

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

[00:00:00.72] TORAL PATEL: The opinions expressed by the guests and contributors of this podcast are their own and do not necessarily reflect the views of Cornell University or its employees. The coronavirus pandemic has impacted all of us in many different ways. The pandemic has also caused an increase in hostility and violence towards Asians and Asian-Americans.

[00:00:22.72] On today's show, we'll be discussing the rise of xenophobia and racism with Hei Hei Depew. Xenophobia is the fear and hatred of strangers or foreigners, whereas racism is a belief that racial differences produce the inherited superiority of a particular race. My name is Toral Patel.

[00:00:42.00] ANTHONY SIS: My name is Anthony Sis.

[00:00:43.41] TORAL PATEL: And you are listening to the Inclusive Excellence podcast.

[00:00:46.47] [MUSIC PLAYING]

[00:00:59.73] Hei Hei, thank you for joining us on today's show. Why don't we start by having you share a little bit about yourself, where you work at Cornell, and the pronouns that you use.

[00:01:07.80] HEI HEI DEPEW: Sure, my name is Hei Hei Depew. I work for the College of Human Ecology. I am a financial analyst. I go by she/her.

[00:01:15.84] TORAL PATEL: Perfect, thank you so much for sharing. As usual, we will start with our question of the day, which Anthony has prepared for us today. So, Anthony, what is our question of the day?

[00:01:25.44] ANTHONY SIS: So my question of the day is very much kind of just keeping in mind everything that's going on in the world, everything that's going on in our personal lives and whatnot. So it's really just a temperature check of, how do you feel in this moment?

[00:01:38.98] And so I can start off with my answer of how do I feel in this moment. I feel overwhelmed. I feel overwhelmed by everything that's happening in the world, as well as just with what's happening in our country in terms of racial justice, in terms of social injustice.

[00:01:56.04] But I also have a sense of optimism. So I also recently just attended the March on Washington that happened at the end of August. And it was just a really inspiring moment and space to be in to be able to also realize that I was in the same kind of grounds and area that the same March was happening where Dr. Martin Luther King Junior had his speech-- his "I Have a Dream" speech.

[00:02:20.67] So just to be in that kind of environment and to be in that space with other key figures who are continuing the conversation, or as they kind of phrased it rather,

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

having a different kind of conversation around racial injustice that was different, but is just a continuation of what was said in 1963. It was just a really powerful space to be in. And I think it gave me that motivation and that hope and inspiration that I did not know I needed at that moment that I think is definitely something I'm sitting with as I think about the work that I do professionally, as well as everything that's happening around this country and around the world.

[00:02:56.98] So I'm having a little bit of optimism as well. That's kind of how I feel in this moment. And that's what makes me more excited to have the conversation that we're having today.

[00:03:06.10] TORAL PATEL: That's amazing. I'm so-- I don't want to say jealous. But I'm glad that you got to attend the March on Washington. I know we were talking about it, and I was very excited for you to go. So thank you for sharing that.

[00:03:16.59] For me, overwhelmed is a great word. You used that earlier. And I feel the same way.

[00:03:21.84] I also feel hopeful that these conversations are happening. I'm glad to see that they're happening. You know, I sometimes feel like maybe things aren't moving as quickly as I want them to in terms of the right direction. But I'm having conversations with people that I've never talked about this kind of stuff with before. And so for that reason alone, I think I'm hopeful as well. Hei Hei, how do you feel right now?

[00:03:43.77] HEI HEI DEPEW: I feel like my feelings fluctuate on a daily basis based on some of the things I've seen, you know, my own personal experiences. I spent some time with my family together for the first time in six months. So that was really nice to be around people that I haven't seen in a while.

[00:04:00.49] I mean, there's so much happening right now with the pandemic and then with a lot of these race issues happening in the country. So it really was very nice to see everybody and to have conversations with people. It was really nice.

[00:04:12.33] I think it's great to hear that you two are hopeful. I feel like some days I am very hopeful. Some days I'm just kind of overwhelmed. Like, you know, as Anthony said, it is a lot. But I think I'm feeling in a good mental headspace, better, I think, than I have in a while. So that's how I'm feeling.

[00:04:27.39] TORAL PATEL: Great, thank you for sharing that.

[00:04:28.96] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you. Thank you so much. So I mean, I guess coming into this conversation and with the check-in question about in the moment, we talked about what is happening in the moment and how that overwhelms us, but I think it'd be appropriate to dive a little bit deeper about what is happening in this moment that is affecting us. And so you know, Hei Hei, from your perspective as a staff member, as a person of color, what has been some of those experiences for you that have been

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

challenging, or that have really caused some of the ways that you are currently feeling, as you mentioned in your check in?

[00:05:01.80] HEI HEI DEPEW: Sure, so not only am I a financial analyst for the College of Human Ecology, but I'm also the vice chair on the Employee Assembly, and also for context, I am a Chinese-American woman. So a couple of months ago in early July, we had an Employee Assembly meeting.

