

Voices of Sustainability: Season 1, Episode #11

Phillip Schlies

TRT: 31:35

Intro

Hello and welcome, I'm Phillip Schlies and you are listening to the Voices of Sustainability Podcast. Join us as we delve into the various strategies and challenges faced by the government, businesses, and non-profits, all striving to balance economic growth with environmental and social responsibility.

This season from the University of South Carolina, our reporters are all business majors at the Darla Moore School of Business with a concentration in sustainability. They'll be talking with various organizations to highlight how they're working to improve the world we live in and conserve our natural resources.

On today's episode, our reporter Taylor Gilliam will be speaking with Zenobia Edwards, the founder of the non-profit organization I Am Beautiful, which she co-founded almost two decades ago. This organization focuses on fostering confidence, leadership, and sustainability awareness among girls and young women across communities. Tune in to hear Zenobia's inspiring journey and insights into how education and sustainability intersect to create meaningful change. Let's get into it.

Script

Taylor Gilliam

So my name is Taylor Gilliam. I'm a junior finance major. Thank you for coming here today and being interviewed.

Zenobia Edwards

Certainly, thank you for selecting me. I'm happy to be able to.

Taylor Gilliam

So the first question is, tell me about yourself.

Zenobia Edwards

I am, I was actually born in the lower state in Darlington, South Carolina. If you know anything about NASCAR racing, then you've heard of Darlington. That's where I was born. That's where

my mother is from. But I grew up and attended high school, college and grad school in Spartanburg, South Carolina. Graduated from Lafayette College with a degree in biology Converse college, right across the street, and obtained my master's in the art of teaching science, and my EDS, and went to right after that, went back to my alma mater, James at first high school, and taught science and I love to tell people how I taught right beside my dad, he was a science teacher. So we got to teach right beside each other for about three or four years. And then I got into administration Education Administration, and obtain my doctorate from Nova Southeastern University, and have been in the classroom and administration in education on every level from middle school to grad school really, I worked for a few years at Johnson C. Smith, university. And currently I am not an education proper, but I am an educator at heart. I am the director of will will co founder and co director of I am beautiful, which is a nonprofit organization that my sister and I co founded almost 20 years ago. And I'm executive director of Old North State Medical Society. And it's the oldest chartered Medical Society for doctors of color in the nation. So all of those have my interest, because almost it kind of connects me back to my science interest. And of course, my work in the community with I am beautiful and I programming and girls, then I'm also leading a project with Aspen Institute right here in the corridor for criminal justice reform. And we're focusing on youth ages 16 to 24. And I know that was a very long introduction, I apologize.

Taylor Gilliam

No, its ok, thank you. And the next question would be, what is sustainability to you?

Zenobia Edwards

Well, I always try to look at things from different angles. Sustainability, to me is on the surface is probably what everybody else thinks it is about, you know, reducing our carbon footprint, cleaning our oceans, preserving our water, doing all those things, recycling, what can ever can be recycled and reused. It's all of that from me too. But for me, the thing that really pulls me closer to it, is the social impact of sustainability. So I think about not only the impact on impoverished, and rural communities and people, especially minorities, but also the preservation or the sustainability, if you will, of systems that are already inequitable. So we don't want to sustain that we're certainly working to change that as we work towards health equity, housing, equity, you know, all those things. So we're still trying to get to some places and we need to be sure as we look at sustainability, that we look at the human factor side, we still need to be focusing on those things, and the goals that we're trying to meet with regard to gender equity, and all of those other things. So it means the typical thing to me but it also is about being inclusive as we sustain and not forgetting some of those other roles because sustainability quite honestly, like many things can be tiered. You know, I remember as a school administrator, wanting to do a recycling program well, I had to look at my budget because those recycling trash cans or you put pack paper, those are expensive. So you have to, you know, think about things like that. So it means a little goes a deeper layer for me.

