B-Side (/kickers/b-side)

Elizabeth James: At the corner of culture and storytelling

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National Center for Institutional Diversity

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Every time Elizabeth James takes a breath to speak, you can see a story forming in her head. It builds until it's right behind her teeth, and then she opens her mouth to create a world in the space around you with her words. For me, this is her office building, up in the University's Haven Hall, tucked away in the kindest room I've ever seen — an entire wall covered with warm, loving photographs and artifacts that reflect her passion for culture and history lining every surface. The room has an inviting, colorful vibe — and there's no better way to describe James. Her voice is soothing and relaxed, taking you with her into each story and piece of advice she has to offer. In her years as a storyteller, a friend and a mentor, she has touched and affected many peers, students, fellow staff members and more with her narratives.

A woman of many incredible experiences, James currently holds the position of outreach coordinator with the University's Department of Afroamerican and African Studies. In 2014, James became a Harold R. Johnson's Diversity Service Award recipient, as well as the Office of Student Affairs's Advisor of the Year. She has additionally been awarded the Cornerstone Award from the Black Celebratory among countless other honors for her dedication to DAAS and the student community. In addition to scheduling

and coordinating events and publicizing on campus, James holds a rather crucial and important position in the hearts of alumni, staff and students alike — many would call her the University's own resident storyteller. When asked to simply describe what this position and her work at the University surrounding storytelling entails, she took a moment to form her words — something she does often before she speaks — which lends to her acumen and astute voice.

"Storytelling is …" She pauses, thinking of something, her grandmother perhaps, or a story previously told. "It is the healing yet gentle way to open the door to talk about experiences."

In what could best be described as growing from her roots, James began her journey of telling stories when she was a young girl and her grandmother would tell stories around the dinner table and in her living room. This sparked her love for the art of storytelling and put her on the road to becoming a well-known storyteller herself. As an observant young girl, James was infatuated with the idea of stories, and especially loved the ways in which they could transcend different cultures, teach lessons and bridge gaps between those with different backgrounds.

"My grandmother was an informal storyteller, she told stories as life lessons to heal people. You know, people didn't talk about issues back then like they do now. So this was a way they could handle their grief," she said.

From then on, she was hooked. As she grew up, her mother also took on storytelling, going on to have her stories recorded and broadcasted on WDET-FM radio station. James went on to study History of Art and Communications, then received a master's degree in Journalism and Library Science. Despite varied interests, she always knew her path would trail back to storytelling at the end of the day. The stories and moments of her childhood were passed down from the hands of James's grandmother to her mother, and have now landed in her palms. She has taken this foundation, shaped and molded and built it into something much greater than she ever imagined.

"To me, after I realized what storytelling meant to me and could mean to others, I began to explore myself and my background through stories. Now I use them to convey deeper emotions and metaphors," she said. "I often think of writing a book with all of my grandmother's stories in it. I just feel that in the future, I'd like to put those stories to paper."

What James means by exploring her background through stories is exploring the intersection between culture and storytelling and what that means to her, the Mich. community and society as a whole. Her work consists of the importance of cultural storytelling and figuring out what this means to audiences, society and herself.

"The heartbeat of culture is storytelling. It captures all of our souls. We're all storytellers," she said. This is the mantra behind the community of cultural storytellers she has created here at the University.

What began with an informal conversation with the director of the National Center for Institutional Diversity has become one of the most important and fulfilling projects on which James has ever worked. For the bicentennial event at the University, James really wanted to explore and tell stories that aren't being told on this campus. Whether it comes from students, alumni or staff, James had a sudden itch to lift up the voices of people who feel marginalized on this campus and celebrate them for their individuality.

“I saw a need to make the narrative of U of M richer and fuller because there are so many other stories than the ones that we hear on this campus every day,” she said.

And with that spark of an idea, she got to work. She began to reminisce about the past while looking at the present and the future, and she started to think about how the climate at the University could be supplemented and advanced by cultural storytelling. Out of this brainstorming came “MVisible Voices (http://sites.lsa.umich.edu/m-visible-voices/)” — a podcast series dedicated to telling the types of stories this campus has stifled and left untold. The podcast series is intergenerational, sharing stories from alumni, students and faculty. James explains it as having a triangular style, split up between the three groups. However, after exploring different people’s stories, they began to realize that many had more connections than they originally imagined. They were able to make connections between the current members and creators, who have since graduated, of specific student groups on campus — students from years past who have had identical experiences to present students and watched as faculty related to and connected with students. The series allows listeners to discover the lost narratives of so many on this campus, and it seeks to demonstrate the struggle for change in society and the world. On the series’s website, in addition to listening to the podcast, you can learn about the history that puts the stories in a larger, national context.

“What’s so interesting is the intersectionality between cultures,” James said. “There are so many similarities between different cultures that we can explore through storytelling. Just starting from the base of it — every culture has some sort of creation myth or story … it defines human beings, being curious about why we’re here, and it builds from there.”