[00:05:18.96] So prior to COVID, prior to the pandemic, prior to the quarantine, all of our Employee Assembly meetings were held in person. And they were open to the public. And I think that's what the Employee Assembly is about. It's about representation. It's about inviting people to the table, community members, staff members, to talk about what are the issues facing the staff.

[00:05:38.46] It's a place to promote voices that maybe aren't usually heard. It's very much an open and welcoming environment. So when we moved to an online platform, you know, we wanted the same sort of openness to be able to have this platform, which is open to all staff members, but also community members. So if you don't have a Cornell ID, you know, we really kind of welcome everybody.

[00:06:00.58] So we didn't have the security in place, because we did want to have that sort of open environment. And so we got Zoom bombed. So myself, as the vice chair, and also the chair of the Employee Assembly, Adam Howell-- our backgrounds were taken over and swastikas replaced behind us. In the chat, there was derogatory commentary about black people and also about specifically, Chinese people.

[00:06:25.15] Some profanities were used in regards to Chinese people. And so that was very disheartening. And that was kind of-- that was pretty hurtful to see on this platform, which is really meant for open dialogue and for the Cornell community, staff members.

[00:06:42.35] And so I think that was a catalyst for me personally to have more conversations, to speak to other people of color on the Employee Assembly to talk about their experiences. But also in my personal life to reach out to other people of color to kind of talk about what I went through and talk about what they went through.

[00:07:00.95] I think this led to a lot of-- it was really eye opening for me when I spoke to the other person of color on the Employee Assembly. I'm not going to name her name. I would like to respect her privacy. I had told her my plan was to file a biased report. And it sounded like for her, this was not the first biased report-- if she were to file, it wouldn't be the first one that she would have filed.

[00:07:22.87] And that there are other instances that she's faced at Cornell. And her advice to me was to develop coping mechanisms. And I think that took me back a little bit. I think it was great sound advice. I think, where she was coming from was you know,

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

she saw these individuals as disruptors, which they were, and that they weren't specifically Cornell staff members with this prerogative to spread their hateful rhetoric.

[00:07:49.48] And I agree that I don't believe it was a Cornell staff member. I could be wrong. But that's a sense that I got. But I think for me, it was difficult to hear another minority having difficulties in regards to bias at Cornell.

[00:08:03.55] And also difficult to hear that to me in a way, dealing this with this would mean accepting this behavior. And then moving forward-- because I think for myself, I don't want to accept it. I want to think of, what do we do moving forward? How do we combat these things that we're seeing?

[00:08:24.94] Personally, as a Chinese-American, I've spoken to other Asians, other people of color-- I've had a Korean friend who was assaulted on the street. And this person who assaulted them indicated they brought Corona to America. I've had friends who are doctors who are Chinese who have had patients refuse their service because they're Chinese, and they don't want to be associating and being taken care of by a Chinese doctor.

[00:08:47.06] My sister lives in an area in Brooklyn where there were signs posted about Chinese people and how they brought diseases and filth to the community. So anecdotally, I've just heard a lot of instances of racism towards Chinese people. And I think it's one thing to say anecdotally and think about what maybe I've seen in my social media feeds, but I think there's also data that supports what I'm saying.

[00:09:10.72] I think the Pew, our research center, published a study recently on 9,600 Americans. And from the study, we found that 4 in 10 Americans say it's more common for people to express racist views against people who are Asian than before COVID. You know, in the same study, they found that 31% of the Asian people surveyed have indicated that they've been on the receiving end of racial insults or commentary.

[00:09:35.33] So I don't think that from my perspective seeing an increase in racism and xenophobia towards Asian people is unfounded. I think for myself, I've seen it. The Zoom bomb was an instance, for me. I've had friends and family members talk about things that they've gone through recently.

[00:09:55.24] You know, I'm looking at the research, and so this is happening in this country. And it's tremendously disheartening. But I also want to say that this is just a really difficult time for a lot of different people. I think we're seeing in America, that we have instances where Black individuals, Black people, Black Americans have been killed. They've been harmed for doing mundane tasks that I wouldn't be fearful of doing or have the same punitive repercussions.

[00:10:24.71] And so, it's been really disheartening to see these sorts of situations. But it has been very educational for me having discussions with other people of color to kind of discuss what they've gone through. I think it's so important for us all to kind of have

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

these conversations and see what's happening. When one person assaults another based on their race or ethnicity, the person, the assailant, is acting in a way where they've really lost their sense of humanity. And I think when we have these conversations, and we tell people this is what's happening, and if we, as a society don't acknowledge that, I think we lose a sense of our common collective decency.

[00:11:03.68] The thing that I had thought about and I want to get clear is I am a Chinese-American. I'm an Asian-American. But we're not a monolith. And what has happened to me isn't representative of every Asian-American's experience here.