Taylor Gilliam

Okay, thank you, I know you talked about the science part of your degree in your masters in biological sciences. So how did that kind of pull in to your understanding of sustainability?

Zenobia Edwards

Well, you know, in the environment, the ecosystem, just looking at it, in general, we're apart as human beings have, you know, a bigger system. And, you know, it's always been interesting to me that, you know, there's some ideas or theories that make, they're based upon us not being connected to each other. But we are, and there's nothing we can do about that. And we're connected to other things in nature. So, of course, Biology, being the study of life, and looking at everything that causes and puts pressure on that life, we have to think about that in terms of sustainability. I feel like I am only as healthy as the people I'm around, and who am I around, I'm around people. When I travel, I'm around people, if I'm on the airplane, I'm around people like at the mall. And so I don't know all those people, but I'm only as healthy as them. And then when we start talking about what will make us unhealthy, we're talking about something that we can't even see what the human eye, you know, that can take all of us out, as we, you know, learned over the past several years with the pandemic. So we really have to be cognizant of the fact that we all are interdependent, not just as human beings, but we're interdependent on the sunlight, the beaches, our air quality, and that compete sometimes with the capitalistic society we live in.

Taylor Gilliam

So with your career working with kids, as a teacher, a dean, and a principle, what led you to your nonprofit? I am beautiful.

Zenobia Edwards

Great question, I get to ask that all the time, that my experiences with my students, and my parents and communities is exactly what led to I am beautiful, and not just them and my sisters as well. So we're in two different states, when we had this initial conversation, and I'm working with girls, and girls and boys really, but you know, I dealt with more girls. And even with my boys, I'm dealing with single mothers, a lot of times because I work with my career has pivoted to at risk students by choice, even you know, in the college level and graduate level, I want the ones who need the support at providing challenge and the support and helping them reach the next level. So, you know, I had an experience with my, my girls and my parents that, you know, they will say, you know, on a Monday, I want to be a nurse. Okay? So let's get a plan, you need to pass math if you want to be a nurse. And here's why. And you know, in the next week or two, they will do something that will completely compromise even them being a student in school. And so it's like, Why do you keep getting off track and my sister is working with a completely different type of girl in another state with her church. And she noticed when she was doing a lesson with them that you know, she asked them to write down everything, you could look at yourself, if you could change anything, what would it be? And she said, they just wrote ferociously, and the lower middle school girls, they just wrote, oh, you know, longer hair, lose 30 pounds. I mean, just she said and then she I'm gonna turn the paper over, write down all the things you love about yourself. And they literally sat there and they were thinking, like, they

couldn't find anything. And she thought this is horrible. And so we were having that conversation. And he was like, wow, why would these girls not think that they, they're worthy that Oh, I like my hair like me. And we've just decided it's all the influence of the media and comparing themselves to different things, and a lack of confidence and self-esteem. And so that's what spurred our you know, creating you know, beautiful, beautiful isn't just about hair and makeup and nail polish. It is about character and as you can see in my background, I've beautiful acrostic is about carrots or it's brave, energetic, assertive, unique, tenacious, important, fabulous, unequaled in love. Every girl and woman could be those things. And that's really what makes you beautiful, because they come from the inside out. And the rest is history. Honestly,

Taylor Gilliam

I love that it was a great explanation. How does your organization talk about being sustainable related to social issues?

