

Episode 56: Journey Back to Cornell- A Conversation with Sonia Rucker, AVP of Inclusion and Belonging

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[00:00:04.23] BERT ODOM-REED: 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.

[00:00:15.51] TORAL PATEL: Welcome to another episode of the Inclusive Excellence Podcast. We're excited to bring Sonia Rucker on today's show. Sonia is the Associate Vice President for Inclusion and Belonging. She's also a member of the Presidential Advisors for Diversity and Equity. Bert and I talk to her about her journey back to Cornell and get a glimpse into her perspective as to why issues related to diversity, equity, and inclusion should matter in higher education, and especially here at Cornell.

[00:00:44.61] My name is Toral Patel.

[00:00:46.12] BERT ODOM-REED: My name is Bert Odom-Reed.

[00:00:47.94] TORAL PATEL: And you're listening to the Inclusive Excellence Podcast. All right, Sonia, welcome to the show.

[00:00:54.24] SONIA RUCKER: Hi, Toral, thank you for having me.

[00:00:56.50] TORAL PATEL: We are so excited to have you here. To start, can you please tell us a little bit about yourself, share the pronouns that you like to use, what you do here at Cornell, and how long you've been here?

[00:01:06.75] SONIA RUCKER: Sure. My name is Sonia Rucker. My title is Associate Vice President for Inclusion and Belonging. I'm also a member of the Presidential Advisors for Diversity and Equity. I use she/her/hers pronouns. And I actually started at Cornell on October 18, of 2021. But this is actually my second time around. So I worked here almost about 10 years ago as well.

[00:01:33.60] TORAL PATEL: Perfect. And yeah, we'll get into that a little bit more as we have our conversation further. So Sonia, if you've listened to our podcast in the past, you might be aware that we actually start each of our podcasts with a question of the day. And so I have the privilege of asking today's question of the day.

[00:01:51.39] BERT ODOM-REED: Go for it.

[00:01:52.50] TORAL PATEL: And just kind of keeping in mind that we're starting our new year. It's 2022. And in the interest of getting to know the two of you a little bit better, my question is, what are some goals or some things that you want to accomplish this year?

[00:02:07.47] SONIA RUCKER: Wow, that's a big question.

[00:02:08.57] TORAL PATEL: It is. It's a huge one.

[00:02:10.27] SONIA RUCKER: So these are work related goals.

[00:02:12.28] TORAL PATEL: No, they can be personal goals. They can be work-related goals. They can be anything you want them to be.

[00:02:17.55] SONIA RUCKER: Well, I guess my immediate goal is to get all of my boxes unpacked at my new house. So I can completely immerse myself in the Ithaca experience. And besides unpacking my house, I really just want to reacclimate to the campus, get to know people, get a feel for how people every day feel being a member of this campus community.

[00:02:46.14] My job is to try to determine what that sense of belonging is. So I think the most important thing in accomplishing that goal is to talk to people, find out what the pros and cons are, and determine what I can do to make their experience better.

[00:03:04.46] TORAL PATEL: Oh wow, what a great goal to have this year. That's amazing. Thank you.

[00:03:08.49] BERT ODOM-REED: Excellent.

[00:03:09.57] TORAL PATEL: Bert, how about you?

[00:03:10.53] BERT ODOM-REED: OK, I have a short range and a long range set of goals. The short range one came in the Men of Color meeting. And I think that short range goal is to come up with a way to inform the allies that they need to do their own work first.

[00:03:31.95] TORAL PATEL: Mm-hmm.

[00:03:32.43] SONIA RUCKER: Mm-hmm.

[00:03:34.14] BERT ODOM-REED: So it has to be something that's simple for them to understand, easy to work with. And I think in my work life, if we can get those allies to that point, I think we'll be in a much better place. And then the long range goal is at some point in the way future when I retire, I want to ride my bike on rail trails all across the country. So I really want to define my new bike and get that in place, so I can start riding.

[00:04:05.31] SONIA RUCKER: Nice.

[00:04:05.62] TORAL PATEL: All right.

[00:04:06.42] SONIA RUCKER: That sounds fun.

[00:04:08.40] TORAL PATEL: So this is just totally getting off a little tangent here. My husband bought a bike last year.

[00:04:14.13] BERT ODOM-REED: Oh, great.

[00:04:14.97] TORAL PATEL: His first one ever. And because it's his first one, it was like a used--

[00:04:20.56] BERT ODOM-REED: Yeah.

[00:04:21.72] TORAL PATEL: --that he bought off of like-- I don't know if he found on Facebook groups. I don't know, somewhere. But yeah, he bought his bike last year.