[00:11:16.65] But I think it is important that we do have these conversations, and we do listen to one another. And we can kind of try to find solutions, if there are any possible. As an Asian-American growing up in America, conversations around race have always felt kind of black and white-- these conversations about Black people, white people. And I think as an Asian-American, it's always been difficult to kind of see where we stand in these race conversations. But I think they need to be had. I do. And I think now is a good time, as good as any to kind of have these sorts of discussions, although they are really difficult, as we've seen.

[00:11:55.37] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, no, thank you for sharing that. And especially your experience being Zoom bombed and experiences of your friends and family members and what they've gone through. Can you share a little bit about when you were Zoom bombed, what did that feel like? What was the impact on you as an individual?

[00:12:11.18] And then, because you were Zoom bombed at work, in your work capacity, how does that impact your work at Cornell?

[00:12:19.00] HEI HEI DEPEW: I think when I was Zoom bombed, it happened so quickly. I logged on. I saw the imagery behind me. I saw the chat.

[00:12:28.03] I was trying to mute these individuals who were saying things out loud that were really disruptive. I don't think I'm that great at Zoom, because I don't really know how to turn things off. If somebody has taken over my background, I don't really know how to undo that.

[00:12:42.16] And in the moment, I didn't think to stop my video. I just was so busy trying to mute people. I think it was very disruptive, because I think at Cornell-- I've been here about five years-- and I've felt that the community has been really great, really warm, very receptive. I haven't felt any sort of like hostility, any sort of racism, any sort of xenophobia from people.

[00:13:08.38] It was really kind of eye opening, because I feel like we live in the sort of bubble, this Cornell bubble, where I think diversity and equity are supported. And I have seen nothing but support from leadership. But then to kind of be faced with this kind of imagery and language-- it was really unsettling.

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

[00:13:29.54] It was not something I am accustomed to. It's not something I ever want to be accustomed to. I don't think it's anything that anybody on that meeting of over 50 people should have witnessed. We have people from different backgrounds on that meeting. There are other people of color that were on this meeting.

[00:13:45.64] It felt really terrible for them it. Felt really terrible for me. It's not the Cornell community that I feel represents what my experience has been and what I think Cornell wants to represent. So it was tremendously disheartening and hurtful.

[00:14:01.54] In regard to how it impacted my work, I think myself, as a financial analyst, a lot of what I do is reporting. It's meeting with people, talking about budgets and finance. And so I think with that, it hasn't changed the things that I've done.

[00:14:18.49] I know on the Employee Assembly side, we've changed our security. We have made a dual log-in policy implemented so that we don't have these sort of disruptions again. And we keep a record of who's coming in and out of our meetings. So I think procedurally that has been a change. But I'm just doing my best to continue the work that I'm doing professionally and try to return to normalcy, even though this was just a very disruptive event.

[00:14:51.30] TORAL PATEL: Thank you for sharing your feelings.

[00:14:53.13] ANTHONY SIS: Going back to that incident, and then I think moving forward, as you already mentioned, it's been a challenging situation, even still to this day to kind of overcome. I just think about for yourself, what were some of the things that you immediately did after that incident happened to really center yourself, to really take care of yourself?

[00:15:10.79] Because I think particularly, as a person of color myself, I think a lot about the importance of self-care, self-preservation for marginalized communities throughout this country, throughout the world. And so I'm just curious you know, what were some of those things that you did, technique's, activities, whatever it was that you did immediately after to really take care of yourself?

[00:15:31.15] HEI HEI DEPEW: Immediately after, I filed a biased report, knowing-- managing my expectations, not thinking OK, they're going to find the culprits. They're going to bring them to justice. It was more about having it on record.

[00:15:43.57] So filing a bias report, speaking to local authorities, talking about security, trying to figure out, how do we prevent this. And then also, I issued an email to EA members indicating this is what I've done. I filed the bias report. I encourage you to as well, if you feel comfortable with it, condemning the sort of imagery and language on the Zoom bomb and letting them know where I stood.

[00:16:09.22] When it first happened, I was angry. I wanted to get a sense of what I could do moving forward to combat this. So the bias report and the IT measures, that

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

was part of it. But then also, having conversations with other people. That was pretty integral, because I want very much for people to know that these things do happen.

[00:16:32.35] I think it's important, because I think sometimes people say, I haven't seen anything like that here at Cornell. And perhaps you haven't. And that's great. But these things are happening. And I think it's important to acknowledge that, that we are not free of this kind of negative, ignorant behavior. That it is around us, and we have to find some way, somehow to acknowledge it.

[00:16:57.19] Even if we don't necessarily know how, we can address it. Because the Zoom bomb incident-- it was individuals that we can't identify. With hateful commentary and imagery, how do we combat the sort of faceless group? How do we confront this sort of faceless ideology and hate broadly? I mean, I think that's a really difficult question to answer.