Zenobia Edwards

Sure. Well, we touch both layers that I talked about earlier regarding my perspective on sustainability. So we have done things in the community, because we indulge heavily in community service. And so in doing so, we done the trash pickups, in different areas, parks, or whatever we've done, the community gardens, and those kinds of things, with our girls in different groups, for community service, but on the other side of the social side, we really make an effort to introduce our girls to non-traditional careers for women, like construction engineering, or aerospace science or things like that, that they typically wouldn't think was within their reach, you know, we put it not only put it in their reach, we put people in front of them who've done it. And, you know, like, I was just a regular kid, like you. And I just wondered how those airplanes stayed up in the sky. And so they get exposed to things like they're early on, because our program begins as early as six years old. And so letting them simulate and do things. We had a former board member who's still very, in close contact with our organization, life circumstances, took her from our board, but not from our mission. And she was exactly what I described, she's, she's an aerospace engineer, black female. And she, you know, we make paper airplanes, and we're talking about, you know, the whole science behind something flying. And actually, there's a documentary that she was in, because not only and this is, this goes further, not only Chanel supposed to space engineer, but she is a classically trained ballerina. Wow. What about those tours you can do and be anything you want to and so for our girls, to see that and, you know, and be exposed to it right there within their reach is huge, because we've had girls that have gone through our program, and their parents themselves now and married, etc. And they volunteer to come back to volunteer with our program. So it from that standpoint, the message and mission of I'm beautiful, is being sustained.

Taylor Gilliam

I loved that. I really do. That is a really great question. And answer. Um, so consider your background and education. How does your nonprofit reach the goal of quality education? And what is the importance of quality education to you?

Zenobia Edwards

Oh, education is the one thing you can have that no one can take away from you. I don't care where you are, I don't care how much money you have or don't have. Your that Curiosity has to burn within you to learn things, read things, be curious about things, and not be hampered by what you don't have. And a perfect example, is what you described at the beginning of this conversation, you know, I saw that you were the only black person and you were female, if you saw something you could relate to. So representation matters, that you see people that you can relate to in places you may want to be. And you know, we've discovered some other similarities as we've been talking about people we know. But that's the big deal. Education is everything. And I never make an assumption. And I really, my colleagues and I have these conversations all the time, you cannot assume that the kid that gets in trouble in class or gets put out of school, or sitting in the back with the headphones on don't assume that that kid is ignorant, or doesn't value learning, because they'll surprise you. I've seen it so many times that you know, when they get the right stimulus, or when they have to show up something they're interested in, you won't be able to slow them down or stop them. So and so that brings up the second thing, preposition representation is important and it matters. But also exposure exposure is everything. Because young people don't know what they don't know. They've never been it. They've never seen it. They don't know that they can even attain it. So I feel like it is our job as our organization I am beautiful, and as educators to expose young people to places things, ideas, and to listen to them. I tell people all the time, I learned as much as I taught while I was in education. So education is quite a value for me, my family, because you have to show up, we've been given so many opportunities. Why would we not when you think about the sacrifices that were made just for us to be able to sit as black people, and then even as women to be able to sit in some of the educational halls that we are able to sit in now, and not just sit and learn as a student, but to sit as professors to sit as administrators, presidents? I mean, why wouldn't you learn it, our ancestors paid a very heavy price. And we owe it not only to them, but we owe it to future generations to absorb everything we can about ourselves, our history, about the planet we live on about the people we share the world with.

Taylor Gilliam

Thank you. So with what your nonprofit does for young girls and women, can you tell us about good health and well being and what it means to you and why it's important for the girls and women?

Zenobia Edwards

Well, it's especially important because we tend to juggle so many things. You know, I don't want to be sexist at all. Because, you know, my husband does most of the cooking in our house, and he's a very good cook. So those old traditional roles don't necessarily apply. But we do know that if you're not healthy, you can't do anything. So health is wealth. And, you know, it's a journey for everyone. So we've done lots of programming that address, you know, being healthy moving. We had programming, we haven't done it in a while, but we did it for several years, walk it out, whatever county we're in, walk it out, whatever that city was, and it's kind of like a, you know, a walkathon to get up, get moving, our parents and volunteers will participate. And we just have a