[00:04:29.74] BERT ODOM-REED: Tell him we're going to ride together.

[00:04:31.29] TORAL PATEL: Yes, yes. Yeah, he's definitely looking for riding buddies.

[00:04:34.06] BERT ODOM-REED: All right.

[00:04:34.87] TORAL PATEL: All right.

[00:04:35.56] BERT ODOM-REED: Toral?

[00:04:36.28] TORAL PATEL: Yes.

[00:04:37.33] BERT ODOM-REED: You're not getting away from your own question of the day now.

[00:04:39.52] TORAL PATEL: I know. I know it. So mine is probably going to be a little bit more personal. And this is actually, usually, I don't want to say I don't have New Year's resolutions. But this has been one that I've been trying to focus on for the last two years. And it's really, I guess, the way I phrase it is that I've been saying I'm going to put myself first. But really it's about actually devoting time for myself in every capacity, whether it's taking care of my skin, my hair, the food that I eat.

[00:05:05.59] So it's mentally, physically, emotionally just carving out some time for me. And so whether it's I read a book for a little while, half an hour. It doesn't have to be a lot of time, but just some devoted time for myself. And I think just as human beings when you have the children, especially preteens and a very busy life that you tend to put everybody else first and you don't necessarily take care of yourself. And I think this year my focus is to also take care of myself.

[00:05:34.81] Doesn't mean that I'm not taking care of everybody else, but also carve out some time for me.

[00:05:39.34] SONIA RUCKER: That's a great goal.

[00:05:40.33] TORAL PATEL: Yeah.

[00:05:40.75] SONIA RUCKER: I think I'm going to steal it and add it to my list too.

[00:05:43.52] BERT ODOM-REED: That's exactly what I was thinking, so yeah-- oh, oh, I said the wrong thing.

[00:05:48.19] TORAL PATEL: Yeah. Yeah, like I said, this has been my-- people say, what's your New Year's focus? And I was like, whatever it is, it's my time. And to be funny, I always say I'm putting myself first this year, you know? And it's not necessarily the case. But I'm actually just creating time for myself.

[00:06:02.83] BERT ODOM-REED: Excellent.

[00:06:03.31] TORAL PATEL: That's it, yeah.

[00:06:03.79] SONIA RUCKER: Absolutely.

[00:06:04.96] TORAL PATEL: All right, Sonia, so as we mentioned, we're so excited to have you here and back at Cornell. And so you mentioned that you started in October, that you've been at Cornell previously. So let me just talk a little bit about your journey back to Cornell and into the D, E and I space.

[00:06:19.52] SONIA RUCKER: Sure, well, I think that it happened very unexpectedly. I've been working and living in Missouri since 2012. Missouri is my home state. I worked at Cornell from 2003 until about the end of 2011 and made the very difficult decision to move back to Missouri.

[00:06:40.12] At the time, it was primarily related to the fact that I had a mother who was elderly. She was having some health concerns. And I just wanted to be closer to her to be able to help out and to just be able to spend time with her. I've always had the luxury of living in different places and kind of being on my own.

[00:07:00.61] And I had a sibling who was the primary caregiver for her. And I just felt like it was time for me to be closer. And very happy that I had that time. She did pass away this summer. So the last few years being with her, you know, I'm really happy that I made that decision. And almost within the summer when she passed away, I received an email saying that I had been nominated for this position.

[00:07:27.22] And it took me a moment to figure out, is this something I want to do? Should I apply for it? I mean, the timing was just really interesting to me.

[00:07:38.57] TORAL PATEL: Yeah.

[00:07:39.04] SONIA RUCKER: So I took some time to consider it. I actually had a chance to even mention it to her before she passed away. And as usual, she was very supportive.

[00:07:49.90] TORAL PATEL: Aw.

[00:07:50.34] BERT ODOM-REED: Nice.

[00:07:50.78] SONIA RUCKER: She told me, I would miss you being so far away, but do what makes you happy. So her blessing was really important to me. And so I made the decision to submit my material. And here I am.

[00:08:02.88] BERT ODOM-REED: Yeah, that's great.

[00:08:03.76] TORAL PATEL: As a member of your team, I'm so glad that you made that decision, for sure.

[00:08:09.28] SONIA RUCKER: Thank you.

[00:08:10.15] BERT ODOM-REED: Yes. I had the fortunate place in my life where I was here for my father all the way until he passed. And I so much get, there's time and conversations that you'll never get to have any other time than when you just sit around and talk about stuff.

[00:08:31.09] SONIA RUCKER: Absolutely.

[00:08:31.82] BERT ODOM-REED: And it's so, so important. And I'm glad you had that opportunity to do that.