[00:17:22.97] So I think for myself, as I went through a range of emotions, it was anger, then it was trying to be more educated on other people's experience, trying to be empathetic towards their experiences, trying to kind of figure out what the next steps are. Reaching out to other individuals asking what their suggestions are.

[00:17:44.74] And from this email, we had another Employee Assembly member suggest writing a resolution to condemn hate crime and hate speech, which was a resolution that I also supported. And I think is a good way to state, as the Employee Assembly, this is where we stand on this type of behavior.

[00:18:01.72] I think a lot of times when instances happen on campus, sometimes, it can be difficult to address them. I think on the Employee Assembly, there's a lot that we are working on in terms of issues. And I think it was really a good step for us to have this resolution to solidify what our stance is, because this is a racially charged time. And so I thought that was helpful.

[00:18:26.12] We had somebody else suggest that maybe we have conversations with other colleagues network groups on campus, especially ones maybe geared towards people of color to kind of have conversations and talk about their experiences so that we can learn more. And so it was really great to see people reach out with their commentary, with their suggestions. I think that's part of what has helped me a lot to hear that people care and are willing to work towards a better vision for the future, whether that's a resolution or more meetings or more conversations. I think it all helps me to see people being engaged in this process, even though the answers are-- sometimes there just aren't no answers.

[00:19:05.02] And sometimes, there's just a lot of gray area. And it feels like you're doing something, but sometimes, you're not really sure how it impacts things or if it'll really solve anything. I mean, it's difficult to say.

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

[00:19:20.05] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, I'm actually really glad to hear about some of the resolutions that the EA took and is working on to address some of these concerns that people have. So why do you think that all staff and faculty should care about racism and xenophobia here at Cornell?

[00:19:34.54] HEI HEI DEPEW: During the pandemic, there are these terrible aggressions happening towards Asian people. We've got the assaults. We've got the attacks. We've got the verbal jokes, the commentary, this Zoom bomb.

[00:19:48.37] So there's a range of ways in which we can see that there's been xenophobia and racism towards Asian people because of COVID. During this pandemic, it has increased. I think there's also sort of insidious biases that people have as it pertains to Asian people.

[00:20:05.20] I think of this term called the bamboo ceiling. I think of misconceptions about Asian people that perpetuate within our society that sometimes lead to diminishing how capable Asian people might be in realms of being creative, or in realms of being independent free thinkers, of being natural leaders. And so I think of this one instance that occurred prior to the pandemic. This was I think, October of 2019, so almost a year ago.

[00:20:35.58] I was on a flight from Washington DC to Seattle, Washington. I was sitting next to a middle-aged white woman. We struck up a conversation and things were going really well. We had found a lot of parallels in our lives.

[00:20:50.35] She was from, coincidentally, the same neighborhood in Brooklyn that I'm from, which is this neighborhood that nobody knows of. People who live there don't know about it. It's this neighborhood called Kensington Brooklyn. She went to the same elementary school as me. She went to the same bagel shop as me.

[00:21:07.02] We talked about the neighborhood and how things had changed so much. She went to Cornell for school. I work at Cornell, obviously. And so there were a lot of parallels in our lives. And so it was really a great conversation that we were having.

[00:21:21.21] And then all of a sudden, the conversation kind of changed and we started talking about Asian-Americans. She is a lawyer at a law firm in DC. And so she mentioned to me that while Asian-Americans were great associates, they came from great schools, great education, very hardworking, she told me that she didn't think that Asian-Americans were creative thinkers, that they weren't natural born leaders.

[00:21:45.06] And that really took me back, because I did not sense any hostility from this person. I did not think that she was coming from an aggressive place. But I think what she was saying was tremendously harmful towards Asian-Americans. I think a lot of people probably share these sorts of feelings about Asian-Americans, about a certain demographic thinking that perhaps we are a very docile and we are very focused on academics, but perhaps, we are not the best at thinking outside of the box.

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

[00:22:15.60] Perhaps, they might think that we're not very outspoken, or that we are not the type to take leadership roles well, perhaps. I don't know. So that was sort of the feedback I was getting from her.

[00:22:28.77] And I was really not sure of how to address that, because I think in my own life, in my own experiences with Asian-Americans, I found that Asians and Asian women have been some of the best leaders that I've seen and some of the most freethinking and wildly passionate people that I've met. And so it was disheartening to see. But I don't think that she was alone in thinking that.

[00:22:52.91] And so I think some of these preconceived notions about Asian people do kind of set in place this sort of thinking that hinders Asian people in advancement to certain levels. And it's something I've spoken to my siblings about, something I've spoken to other Asian people about, where they feel as Asian, going for the same opportunities as other people of different races and ethnicities-- that they don't feel as if they're taken as seriously because of preconceived notions about who they think who they might represent. So I think that is very disheartening as well.

[00:23:29.25] TORAL PATEL: Hei Hei, you mentioned the term "bamboo ceiling." For our listeners who don't know, can you describe what that means?

