get a go, dogs?

Khalilah Kersey 38:52

Go dogs!

Gavin Kelly 39:06

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