[00:08:37.99] SONIA RUCKER: Me too.

[00:08:39.36] BERT ODOM-REED: Even as you talk with your mom about your career, I mean, what experiences have influenced you or inspired you to pursue the career that you have?

[00:08:48.99] SONIA RUCKER: Well, you know, I did not intend to go into higher ed. I was in college majoring in psychology. I ended up going into social work, worked in a variety of areas, from Human Services to child abuse investigation, juvenile treatment. As I was getting my master's degree, I was working full time as a child abuse investigator in Texas. And it's a very intense, stressful thing to do to go in to investigate child abuse.

[00:09:21.39] And I had a particularly difficult case. And I thought, can I do this for the next 25 years? I just felt like emotionally the toll was just going to be too great. So I started thinking about other career options and just happened to have a conversation with a friend of mine over Thanksgiving. Her brother-in-law was visiting. I knew him

previously. He was the Vice President of Student Affairs at my undergraduate institution.

[00:09:50.40] And he just said, why don't you go into higher ed? And I said, what do you mean? What is that? And he's like, you do what I do. I'm the Vice President of Student Affairs. And I really-- I had no idea what exactly that entailed.

[00:10:06.34] So I started exploring it. And I found that being a former social worker, I had a lot of transferable skills. I mean, working with students, it's the same thing, being a good communicator, being able to provide support, listening to people, everything that we do when students arrive on the campus over the course of those four years preparing them for their entry into the world.

[00:10:31.95] So I just applied those skills into higher ed. I went back home to mom, changing careers. Can I live here for free?

[00:10:40.60] TORAL PATEL: Right.

[00:10:42.15] SONIA RUCKER: And she welcomed me back. And I got a job working in TRIO Program, which is a grant program for first generation, low income, and primarily minority students and students with disabilities. So again, my background in social work made me a good fit for that. And I mean, I fell in love with higher education. And here I am 20 years later, yeah.

[00:11:06.82] TORAL PATEL: So I want to kind of move into how you started working in the diversity, equity, and inclusion space. So maybe if you want to talk a little bit about that background, how your career path in higher education has led to where you are today.

[00:11:18.97] SONIA RUCKER: OK, I did not really know where I wanted to focus in higher ed. There's a lot of different areas know, from Res Life to student affairs, grant programs. And I really just kind of let things unfold naturally. Working in the TRIO Program, I had a lot of contact with students with disabilities and minority students.

[00:11:42.79] And being a Black female on a predominantly white campus, a lot of the students of color would just come to my office to talk. I started a relationship with them. And from there, it just became an area of interest. And when I decided that I really had a strong interest in working with students with disabilities, I reached out to the Disability Services Office and just said, you know, I'm interested in this area.

[00:12:10.78] I asked the director, could I just come and talk to you, just get a little bit more information on how to best serve the student population? He invited me over, started seeing him as a mentor. He had a staff member of his staff who got married. And he needed an Assistant Director. So he reached out and said, you want to do this full time? I was like, absolutely.

[00:12:32.41] So just went into that area, loved working with students with disabilities, providing accommodations. And I mean, I did not ever really plan on going into DEI. It just was a natural progression in my career. And when I was working in that position, I had an interim Assistant Director position. And he wanted to do a search. And the HR department said it had to be a national search.

[00:13:03.16] So I said, OK, if I'm going to have to apply for this position, I'm going to apply for other schools as well. I sent an application to Cornell and didn't even think about it. Because I had no intention of leaving Missouri. But they called and asked me to do a phone interview. Did the phone interview. They called and said, hey, we want to bring you to New York for a campus interview. I was like, I've never been to New York, sure. Came here two days. Went back home. And within a week, they called and offered me a job.

[00:13:38.17] And that was not a part of my plan. So I had to kind of scramble and say, you know, this is home. I'm in Missouri. Can I pick up my entire life and move across country to a place where I knew absolutely no one? I didn't know a soul in New York and had never even thought about living here. But again, my mom was the person that said, go ahead. If it doesn't work out, you can come back home.

[00:14:08.65] TORAL PATEL: Yeah.

[00:14:09.76] SONIA RUCKER: And so that's what I did.

[00:14:11.11] BERT ODOM-REED: So they at least tell you that this isn't the New York that you think?

[00:14:15.82] SONIA RUCKER: Well, I did come for a visit. And I remember like driving in from the airport, from Syracuse.

[00:14:23.13] BERT ODOM-REED: OK, yeah.

[00:14:23.47] SONIA RUCKER: And I was like, how long does it take to get to this place? I mean, you don't see a sign until like the last minute. There's one sign that says Ithaca. And then you still drive forever. So I kind of figured out, OK, this is not New York City.