[00:23:34.11] HEI HEI DEPEW: The bamboo ceiling, according to Wikipedia was coined in 2005. But basically, it addresses the barriers faced by Asian-Americans in the professional arena. So there are stereotypes and racism that exist that provides basically hindrances to our professional growth.

[00:23:51.07] So as I spoke about this instance in the airplane with this person, it's these ideas, these preconceived notions, these racist notions that perhaps Asian-Americans lack leadership potential. They lack communication skills. They lack creative thinking.

[00:24:06.13] So any sort of bias that you might have about Asian-Americans prevent them from being able to acquire executive positions based on these preconceived notions. So when I think about how it applies to this academic sphere, I think if you've got faculty and staff, perhaps make sure that you're checking your bias, you're thinking about-- when you engage in an interaction with an Asian-American, if you're already thinking that they are sort of a docile, not freethinking individual that you kind take a step back from these sort of negative thoughts, because I think what ends up happening is you limit a person's capacity to kind of be more than these stereotypes and more than what you think that they are.

[00:24:47.13] So the bamboo ceiling is definitely something I think a lot of Asians have been fighting against for a while now. When you think about the amount of Asians in Ivy League institutions. It's pretty substantial.

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

[00:24:58.81] But when you think about the amount of Asians in executive-level positions at Fortune 500 companies, that doesn't represent that same percentage. So I think it's something that we haven't really reckoned with. And it is an issue for our community. It's one that we definitely have discussed and pondered.

[00:25:17.65] ANTHONY SIS: So going back to the bamboo ceiling. I think a lot about how that is also perpetuated by things like the model minority myth. And so would you mind just explaining to listeners a little bit about the model minority myth, but also just the implications that that has, particularly on Asian-Americans?

[00:25:35.77] HEI HEI DEPEW: Sure, I think the model minority myth is sort of a double-edged sword for Asian people. I don't personally subscribe to it. I don't like the way in which the model minority myth has been weaponized to undermine obstacles faced by Black and Latin people in America, especially as it pertains to higher ed. When you think about the model minority myth, you categorize Asian people into this bucket.

[00:25:57.73] We are hardworking, docile, educated people who have done really well in this country. And it really discounts some of the struggles of other minorities. And it really discounts the type of people that are coming in.

[00:26:09.88] Migration into America is not easy. It's not cheap. It brings in a certain kind of person into this country. And I think we're seeing currently this model minority myth, which is just that, a myth, sort of being used against Asian people. And I don't subscribe to it.

[00:26:26.53] I don't think that you can ever describe one group a people as one sort of stereotype and just subscribe to that. And definitely, I think it really discounts the individuality that we all have. So I personally dislike the phrase. I don't like it.

[00:26:41.38] And I think it does hold us back from being able to be our own individual people with our own individual struggles, whatever that looks like. So I'm not a fan.

[00:26:50.97] TORAL PATEL: And to your point earlier, it also creates monolith, right? So it takes all Asian-American or Asian groups and combines them into one type of experience.

[00:26:59.85] HEI HEI DEPEW: Yeah.

[00:27:00.84] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, so speaking of leadership roles, and not to change the topic from what we were talking about, but can you talk a little bit about your leadership role in the EA, particularly what made you actually apply to be part of the Employee Assembly and then take on some of the leadership roles that you have there?

[00:27:21.09] HEI HEI DEPEW: Sure, I joined the Employee Assembly a couple of years ago. I think maybe three years ago, I applied for the position of the less-than-five-

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

years representative. And it was the only contested position. I think there were three staff members that wanted this position, which I think was really great, because it showed that people new to Cornell really cared and wanted to be engaged in shared governance at Cornell.

[00:27:42.16] And I think myself, I wanted to be part of Employee Assembly because I wanted to get a better understanding of, what are some issues facing everyone? I think there are issues that I have. But as a whole, I wanted to learn more about Cornell, more about how it operated, to have conversations with people from completely different backgrounds that I normally wouldn't interact with.

[00:28:01.89] I think a lot of times in our specific roles at Cornell we deal with our department, we deal with our college, but we don't branch out to other departments, other colleges, other units. And I thought it was a great opportunity to meet more people and to get a better sense of Cornell as a whole. And I think it's been a really positive experience to meet so many great staff members.

[00:28:25.89] I've worked at a lot of corporate positions before this in finance capacities. I think the people that work at Cornell have really shown how much they care about the values of Cornell. And I think that's been really amazing to see the engagement level of staff members here at Cornell and just how hard that they work with sometimes very little, and how it seems over time, they've been asked to do more with less.

[00:28:49.47] And I think in this pandemic time, we're seeing that more than ever-- that staff are being asked to do a lot with less. And that's commentary I've heard over and over again in my time at the Employee Assembly. And so it was really interesting to have these conversations with staff members and also to have the opportunity to engage with senior leadership to be able to have conversations with Mary Opperman and Martha Pollack and to be able to have this platform, to have these staff forums has been a really great experience, because I think it's a good way to bridge senior leadership with staff members.