fun day walking, we have a program read before you feed to teach our girls how to read nutrition labels, and understand that the 20 calories you see on the back of something is per serving. So how many servings is in that? So you know, you said oh, this this is 20 calories. But understanding that at a young age, I think if you're exposed to that kind of thinking that you can grow up with it, and you understand it more. So we do push health and wellness from a physical standpoint, but also mentally, being emotionally healthy finding a way to cope with life and life's challenges that are sure to come. How will you deal with it and not let it affect your spirit, your essence and you know, be resilient in dealing with things sometimes the carpet can be pulled from under you, the door might get slammed. But sometimes those closed doors are a blessing to you. Because it makes you think deeper about things and learning how to deal with those hurdles that may surely come in life early on, sometimes keeps people from when they would go down that slippery slope of being, you know, depressed or not feeling well about themselves at all goes to self esteem, that you can get back up and fight another day. That's what we try to teach our girls.

Taylor Gilliam

Thank you. Thank you for sharing. I know you touched on gender equality. But can you talk about gender equality and reduce inequalities and how your nonprofit is navigating through these?

Zenobia Edwards

Well, it goes back to what I said earlier about confidence. Typically, and this is old, old, traditional belief that where a woman's personality should be where her how she should present herself. And you know, honestly, it's how I was raised, that you know, young ladies are seen and not heard. No, I want to be heard, you know and seen sometimes and sometimes just saying it's my choice. And so that whole notion of how I feel about myself and my level of confidence when I speak when I walk into a room, that inequality can only start to be addressed. If we start speaking up more and it is happening. We see it all over where women are speaking up for themselves. They're owning their own mental health. They are speaking up about being looked over for promotions, and mistreatment in the workplace and microaggressions and so all of that starts early because beautiful girls become beautiful women when they're brave enough to express things that are going on with them, you know, and I have to address something that always gives me pause, because sometimes is black women were hesitant to say what we want to in certain, you know, places, because we don't want to be perceived as that stereotypical angry black woman. Why is that a stereotype for us and not other ethnicities. And you know what it's okay to be angry. Anger is another emotion just like happiness is a happy black woman, I'm an angry black woman, sometimes, I'm a happy black woman, sometimes. I'm an introvert, black woman sometimes, and sometimes I'm an extrovert, you can be all of those things, we can select from the entire menu, and not be quelled by what someone may think of us. So all of that to say, when you feel confident, and you know who you're worth, and you know who and who's you are, some of the inequality starts to reduce, because you call it out where it is.

Taylor Gilliam

Love that, um, this is one of our standard questions we have for the interview. So how does your organization measure the impact and effectiveness of your sustainability initiatives?

Zenobia Edwards

Well, for us, it's probably more qualitative and quantitative, we're not doing you know, ESG reports or anything like that. But, again, the human side, of course, we can see the immediate results of, you know, say, adopting a highway or, you know, a park that we're going to keep, we can see the immediate results of that, oh, it looks this way we can take before and after pictures, you know, we've planted flowers in little garden spaces, you can see those immediate results, that's a part of our community service initiatives. But it takes longer to see. And this is a true story, to see a young lady who had no confidence to join your organization, and be put in a position to speak up for herself, to share her ideas to give her voice and see her transform. From this, you know, quiet little, it's kind of intimidated introvert into this blossoming, speak up on social issues and become really an activist championing a cause in college on a full scholarship. That is how we measure what we've done. And we've seen that repeatedly, we've seen our girls go off into the military go off to college, in 2020, for some of them being the first generation to obtain a college degree in their household. That's a true measure for us, when I can see some of our girls now, and they tell the story of how, and I am beautiful, impacted them. That's how we measure what we're trying to do. Because what we know is if they feel that way, and then they had it had that impact on them. They're going to share that with somebody, their younger sister, their younger cousins, and the beautiful mission will continue. And that's our goal.

Taylor Gilliam

Thank you, thank you for sharing. I touched on my mentor, how they helped me. So how has being a mentor to these young women and girls shift your perspective on your impact and the work that you do?