[00:14:38.65] TORAL PATEL: Nope.

[00:14:38.93] BERT ODOM-REED: Yeah, we are five minutes away from a farm.

[00:14:41.29] TORAL PATEL: Yes. Yeah.

[00:14:43.45] BERT ODOM-REED: That's great. I think your life course of experiences-- I'm so impressed that Cornell was smart enough to get you here to do what you're doing.

[00:14:53.99] TORAL PATEL: Twice.

[00:14:56.26] BERT ODOM-REED: Truly, I think you're well placed to excel here in this space for sure. And even to survive Texas, I have always thought of people who have gone into the type of work that you have to do to care for families in all of their different iterations and problems, it can be draining.

[00:15:21.76] SONIA RUCKER: Yeah.

[00:15:22.54] BERT ODOM-REED: I applaud anyone who can get through that. And I'm glad that at least our student population is not so draining. Hopefully.

[00:15:31.65] SONIA RUCKER: No. No.

[00:15:33.04] TORAL PATEL: And our staff will be even less draining hopefully, hopefully.

[00:15:37.03] BERT ODOM-REED: Should staff care about the terms of diversity, equity, and inclusion, and belonging, and how it affects their colleagues at work?

[00:15:46.63] SONIA RUCKER: Absolutely. And I think people sometimes want to just say, OK, you have a DEI office. That is over there, doesn't really have anything to do with me, especially people who don't consider themselves a part of the diversity group. But I mean, diversity is about people. We all have identities that we hold. Those identities are important.

[00:16:07.18] And it shows us-- I mean, it's our lens in how we see ourselves in the world and how we see other people. So I mean, diversity is about relationships. And if you're not experienced with certain groups of people and these are the folks that you have to see and be around every single day, DEI is all of our job. It's everybody's job to make that mix work. It's the thing that can make a person's daily life either a positive, good experience or one that is miserable, and difficult, and stressful.

[00:16:46.55] So I think that's our responsibility. If we want to call ourselves a community, this is what we have to commit to, everybody saying that this is our responsibility to make this mix work and to make sure that people have a positive experience.

[00:17:03.94] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, I love that word, the responsibility concept and how it's all of our work. Because to your point, we all contribute to whether or not that day is going to be miserable for ourselves and for others. Or is it going to be an amazing day for ourselves and others? And so the contribution that we make in terms of the diversity, equity, and inclusion space is for us too, not just for other people. And that's kind of what I love about what you just said.

[00:17:31.06] The other role that you play here at Cornell, which is part of the Presidential Advisors on Diversity and Equity, the PADE team-- for our audience who may not be aware of what that is, can you share a little bit about the PADEs across the board and kind of what the overall purpose is here at Cornell?

[00:17:46.42] SONIA RUCKER: Well, one of the things that I found very interesting when I was told about the position, looking at the definition of the Presidential Advisors, it was pretty unique. I thought it was a very interesting approach to DEI. Because typically, an organization will hire a Chief Diversity Officer. But Cornell has decided to kind of spread that role between three of us.

[00:18:12.34] So we have Dr. Avery August, whose focus is on faculty. My focus is on staff. We have Dr. Marla Love, who is the Dean of Students, and then Victoria White who's a part of the president's staff, Special Project Manager. So we all have kind of a shared responsibility to discuss issues of diversity and how it affects the various constituencies that we're representing.

[00:18:39.46] So it does make it easier. Because I've been in a position previously at my university in Missouri, where I had that sole responsibility. And so it's nice to be able to have a team of people to talk through problems with and to come up with solutions, and to kind of serve as that group of people that the president can come to have these discussions about the various groups that we represent.

[00:19:06.35] BERT ODOM-REED: That's great. With this team of people, do you guys get together often? Or is it issue-based when you come together?

[00:19:15.37] SONIA RUCKER: Both. So we have regular meetings. We meet with the president as well. We have started to meet with the president. And as issues arise, we may get an email or phone call and say, this issue has come up and we need to have a discussion about it.

[00:19:34.36] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, that's great.

[00:19:36.41] BERT ODOM-REED: It's always good to have a team of people to help. Because-- I'll use the music metaphor-- if you're in a band and you play every instrument, all your music comes out sounding the same.

[00:19:49.82] TORAL PATEL: Right.

[00:19:50.34] SONIA RUCKER: Absolutely.

[00:19:51.62] BERT ODOM-REED: Leave some room for the bass player. Leave some room for the guitarist.

[00:19:54.47] SONIA RUCKER: Exactly.