[00:29:24.21] How do we engage both parties in a conversation around these really difficult topics? Sometimes there are no answers. But I think to have that opportunity to see Paul Streeter or to see Joanne DeStefano, to see Ryan Lombardi address staff members to answer their questions to provide their honest feedback-- I think that that is really valuable. And I think it's been really great.

[00:29:48.70] So I really appreciate what the Employee Assembly has done from when I started to where they are right now. I think they've shown tremendous growth. And I think for myself, when I first started just to be a representative, it was just to learn more, meet people, try to figure out what are the problems and not necessarily say, I'm going to come in and fix it.

[00:30:10.32] But I just wanted to learn more and have people get together to talk about solutions and work through it together, collaboratively. And I think that has really been

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

key to be able to say, we have issues with traffic and then issues with parking, so let's meet with transportation. Let's meet with the team that works on this and have different staff members from across campus meeting to discuss these issues. I think that's really what shared governance is about-- is about collaborating. It's really about working together and seeing what the path forward is.

[00:30:42.66] So me wanting to get into leadership at the Employee Assembly seemed like the next progression for me. So as just an EA member, you have these conversations, you work in committees, and that's great. I think when you join the executive committee, you meet frequently with Mary Opperman, you talk about a lot of the plans and the initiatives.

[00:31:03.27] I think that's just another way to kind of learn more and gain a different perspective. And that's really what I wanted to do this entire time to just learn more, have more conversations, and to talk to people about, what do you think is happening? Share that with me.

[00:31:19.44] And I think it's been really great that we have all these staff members. We have reached such a great level of engagement with our EA membership and then also with the staff community. It's been really great for me to see that we've been able to reach as many EA staff members as we have been.

[00:31:36.17] I'm a huge proponent of the Employee Assembly. And this year, we've had a lot of interests, which I think is a result of how much we've really engaged with the staff population. In the 2016 employees staff survey, there was a question of whether or not Employee Assembly represented your interests and your concerns. And the answer was like 28% people thought that the Employee Assembly represented their concerns and their issues.

[00:32:01.37] And I think that we've come a long way since 2016 in terms of what we've been doing, the type of engagement we've been working on. And I attribute that to the leadership. Not myself, but you know, the chairs before me. And with the direction and the amount of commitment we've seen from EA members, I've just seen a lot of dedication towards this work. It is a lot of work on top of your already existing 40 hours or more every week.

[00:32:29.90] And so I really want to thank the EA members, thank EA leadership, thank senior leadership for supporting the Employee Assembly. And also, thank the Office of the Assemblies for providing support as well. So that's my Employee Assembly plug. Everybody, go join a committee.

[00:32:45.97] ANTHONY SIS: Go join. Get involved.

[00:32:47.14] TORAL PATEL: Go join, yes.

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

[00:32:48.58] ANTHONY SIS: Another call to action, just like you've been dropping this whole entire interview.

[00:32:53.68] HEI HEI DEPEW: Be engaged. And also, after the Zoom bomb, I joined the Women of Color Colleague Network Group, because I want also to talk to more people and see what we can do and hear other people's stories, because their stories are just different from mine. But also, I think it's all very intertwined.

[00:33:10.84] I think we all have a part to play. And we all should be a part of this conversation, because it's not just about me as an Asian-American. It impacts everybody.

[00:33:21.82] I also want to mention that we passed a resolution to add a Black indigenous person of color seat on the Employee Assembly. And so I feel like something terrible happened, but the Employee Assembly rallied. And then we created some good things afterwards.

[00:33:37.30] And so it's not all terrible. And I think that has been very helpful to see. Something terrible, you know, staff engagement, resolutions, calls to action, and even this podcast I think is a good way to spread information and to continue that conversation. So again, thank you both. And that's it.

[00:33:57.50] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, and thank you for that amazing plug for the Colleague Network Group. And we'd like to invite anybody else who would like to join the Colleague Network Groups, please do so any time.

[00:34:06.55] ANTHONY SIS: And if people want to get involved in committees through the Employee Assembly, how can they do that?

[00:34:11.71] HEI HEI DEPEW: You can go on the Cornell Employee Assembly website. You can just Google Cornell Employee Assembly, and it should lead you to the employee website, where you go to committees. And you can see the times that they meet.

[00:34:24.89] You can see the email addresses. You can see the chairs. You can join a committee even if you are not on the Employee Assembly. A lot of people you know, delve into that sort of to put your toe in to kind of see what is being done, what conversations are being had. So I think it's a good way to dabble in the Employee Assembly if you don't have a seat. So that's my plug.