She moves from this to talk about how all basic questions have their roots in stories, which is why storytelling is such a universal art form: stories are inherently relatable. This is why the “MVisible Voices” podcast is so relatable and intriguing — each person who listens can pull out different elements of the story with which they relate. This ties people closer together, regardless of their background, and proves that, at the very simplest point, we are all human beings who can share some inherent experience one way or another.

“Each culture has their mystery stories, their fiction stories, their sun stories, their water stories. Stories are just human beings trying to convey to ourselves and to others that we will go on. That we will make it. All stories deal with things that are greater than ourselves,” James said.

Right now on the website, you can explore a piece on the culturally-rooted Greek life organizations on campus, which discusses the stifled Latin, African American and Asian American Greek life organizations that are talked about so little. With just one click, you can learn about and listen to how students of historically marginalized identities live, learn and grow together. With another, you can explore campus movements at the University. This podcast is not just for those marginalized voices to feel heard, but to educate those with the privilege to have their stories and voices lifted up and heard every day on this campus.

In one podcast, titled “Days of Future Past”, former Black Student Union President Sherise Steele, Business sophomore Kyle Trocard and James have a conversation about the connection between technology and social change at the University. Steele speaks on the way in which the Black Student Union and other organizations used to have to get the word out about their meetings and events without technology.

“We communicated with mass meetings — but if we had to get the word out, we had to do hand-to-hand combat. So someone went to every residence hall and posted fliers, did party invites, meeting invites and then word of mouth. So there was no other way other than to go to Markley; so whoever lived on the Hill had to take care of all the Hill residence halls. If you worked someplace where students ate — maybe you worked at the League or the Union and put the fliers there. That’s how we’d have to get the word out about protesting,” said Steele, who was also a first-generation graduate from the University. In this podcast, she is put into conversation with Trocard, who is currently involved with the Black Student Union.

“I feel like we know our place when it comes to handling things, and people have accused us of playing politics. But sometimes you have to do things in the way that the University will be willing to listen to you and so you know ... speaking the language that they understand so that when you need something done, you can get it done. We find it hard to protest constantly — we can make a phone call, we can talk to the administration. When the time comes to protest though, we’re there,” Trocard said about the way the Black Student Union operates today.

The University is a hotbed for narrative negotiations and struggles as people come together from all different experiences and backgrounds to share in this creative learning environment. Not everyone gets to experience this University as a welcoming environment with the same sense of belonging as others. A lot of the consternation that this campus has seen surrounding race, gender and identity in recent months has led many students to grapple with their identities in ways they never have before. “MVisible Voices” is about taking these experiences and these identity conflicts and moving them to the very center of the conversation instead of pushing them to the periphery. These stories are just as much a part of the history of this University as the narratives that we hear more often. Through her work, James explores being a minority on this campus and how as a community we can welcome all people into the broader conversation about what it means to be a Wolverine, and in a bigger sense, what it means to be human.

James hopes to take the podcast further than just a bicentennial event, as it has seen much success. She laid out a plan for Season Two of the podcast. She hopes to take it a step further, explore new issues and open it up to more minorities who were not explored in the first podcast. She says she’d like to further explore the Native American culture and identity on the campus, as well as the issues surrounding gender and sexuality.

“There are continuously going to be untold stories that we can discover and lift up,” she said.

In addition to the podcast, James has brought the “Value the Voice” event to the University campus. In junction with the Comprehensive Studies Program, James helped to create a live storytelling series. It is described as a more casual and off-the-cuff TED Talk, with an emphasis on culture and the learned life lessons. The series has had three installments thus far (in Sept., Nov. and Jan.), with a final one coming in March. James describes it as a sacred space, and spoke to the wide spectrum of stories that were told at the most recent of the three events held so far.

“One girl told the story of her mother and sister dying in a house fire, someone else told the story of nobody knowing they have MS (multiple sclerosis), another of her experiences abroad,” she explained. James herself told the story of the first time she saw a naked man, which was in a West Quad Residence Hall girl’s bathroom during her undergraduate years, when a man had stumbled in there drunk and passed out naked.

“That story is real, and it’s relatable,” she said with a laugh.

She has also been recently exploring the way storytelling is evolving and changing with the times. When she began, storytelling was all done live and not written. In her early storytelling career, many people began transcribing and posting stories; however, now most storytellers have reverted back to the old ways of storytelling — simple and spoken. Additionally, James speaks on the world of social media, and how that has played a role in the world of storytelling.

“It’s funny actually. I had a student download Snapchat on my phone because I wanted to have my own Snapchat story — it’s a new way of telling stories,” she said. “Storytelling is changing.”

James does not seem fazed or nervous about these changes in storytelling that come with the times. Rather, she is excited and motivated for where this could potentially take her as a storyteller. At the base of all of the organizing she has done to bring cultural storytelling to this campus is her original passion: storytelling.