[00:19:54.92] BERT ODOM-REED: And even the soloist needs to have some help with some background.

[00:19:59.63] SONIA RUCKER: Exactly. I mean, in higher education too, you know, I think that people like to lump us all together. But being a faculty member, or faculty of color, can be a very different experience for a staff member. Of course, we try to collaborate. But what we do on a day-to-day basis can be very different.

[00:20:17.19] And so your experience as a faculty of color, it's important to have someone who has that same background who can speak to what it was like for them. And Dr. August can do that. So I think it's nice to be able to have people in a room who can actually talk about what it is to be a faculty member.

[00:20:38.64] TORAL PATEL: So what I also really like about the PADE concept is that each of the constituencies are represented equally, right? And so to your point, there isn't that one person at the top and that there are three different individuals that can really speak to the issues that come up for each of those different groups. So now, speaking of just general issues or concerns, what do you think are some of the most pressing issues or concerns that you hear about most in higher education related to the diversity, equity, and inclusion space? And then specifically, if you want to maybe address or talk about how the diversity and inclusion space has been impacted by the pandemic.

[00:21:13.61] SONIA RUCKER: Sure. Well, I mean, I think having been in this space for so long, there are various issues that come up over time. I think what's happening on a national scale or international scale can affect the conversations that we're having and our focus depending on who's in office, policies that they implement. And of course, we have incidents that have occurred over the years.

[00:21:40.88] When I was in Missouri, it was the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson. We had a number of students, and faculty, and staff who lived in that community. Ferguson became like the ground zero for the Black Lives Matter movement. We had students that took what was happening in their hometown and brought it to our campus and said, our experience here isn't really the experience that we feel that we deserve.

[00:22:07.76] And they went to the president. He created a diversity task force from that conversation. So it kind of snowballed into actually the creation of the position that I had at Southeast Missouri State University. It came from that conversation in 2014 after the death of Michael Brown. And a lot of times, the experience that you have as people of color, you don't necessarily always bring those into your workspace or into the higher ed setting.

[00:22:38.24] But what happened with Michael Brown kind of brought it to the forefront. And people had to talk about it. And we spent a lot of time in meetings with people just saying things that they hadn't said previously. And they finally have that safe space to kind of express what it was really like to be a person of color in Southeast Missouri. And

we used that to kind of create our goals in terms of how we want our staff and our students to be a part of the community and what steps we could take to make sure that they understood we were committed to making their experience better.

[00:23:19.40] And of course, the pandemic has created so many different areas of focus. I mean, this is an experience none of us have ever had to navigate. We've seen some of the health disparities and how people who were diagnosed with COVID were treated. And we've seen the pressure on those who work in the healthcare industry. We've seen certain cultures, and groups, and communities lack of trust when the vaccine was created.

[00:23:54.32] I had even family members who just said, look, I don't trust the government. I don't trust that this vaccine is not going to be something that could harm us based on the experience with the Tuskegee syphilis experience. I mean, there's these histories, these issues that have occurred over the course of our American history that still affects people and how they react to things.

[00:24:17.10] So we've had to navigate a lot. And we don't have a playbook. So being able to be in a room to talk about, what do you think about this? What should we do? It's so important to be able to have these conversations. Because we want to get this right. But this is an experience very few of us really truly can understand on a day-to-day basis. We just have information coming out. And we have to react to it.

[00:24:44.48] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, and the uncertainty that comes with something like the pandemic that we've never had to deal with before, even things like returning to work or remote work and how that really impacts individuals here on campus, or individuals with disabilities who don't feel safe returning to campus. And so there are so many different issues that have come out of this pandemic that really kind of made us think about work completely differently and the concept of inclusion in a completely different way.

[00:25:13.85] SONIA RUCKER: Yeah, and not only work, I mean, when we were shut down and our university made the decision to reopen in the fall of 2020, I had an 89-year-old mother to consider. I knew I was going to be going back into the general population. So this was pre-vaccine. I mean, I didn't see my mother for months. I had to think about her health and safety.

[00:25:42.45] So it kind of affected you personally. Because of course, I want to see my mom. But I had to go to work every day and just make the decision to try to keep her as safe as possible and not interact with her.

[00:25:57.08] TORAL PATEL: Yeah.

[00:25:58.31] BERT ODOM-REED: It's definitely difficult. And I feel it myself when I send my children to school. You say, I should have had the resources, so I could have a multimillion dollar compound and I could close off the rest of the world. That's not the

reality for most all of us. And I don't know how to reconcile it some days. But it is good to know that there are others who can help out with that situation. And I think for people to be sensitive to other views and other people's lives I think is really important.