[00:34:46.52] ANTHONY SIS: So you know, you talked a little bit, Hei Hei, about just how with everything that's going on-- and I think this incident, as traumatic I would say as it was, I think it's also indicative of everything that's happening outside of Cornell too. And you mentioned earlier too is that Cornell is not immune to situations like these. And I think it's so important for people to know about these types of incidents, as you mentioned.

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

[00:35:11.97] And so I just think moving forward, in terms of support, in terms of allyship, particularly towards Asian-Americans-- and I love how you mention that Asian-Americans are not a monolithic group. And I think that's something that can really resonate with other identities as well is not seeing them as monolithic groups, especially with Asian-Americans and with what's happening, particularly around the xenophobia towards Asian-Americans here in this country.

[00:35:37.01] What would you recommend in terms of just things to consider from an allyship perspective for those who don't identify as Asian-American to best support staff members who identify?

[00:35:48.47] HEI HEI DEPEW: I think it's important to listen. I think it's important to reach out. I think in the Pew Research study that I referenced, over 51% of Black people during this pandemic have had somebody reach out to them to check up on them. Whereas, only 28% of Asian people have felt that other people have reached out to them.

[00:36:10.35] And so I think that support is really key. I think for myself, it was very helpful to reach out to other people, talk about what happened. And I think through that, I found that people were tremendously supportive. And it really helped me to feel that empathy and feel that support.

[00:36:27.60] So I think if there are faculty or staff or there are students, I think it's important to reach out to your community, to reach out to people of color to see how they're doing, to see how it might be helpful to have conversations. Ask them, what can I do to help? I mean, maybe sometimes it's nothing.

[00:36:45.56] For myself, oftentimes, I'll talk about this incident and people will say, what can we do? And the answer is this. This is all I really need right now.

[00:36:54.89] I just need you to listen. I need you to understand that this is happening. I'm not just making it up. And to kind of understand my perspective.

[00:37:03.08] I had a conversation with a friend, and I was expressing some of my fears about returning to New York City for a visit. And she is a person of color. She's an Afro-Latina. And she indicated that she hadn't seen any racism towards Asian people. And so she thought it would be fine for me.

[00:37:18.11] And I understood where she was coming from. I think she was trying to quell some of my fears. But I think it almost felt like she was minimizing maybe some of the real fear I might have I mean, based on this Pew Research Center study. I mean, 31% of Asian people have-- so that's one in three-- Asian people have had slurs, jokes, directed at them because of their Asian identity. And so where I'm going with this is I want people to understand that these things are happening and not minimize how Asian people might be feeling, some of the very real fears that we have.

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

[00:37:56.09] ANTHONY SIS: Hei Hei, thank you so much for sharing the story that you shared with the Zoom bombing incident. But I think for me, as I'm just listening to you and just everything that you shared, I think there's just so much that I'm sitting with that I think you've really put just a really strong call to action for all of us to have a role in really combating against xenophobia towards Asian-Americans in this particular moment, as we are seeing so many other forms of injustice that are happening here. So I just really want to thank you for sharing your story. Thank you for putting out so many calls to action for all of us to really find out what it is that our role is to be able to combat against this.

[00:38:33.93] And so really, genuinely just want to say-- and also, thank you for your leadership as well in terms of being a part of the Employee Assembly and just in terms of having these conversations. And as you mentioned, there's a lot of gray areas. I know for me as a training specialist, I know what that gray area is. And I like to be able to engage in that with other staff members here.

[00:38:52.41] But I also think it's just as valuable and important to hear from people like yourself, who also have other leadership roles here, who are also doing essentially the same thing that I'm doing, that Toral is doing in our respective roles, even though we are in inclusion and workforce diversity that it's not just our job or our role to have these conversations. And I think that's something that I'm really sitting with and walking away with from today's conversation and everything that you've shared. So thank you so much once again.

[00:39:19.36] HEI HEI DEPEW: Thanks.

[00:39:26.14] ANTHONY SIS: Wow, Toral, what an interview. What did you think? What did you take away from the conversation with Hei Hei?

[00:39:35.12] TORAL PATEL: There are two components, really. One is this concept of a monolith. And then the other one is this model minority concept, right? Both of those speak to me.

[00:39:45.40] And for me, the monolith concept-- as an Indian-American, somebody whose family, ancestors-- and you know, I was born in India. I am technically considered Asian, right, because India is part of Asia. But because you know-- and so this other side of this monolith is yes, one concept is that all Asians are grouped together as one identity.

[00:40:08.96] But then there is a South Asian group that's kind of left out of even the monolith, right? And yet, we're part of this larger group that exists. And so I want to kind of hone in on that concept a little bit.

[00:40:20.90] And then the other one that stood out to me was this concept of model minorities. And as an individual, as a female minority, I can truly say that even though I am a female and a woman of color, that I have had a lot of privileges that I know doesn't

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

exist for other marginalized identities. And I think it's because I am also considered to be part of this model minority group or myth that exists-- that technically, as an Asian-American, that I have a lot of advantages that are afforded to me because I'm part of this model group.

