

Project Humanities is putting the human back into humanities

Dr. Neal Lester, Arizona State University English professor and founding director of the Project Humanities, spoke Thursday. He was introduced by **Berdetta Hodge**. He just finished his 25th year at ASU, having previously been at the University of Alabama and the State University of West Georgia. He has appeared on many leading national media. He teaches African American literature and culture, as well as the “politics of hair.” Neal discussed how one’s hair came to be central to one’s self-identity – often becoming a burden for what it is note, such as balding and thinning for those of either gender. “Everybody has a hair story, and that hair story connects us to other people.”

He came bearing a collection of buttons featuring a yellow hand made up of people moving in one direction. He called on his audience to “take the pledge and live seven principles of “Humanity 101” that all connect: Compassion, Empathy, Forgiveness, Integrity, Kindness, Respect and Self-Reflection. Project Humanities was developed 10 years ago. Its full story can be found on its website, narrated by Neal.

“In society, we have a little bit of a bias about what is more rigorous and what is

not,” he explained. “It is simply bringing people together to talk, listen and connect.” It can mean “talking how radical love is, how radical peace is when people seem to thrive in conflict.” Project Humanities is about living the 7 principles in “trying to be better.”

In the year 2008-09, ASU President Crow responded to the economic downturn and recession where students “were fleeing from the humanities (English, literature, film, communications, creative writing).”

“We look at people about their humanity or what is denied about their humanity.” It was suggested

to “take humanities to the people ... whenever we tell a story, whenever we interact with somebody, ‘How was your day?’,... you are engaging in humanity. .. whenever there is a conversation about something you thought about, that’s humanity.” No matter what people’s vocations and identities are, the question is “what do we share?”

That is why he starts out with “hair stories” because is an area of common ground.

He said differences in people divides them. “Let’s get past it.”

“Since May 2020, people have not wanted to talk about race .. or gender or sexuality .. or the P-word, privilege, or talk about bias.” He discussed ASU’s collaboration with PBS on a program about the issues of getting accepted into elite universities. “It is a conversation about how we define

‘success.’ Just as meeting a person who asks what one does for a living elicits different responses, based on status, such is the case with what universities one attended. Project Humanities is trying to dismantle that so “we are thinking differently.”

“It is really disturbing to see these students who are taking these advance classes, and they are each scoring high on these tests.” He said the coveted schools “tend to care more about the brand so that you remain exclusive.”

He said his project works to level the playing field on applying for jobs by eliminating factors that feature bias – like noting what groups one belonged to or including one’s photo or certain narratives.

Neal asked the audience to close their eyes and then describe Cinderella and say one word that came to mind. People responded with adjectives instead of what she was doing. In the culture, “we value women for what they looked like versus men and boys on what they do.”

“We thrive on getting people to think,” he concluded.

Much more can be found at the web site: www.projecthumanities.asu.edu That includes videos and link to the 10th anniversary of the program.



Paul Weich, Dr. Lester, Don Fletcher