[00:26:37.70] And that's why I think working with equity and belonging is more important now than I think it's ever been.

[00:26:46.67] SONIA RUCKER: Absolutely.

[00:26:48.20] BERT ODOM-REED: Is there a strategy or something that you might want to add that would allow people to not lack diversity, or inclusion, or belonging become just a checked box? You know, check this box and OK, now we can move on.

[00:27:06.54] SONIA RUCKER: Right, yeah. And I say that all the time. I mean, this is not something you can just say, OK, we're done. Let's move on. Even though a lot of people feel that is an option. But who we are is not going to change. I mean, it has to be proactive. You have to be in it every single day. Like I said, there are going to be things that occur on a national level that could affect how we interact with each other in our various communities, even the reaction to the pandemic and people wearing masks. That became very political.

[00:27:44.40] TORAL PATEL: Yeah.

[00:27:45.15] SONIA RUCKER: So you have this intersection of health, and community, and politics, and people saying, ah, you can't make me wear a mask, or you can't make me come back to work, or you can't make me put my life in jeopardy for this job. So you have so many things that kind of converged. And all of those are still about equity, and inclusion, and how people feel about how you treat them.

[00:28:12.46] So I think for me, all of that is a part of DEI, even though people may not acknowledge it as DEI. To me it is about people's sense of belonging and feeling like they have the control over the experience that they have in a community.

[00:28:29.63] TORAL PATEL: Great. So we're going to put the focus back on you just slightly here in terms of in all of the work that you've done, you mentioned the social work and then you've been in higher education for quite a while in your career. What is an experience or an accomplishment that you feel like you're the most proud of having accomplished in your career so far?

[00:28:50.80] SONIA RUCKER: Wow.

[00:28:52.16] TORAL PATEL: This is probably one of the hardest questions, right? Because I'm asking you to narrow down to one. But if you want to talk about more than one, you're completely welcome to do that.

[00:29:00.55] SONIA RUCKER: I don't know if I would say there's a specific experience. But I would say that when I started at my institution in Missouri, I kind of made this transition from student affairs to working with staff and faculty in the equity space. And I was very deliberate about that. That was probably one of the first times that I said, I want to switch from working with students to being a Chief Diversity Officer.

[00:29:28.84] And I was surprised with how I had to change the way I thought, how I processed information, how I made decisions. I became a member of the president's executive team. So for the first time in my career, I moved from being at a director's level to being in the president's cabinet, where decisions are made for the entire university. For the first time, I realized the politics, the people who are providing input, working with the Board of Regents, what was happening in with the governor's office, the legislation, I was suddenly kind of immersed in this experience where I thought I had no idea all of this was going on in higher education, because of the level I had worked at previously.

[00:30:20.69] So I had to start to change the way that I thought. I had to consider so many different things. I had to keep certain conversations confidential. And people would come and say, we're upset. This has happened. I may have information that they don't have, which I couldn't share. And it's a very different world when you go from a director to being a member of the president's cabinet. I feel like over the next five years, I changed a lot in my approach in higher education and how I operate it.

[00:31:00.70] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, that's great. So you just mentioned that you had to change the way you thought and the way you worked. And so what advice would you have for employees that are wanting to kind of get into the DE and I space? How can they get involved in some of the efforts that we have going on here?

[00:31:15.97] SONIA RUCKER: I think we talk a lot about what it's like to be a person of color, or a person who identifies as LGBTQ. But it's all of our responsibility. I mean, allyship is important. People who want to try to be a part of the solution rather than a part of the problem, we need you to speak up. We need you to collaborate with us to support our efforts. I think that when you talk about being an inclusive community, that's a huge responsibility.

[00:31:51.97] I mean, you're thinking about every single person. And that's 20,000 plus people, I mean, to consider. So I think it just really is about being willing to be a part of the solution and to be at the table and really contribute to making this work.

[00:32:11.28] BERT ODOM-REED: Yeah. With the 20,000 plus people, you're always going to have that total opposite view on the same issue. Are there any tips, or tricks, or things that you might use to bring them together, if you have somebody that's so diametrically opposed?

[00:32:33.39] SONIA RUCKER: You know, I talked about having to change the way I think. One of the ways that I had to kind of think differently is that we've had certain

speakers that were invited to campus. They may have a completely opposing viewpoint on how I think about politics, or how they talk about certain groups of people, people who don't support people who are LGBTQ, people who don't support people of color, people who don't like people from other countries being here, and the way they have those conversations.

[00:33:06.79] And I think our natural inclination is to want to be a confrontational kind of stance with them. I had to learn to back away from that a little bit. You have a right to think the way that you want to think. I don't have to agree with you. But I needed to make space for those conversations to occur. And I think that's a very difficult thing to do.