[00:40:56.97] So those are the two components in our conversation that really stood out to me and that really spoke to me.

[00:41:02.59] ANTHONY SIS: Thank you. Thank you for sharing that and for being vulnerable and admitting that in this recap. So thank you.

[00:41:08.95] What I really took away from this conversation is just the need really, to understand how COVID-19 is impacting many communities, not just here in the United States, but around the world. And I think especially with this increase in violence, specifically towards Asians and Asian-Americans, it just reminds me of how, even when we think about the words xenophobia and racism and how with racism we always attribute it to the Black community versus the white community, and then when it comes to xenophobia, I think specifically about the relations politically speaking between Mexico and the United States. But xenophobia is a global issue. And so is racism.

[00:41:49.34] And so I think for me, what I really took away from this conversation was really having to do that work to read about how COVID-19 is not just impacting people from a public health perspective, but also how things like xenophobia and racism are being highlighted, or kind of being risen to another level and how it's affecting so many different communities, especially marginalized communities around the world. And so I think as a training specialist, that's part of what I do is really to read up on my articles, educate myself to then educate other people. And so I really appreciate the call to action that Hei Hei put on all of us to have these conversations and to continue having these conversations as it pertains to Asian and Asian-American folks.

[00:42:34.57] TORAL PATEL: I agree with you, Anthony. And I think that we all need to work extra hard on creating space where all marginalized groups are welcome. And I think it's so amazing that you and I have a role where we can actually do that and where we can create spaces for everyone.

[00:42:49.99] But to take the call to action that Hei Hei put on all of us-- that I think we all need to work on-- on creating that space within our own individual work environments, whether that's over Zoom or in person, across campus, as well as in our everyday lives as well.

[00:43:07.40] ANTHONY SIS: And I also just want to emphasize too, the importance of listening that Hei Hei talked about and the need for us to really just listen to different perspectives, to different opinions and especially in the times that we're living in regards with racial justice with COVID-19 and how it's affecting-- disproportionately affecting certain communities. Now more than ever, I think it really calls for both of us and for all of us really at Cornell to just simply listen to our different perspectives, to listen to the

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

different lived experiences of our colleagues in order for us to really understand how things like COVID-19 are affecting us in different ways-- in similar ways, but also in different ways. And just being able to listen, I think that was such a key point that Hei Hei really talked about and that I think I'm really taking away and just reaffirming for me to continue to listen.

[00:43:59.83] TORAL PATEL: Yes. When I think of listening-- you know, and it's something that I've learned recently. A lot of times, I think my entire life, I didn't realize that there were so many different components to listening, right? And I always listen to the words that somebody says and then I respond.

[00:44:16.66] But I don't think I've ever paid attention to somebody's facial expression as they're saying it, their body language, are they cringing, are they clenching their fists or their hands? What is their body language telling me? Is their emotions at work here that I'm not seeing because all I'm doing is listening to their words?

[00:44:35.30] So those kinds of things I think are important for all of us to pay attention to is really listen. And then once you hear them in every capacity, take it in, right? What are they really trying to tell you? Take it before responding.

[00:44:48.94] ANTHONY SIS: And we all should be striving to do that, because sometimes those cues tell us more about what they're trying to communicate than what it is that they're verbally saying to us. So and I think, especially across different cultures and different languages, how I've been able to communicate with people who speak other languages that I don't speak has been through body language, has been through tone of voice and saying, OK, I may not necessarily know exactly what they're saying, but their body language is communicating that they're willing to listen to me, even if we don't speak the same verbal language. And so, especially across different cultures and lines of communication, I think that is so important to remember for all of us.

[00:45:26.08]

[00:45:29.24] TORAL PATEL: That's it for this month's show. If you like what you've heard, be sure to subscribe and submit a review on Apple Podcasts, Spotify, or SoundCloud. It helps new listeners find us and the show.

[00:45:39.59] Also, if you are a fellow colleague would like to be interviewed for an upcoming episode, please email us at ie-academy@cornell.edu. My name is Toral Patel.

[00:45:50.27] ANTHONY SIS: My name is Anthony Sis. Thank you for listening to another episode of the Inclusive Excellence podcast.

[00:45:56.09] TORAL PATEL: This podcast is a production of the Department of Inclusion and Workforce Diversity in collaboration with Cornell Broadcast Studio.

Episode 27: "We are not a monolith"- On Xenophobia, Racism, and Asian American Identity

Released on October 16, 2020

[00:46:08.06] ANTHONY SIS: A very special shout out and thank you to Bert Odom-Reed, our sound engineer for making us sound wonderful each and every episode.

[00:46:17.66] TORAL PATEL: Thanks, Bert.

[00:46:18.24] HEI HEI DEPEW: Thanks, Bert.

[00:46:21.07] TORAL PATEL: Really off.