Zenobia Edwards

I have absolutely loved mentoring. My little girls that have grown up to be bigger girls that are some that are adults now. Because once our paths crossed in that way, we're in each other's lives. And so so it's never ending. It has truly impacted me in that. I really do feel like in my role, here are my purpose, I should say, in helping and serving the people that I work with. Let me connect you because it's how we raise people up. And so that impacts my life, then I hope that I've had an impact on the lives that I've in which I've been involved.

Taylor Gilliam

Thank you for sharing, that was such a great answer. What motivates you to continue to pursue sustainability within your nonprofit?

Zenobia Edwards

Well, I'm motivated because as I said, it's a movement. We have a mission, but it's really a movement. And it's a movement, not just for girls, but for women, as well. So our most of our volunteers are female, we've had male volunteers before, but most of them are female and just

having them come together as a group. and have somewhere to talk about what happened with them on their job or a favorite book. We've hosted the beautiful book club. And that was for our volunteers and board members, something for the grown girls to do. So I'm motivated because it touches every age group. In fact, the very first I am beautiful gathering happened with my girls in school, but our first conference when we formalized it, and really put teeth into it, our first conference, we had, I don't know, maybe 90 or so girls and women there. And I remember this, and this is what motivates me. Our youngest girl, there was about six years old, because I think it was my niece at the time. She's grown now. But she was about six years old, and the oldest lady there was over 90. And she participated. And she did the I am beautiful affirmations, chose her beautiful word. And I thought, this is something for every woman, every female, to know that when they say she's beautiful, you don't have to look like a model. You can be beautiful in whatever you do. And however you present yourself, if you're confident, and you do it with authenticity, and you're doing it from a place of love, not just for others, but for yourself. Then you that makes you beautiful. So that's my motivation.

Taylor Gilliam

Thank you for sharing that was such a great answer. The last question I have for you today is if you were going to give one piece of advice to students looking to have an impact on the careers what would it be?

Zenobia Edwards

Wow, um, so much, I would say, but if I had to sum it all up, keep your curiosity. Always be willing to learn, unlearn, and relearn. And that is from one of my good friends and colleagues, Dr. Calvin Mackay, out of New Orleans, Louisiana. He has started as a still movement across the nation that is like no other. But I heard him say those words like decades ago, and it's true. Be curious, don't let things just pass you by. I encourage students, you know, take those classes, take the harder classes, you can do no worse than some of the other people sitting in the classroom. But you get faked out sometimes like you don't belong here. You shouldn't be here. Or what are you doing here? What Why are you here? Are you getting get these hours? Me too. So have them. I'm included. I want to know to keep your curiosity and learn everything because it all comes together. Like the board member I told you that was formulated with this. That was the ballerina in the aerospace engineer. You know, you may see me you today saying oh, I co founded this and I direct this. But you know what, I drove school bus in high school. That's when you could do it. I have worked at the gift wrapping counter at JC Penney, I worked as a phlebotomist, and all of those experience gave me perspectives, ideas, and things that I use today. My grandfather here in Darlington, when he was living, he was a tobacco farmer. And I have helped put tobacco in and crop tobacco and soybeans and all that other stuff. Why? I know how to drive a tractor. And so I remember my dad saying it is better to know it and not need it than to need it and not know it. That is the basis of education.

Outro

Thanks for tuning in. I hope you've enjoyed getting to know Zenobia and learning more about “I Am Beautiful”. Her dedication to education and sustainability goes to show the importance of fostering confidence and leadership early on. However, that’s all the time we have today. Join us next episode where are guest from South Carolina’s Department of Commerce talks about finding the best routes for sustainable practices that businesses can follow. Thank you for listening and we will see you next time.

Tag

The Voices of Sustainability Podcast is produced by the Darla Moore School of Business, and production was overseen by Dr. Laura Smith from the USC School of Journalism. This program was also made in partnership with Sustain SC. And last but not least, funding was provided by the Alfred N. and Lynn Manos Page endowment for sustainability in business. Thank you.