[00:33:28.41] Because freedom of speech is freedom of speech, no matter who's saying it. Of course, we have to, if someone is coming on with hate speech, or people who are racist, or who violate our policies. But I think when you have a community of people, there are going to be disagreements. They're going to be conflicts. The goal is to walk away from those conflicts without disparaging people or making them feel like you don't belong here.

[00:34:01.38] And that's it, proactive thing. You have to think that way with every interaction that you have. You don't have to like me or how I think. But you need to respect it. And you don't have the right to make me feel like I don't belong here because of how I look or how I think.

[00:34:21.59] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, it's a great message to end this conversation on. I actually have just one last question for you. And Bert, feel free to answer this question as well. In the work that we do-- and I think it's almost like going full circle too, our question of the day and just where we ended that question-- it's what do you do for you? What do you do to take care of yourself?

[00:34:46.68] SONIA RUCKER: Well, that has been very difficult. I mean, it was a huge task to learn how to work from home. I'm an introvert. So when I would leave the office and go home, I mean, home was my sanctuary, even though I had my cell phone. When I got through the door, I was just like, oh, I'm home. And then all of a sudden, I had an office in the middle of my living room.

[00:35:11.52] And I could hear the ding of the emails coming through. I had a printer on my dining room table. So I was just a little thrown by the work home concept. So I moved the office, so I couldn't see it. I had to start to create, in my home, how do I get up in the morning, do my work, and then stop and be at home? And again, it's about being very deliberate in making sure that you made that time for yourself. That even though I couldn't get out and about and do the things that I was doing previously, I had to figure out a way to kind of decompress, learn to cut things off, and just kind of be Sonia and not the VP.

[00:36:01.14] So I love watching documentaries. I love listening to jazz. I love being with my nieces and nephews. So just trying to make time for myself and do the things that bring me joy.

[00:36:13.97] BERT ODOM-REED: Wow, hopefully also listening to the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:36:20.45] SONIA RUCKER: Added that to the list.

[00:36:23.12] BERT ODOM-REED: I totally get what you're talking about. When we transitioned to the work from home, I didn't quickly enough realize, separate.

[00:36:33.62] SONIA RUCKER: Yes.

[00:36:34.82] BERT ODOM-REED: This is office Bert. This is home Bert.

[00:36:37.88] SONIA RUCKER: Yes.

[00:36:39.29] BERT ODOM-REED: Figure out how to separate and turn it off.

[00:36:42.38] SONIA RUCKER: Mm-hmm. Yeah, and you had to do that. I mean, I love cooking. One of the things that I did that got a little bit out of hand, because I was ordering things on the internet, like all these appliances, this grill. And I mean, I would be getting boxes and so excited and had a really good time just exploring different recipes, using different spices and seasonings.

[00:37:11.48] So every day, I was getting a box on my porch. And so 5:00 I'd open the box and see what I had. And OK, I'm going to cook this tonight. That was fun. And I really realized how much-- I grew up cooking a lot. And that was nice to bring that back into my day-to-day experiences.

[00:37:31.01] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, and it's so funny. Because Bert, I hear you say, oh, if I had just known to do the separation earlier. But how could we have known? We've never had to go through a pandemic. We've never had to work from home as extensively as we've all had to do. We've never had to adjust to this whole new way of working.

[00:37:46.13] And so none of us would have known. I think a lot of us have had to figure that out along the way, is what is working from home look like for me?

[00:37:54.05] BERT ODOM-REED: What did you do for you?

[00:37:55.19] TORAL PATEL: Oh, same concept, right? Like the separation from work was very important for me. Like just in the way I live and where I live, it was very easy for me to do that. For some of you audience members who don't know, my husband's a

manager of a hotel. And as part of the compensation package, we actually get to live there in the manager's apartment.

[00:38:15.35] And so I took over one of the hotel rooms as my office space. And so every morning, I was technically leaving my house to go to work, which was 10 feet down the hall. But I wasn't in the same space where I lived. And that separation is a huge benefit for me. I mean, to this day, actually when my last meeting, or my last whatever I had to get done for the day is over, I shut everything down. And I go home.

[00:38:40.53] And so for me, it didn't change the way I worked. Because I literally left my house every morning to go to work. And that space was completely separated from my home life. And so all of my colleagues were like, can I also have a room at the hotel? That part was actually fairly easy.

[00:38:57.77] What was hard for me and what I had to figure out was the first little while when my kids were also home. For them to say, oh, I'm actually working, so I'm not available to come and take care of whatever needs you might have immediately. Because when you have the pre-teenage kids, it's not only I have a need, but I have this need that needs to be fulfilled right this second.