James has become a well-known storyteller both in Mich. and beyond. Besides her mother and grandmother, who are both her biggest mentors when it comes to storytelling, we spoke a lot about two other people who have really shaped her perception of storytelling and how it ties into culture. The first, mythology writer Joseph Campbell, has really shaped her perception of the foundation of storytelling. His work speaks on human experiences and religion. He also introduced James into the idea of the “Hero’s Journey.” The “Hero’s Journey” is the template of a tale in which a hero embarks on a journey, and, after some form of crisis, wins a victory and then returns transformed in some way.

“I use the Hero’s Journey as a guideline so often in my life, especially when I’m just speaking with students,” James said. “I always explain it’s sort of like the freshman/senior narrative, and how you change so much just in your four years of school here.”

The second of her two mentors is Jackie Torrence, who is otherwise known as the Story Lady. Torrence has told wonderful stories of the South for many years, with extremely animated facial expressions — something that James often tries to tie into her own storytelling, especially when speaking with kids. These two mentors, along with her family, have been the people James has looked to for guidance throughout her storytelling journey.

In addition to all her work here, James has told stories around the country and will continue to do so going forward. She is infatuated with the idea of storytelling for youth audiences. When asking James about why she is drawn to young audiences when telling stories, she tells of the magic in telling children stories and watching them want to pass them on.

“When I tell stories to young children, I can change my voice to highlight different characters, and they go crazy for it,” she said. “When I’m ready to leave, I’ll hear them talking to one another using the voices I just performed with, and it’s such a positive way to give to that generation and hope they become hooked on storytelling too.”

She has also gave a TED talk in December at the University of Maryland, where she was invited to speak. Being one who did not much believe in storytelling that is recorded or rehearsed, she originally wanted to refuse the offer. However, after speaking with the TED team in Maryland and realizing what an honor it would be to speak there, she could not turn it down. In the TED talk, titled “What’s your Story?,” James talks about how to use storytelling to achieve one’s life goals and destiny.

“I ended up really enjoying that experience,” she said. “At the end of it all, in any form, storytelling is me and you, and we’re having this moment and sharing it with each other.”

In addition to this, she is currently working on a story she will be telling at Indiana University. It is an updated story from the Yoruba people of Nigeria, which speaks of the Goddess of Fresh Water. However, she has worked to update it to talk about the Flint water crisis and the Native American oil spill — constantly joining past narratives with the present day.

“This isn’t gone, you know? This story has so much history, but it’s still here with us,” she said. “Stories are so much about the past, but we can always take them to the future.”

The piece will be set to a dance, which incorporates other mediums of art, such as music and visual elements. She will be performing the piece with jazz artists, and the dance ensemble is comprised entirely of white performers who have been working to learn traditional Yoruba movement.

“Black dancers have always had to learn ballet — so why shouldn’t these white dancers have to step out of their comfort zone and learn about (a) different culture’s dancing styles?” she said.

She is also looking forward to the traditional Nigerian garb the staff at Indiana University has had made for her, which includes a beautiful headpiece and intricate decorations. The ability of storytelling to take the form of an entire performance is both exciting and innovating, and she hopes it will captivate audiences as much as it has already captivated her.

James’s storytelling experience has been unique and not without struggle. At the end of the day though, she would not change a thing. She has grown and changed in her years as a storyteller and hopes to continue to inspire, teach and grow as she continues to tell stories. As a storyteller, she is constantly brought back to her roots — the ones that began to grow from her kitchen with her grandmother, telling stories about their family’s culture and heritage. From there she has been able to celebrate and commemorate her culture through telling stories, and hopes to inspire many to do the same.

“At our essence, people are good and we want to be happy,” she said. She paused, letting her words settle around me. “At the center of it all, we’re all just made for goodness. And that’s what I hope to convey when I tell stories.”

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Chanelle Davis · Research Assistant at Center for the Study of Black Youth in Context

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ElizaBeth Ann James · Program Manager at University of Michigan

I really appreciate this beautifully crafted article, but I would be remiss if I didn't say that the two projects here at U-M are both borne of collective work. The MVisible Voices team is comprised of a powerful team of colleagues in partnership from the National Center for Institutional Diversity (NCID), the Office of Academic Innovation (AI), the Department of Afroamerican and African Studies (DAAS), the U-M Alumni Association, and the U-M Bicentennial Celebration Committee.
Value the Voice: A Storytellers' Lounge is a collaboration that was initiated by Keith Jason and Harold Waters in the Comprehensive Studies Program. I'm honored to be a part of both series and treasure my association with both projects. Ubuntu-I am because we are. ❤️

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Patti Koeslag

I so connected with Elizabeth James and all she has shared in her wisdom. In visiting elders in a seniors residence as we prepare for our second annual vow renewal ceremony on Valentine's Day it has become more evident than ever that our story is all we really have. Canadian Ojibway author Richard Wagamese wrote about this. If ever Ms James comes to the Ottawa area in Ontario, Canada she has a welcome and a place to stay with us!

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