[00:39:19.18] And so the concept that their mother might be in a meeting was something that was very hard for us to figure out. So navigating everybody else in my household who had to understand that when I'm physically not in the house, it means I'm working. And what does that mean? And that I'm not available, right? And so that was actually the harder part for me to navigate is having everybody else also home, not just myself.

[00:39:43.42] SONIA RUCKER: Yeah.

[00:39:44.05] TORAL PATEL: Well, Sonia, thank you so much for joining Bert and I today. What an amazing conversation. So glad to have you back at Cornell.

[00:39:52.90] SONIA RUCKER: Thank you so much. I'm really excited to be here. And I look forward to working with you and Bert. And as soon as I can get used to the snow and the cold again, things should be OK.

[00:40:04.36] TORAL PATEL: I know that Bert mentioned that Cornell was smart enough to kind of give you that first offer at the very, very beginning of your career here. And I'm glad that we brought you back for that second time.

[00:40:16.40] Wow, Bert, what an amazing conversation we just had with Sonia.

[00:40:20.60] BERT ODOM-REED: Oh yeah, Sonia-- she's inspiring. So it was really, really great to have her spend some time and talk with us.

[00:40:28.73] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, I'm glad that Cornell was able to-- I would say reel her back over to Ithaca--

[00:40:32.90] BERT ODOM-REED: Mm-hmm.

[00:40:33.14] TORAL PATEL: --and especially reeling her back in the middle of winter of all the seasons. So I'm glad that she's made that trek back to Cornell.

[00:40:40.13] BERT ODOM-REED: One of the things that resonated for me was she really liked working with the team of people and introspectively learning to think differently.

[00:40:51.59] TORAL PATEL: Yeah.

[00:40:52.31] BERT ODOM-REED: Which if we get no other concept out there, my opinion only, people need to think differently.

[00:41:00.26] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, that really resonated with me. And that team concept leads me to something else that resonated with me. And it's the concept that this DE and I, diversity, equity, inclusion, is everybody's work, right?

[00:41:10.58] BERT ODOM-REED: Yes.

[00:41:10.79] TORAL PATEL: It's not something that we can rely on the one office over there to do. But this is something that all of us need to be active participants in. So I thought that was something that really stood out. And then the other thing that really stood out for me is the concept that free speech is free speech and that you and I, or me and anybody, we don't have to agree. But yet, we can still work towards being respectful of each other and creating an inclusive space for each other.

[00:41:37.50] And so that's something that stood out to me. Because that's the kind of space that I try to create in not only my personal life, but also in my work setting every day, that I don't have to agree with everybody. We wouldn't. Because we all come with different lived experiences, right?

[00:41:51.14] BERT ODOM-REED: Oh, yeah.

[00:41:51.89] TORAL PATEL: So the concept that we wouldn't agree makes complete sense. Why would we agree? If we did, we would all be the same individual.

[00:41:57.98] BERT ODOM-REED: And what a boring world that would be.

[00:41:59.78] TORAL PATEL: Right, exactly. So that's the other piece that really stood out to me is that we don't all have to agree. But yet, we can still be respectful of each other and create an inclusive space where everybody's welcome.

[00:42:09.59] BERT ODOM-REED: This is a great time we've had discussing things with Sonia.

[00:42:13.50] TORAL PATEL: Yeah, thank you. And thank you for being my co-host, as usual.

[00:42:16.73] BERT ODOM-REED: You're welcome.

[00:42:18.49] TORAL PATEL: Thank you for listening. Be sure to subscribe to us wherever you listen to podcasts and rate and submit a review on Apple Podcasts. It helps new listeners find us and the show. Also, if you or a fellow colleague would like to be interviewed for an upcoming episode on the next season of the podcast, please email us at ie-academy@cornell.edu.

[00:42:39.74] For the latest updates on diversity, equity, and inclusion at Cornell, be sure to visit diversity.cornell.edu. My name is Toral Patel.

[00:42:49.40] BERT ODOM-REED: My name is Bert Odom-Reed. Thank you for listening to another episode of the Inclusive Excellence Podcast.

[00:42:56.35] TORAL PATEL: A special shout out and thank you to Bert Odom-Reed, our sound engineer and my co-host today, from the Cornell broadcast studio for making us sound wonderful each and every episode.

[00:43:06.10] SONIA RUCKER: Thank you, Bert.

[00:43:06.61] TORAL PATEL: Thank you, Bert.

[00:43:07.81] BERT ODOM-REED: You're welcome.

[00:43:09.01] [MUSIC PLAYING]