

Announcer:

Welcome to the Wellbeing at MSU Podcast with Dr. Alexis Travis. We're recording today directly after the 2026 Spartan Wellbeing Summit, and we are pleased to welcome a special guest, the keynote speaker, Kiyaana Cox Jones. Kiyaana is a restorative practitioner, creative scholar, educator, playwright, and innovative leader whose transdisciplinary research weaves ecopsychology, restorative practice, and art space inquiry to illuminate the profound interdependence of people, place, and planet in cultivating the individual and collective wellbeing. Her work bridges scholarship and soul, theory and lived experience, offering frameworks that humanize institutional practice and expand the possibilities of community flourishing. She designs and facilitates brave dialogic spaces where participants are invited to reconnect with themselves, with one another, and with larger systems that shape wellbeing. Her approach emphasizes listening, care, accountability, and regeneration, recognizing that social and ecological wellness are deeply intertwined. As the founder and CEO of KJ Productions, she integrates arts-based practice and restorative methodologies to foster reflection, self-expression, and collective meaning making.

Through performance, dialogue, and creative process, this work supports embodied learning and invites participants to engage difficult conversations with curiosity and care. She currently serves as a lecturer for the International Institute for Restorative Practices. Her professional background spans higher education, K through 12 education, and nonprofit leadership, including previous roles as assistant director of multicultural life and coordinator of inclusion and family engagement in K through 12 settings. She's pursuing a PhD in East West Psychology at the California Institute of Integral Studies, further deepening her inquiry into integrative models of healing, consciousness, and wellness. She holds a Bachelor of Fine Arts from Howard University and a master's degree in social science from the International Institute for Restorative Practices. Her artistic and scholarly contributions have been recognized with honors, including the Star Ledger Scholarship and the Governor's Ward in New Jersey. At her core, Kiyaana Cox Jones is a relational thinker and facilitator of possibility, committed to helping individuals and institutions imagine and practice forms of wellbeing rooted in connection, creativity, and care for the world we share. And now here's your host, Dr. Alexis Travis.

Alexis Travis:

Hello, and welcome to the Wellbeing at MSU Podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Alexis Travis, and today I'm joined by keynote speaker, Kiyaana Cox Jones. Kiyaana has just delivered her keynote at the Spartan Wellbeing Collective Summit, and I'm excited to continue our conversation with her now. Welcome, Kiyaana. Thank you, Dr. Travis. I appreciate you. So your presentation today was called Harvesting Hope, H-O-P-E Hope. Can you tell us about the acronym and what it means?

Kiyaana Cox Jones:

Absolutely. H-O-P-E, Humanizing Our Practices for Evolution. And so when we think about the work that we do in our practices, we don't often stop to make sure that these practices work for human beings. We are making sure these practices work for the system. But if we think about the way the social ecological model is structured, we work from the bottom up, from interpersonal all the way up through our systems. And a lot of times we can't evolve because our practices don't fit human beings. And people get stuck and try to figure out, well, what's happening? We often hear, "We've hit a brick wall. We can't go any further." Well, maybe it's because we need to go back to the drawing board to make sure we have centered people. Dr. John Bailey from, he was one of our former presidents at the International Institute for Restorative Practice.

In his presidential paper, he talks about for the science of human dignity that people need three things, this idea of voice agency and a sense of belonging. Well, when we humanize practices, we are giving

people voice, agency, and a sense of belonging. And a lot of times we try to do that at a very systemic level that cannot be sustained without human beings.

Alexis Travis:

Yeah, that resonates deeply and also really aligns closely with the work that we're doing in the UHW plan. So also during your presentation, you talked about restorative principles, and one of the restorative principles you talked about is people before task. What does humanizing look like and why is that important?

Kiyaana Cox Jones:

Absolutely. So another thing that happened in my keynote is that in the middle of the keynote, I stopped to say, "We're going to do a check-in." And that's not normally what keynote speakers do, but I truly live by the principle of people before TAS that people ... The task is deliver this keynote, make us feel this thing. But the principle is I want to make sure that the people are even ready to receive me. This idea of affect psychology of where are we, what am I thinking, feeling, believing, even before I begin to talk? And so we stopped to talk about what's our favorite MSU moment and the room shifted. Could you feel the way that the room shifted? People started talking, they were gathering together. The room shifted and all of a sudden people were hugging and people were talking and someone even shared one was crying in tears a moment that really meant so much to them.

Well, what that means to me is that in restorative practice, what we say is that human beings are better, more happier and more productive when we do things with them rather than team them for them or not at all. So my principle is, I want to do this work with you. So let me stop the task to check in with you. Now, I often hear people say, "I don't have enough time to do the practice of check-ins. I don't have enough time to do listening circles. I don't have enough time to make sure that my staff feel like they have a sense of belonging. We have so much work to get done." And I often say, if you do the work of people, of honoring human beings and putting them before the task, the tasks get done and they get done better than you ever expected it to get done.

Alexis Travis:

So what I'm hearing is that it's worth sacrificing the time and creating the space because not only will it improve relationships, but it will also improve results. Absolutely. It multiplies impact. Yeah, that's wonderful. It's a gift

Kiyaana Cox Jones:

That keeps going giving.

Alexis Travis:

And I appreciate you making the space for us to do that today because as you said, the mood in the room shifted after we did that. Can you share how hope aligns with and activates each level of the socioecological model?

Kiyaana Cox Jones:

Absolutely. So at the interpersonal level, it is hope within. And so I often say that the path to with begins within, that it's hard to be with other people without first being with yourself and doing that interpersonal work. Then we move up to interpersonal and then it's this idea of hope between. And it's where this is the interrelational work that we do. Even just in the short amount of time, we've exchanged hope between each other in our Zooms or even dinner last night. Then we get to the communal level and then it's hope

across. It's across our communities. And then we think about across where? Across people, across places, and even across the way in which we move in our planet. We often forget about the land and how hope moves in the land and the people whose land it is. And then lastly, in our systems, it's hope through how hope becomes a through line within our systems.

Alexis Travis:

So it looks quite different at each of the levels.

Kiyaana Cox Jones:

Absolutely.

Alexis Travis:

Yeah.

Kiyaana Cox Jones:

Each level, it looks different, but each level requires more. So at the interpersonal level, it's just you and your own personal practices. And then as you begin to grow in each level, there's more level of accountability, there's more supports, there's more resources, and there's more people. And then what also happens is there's a more of a responsibility to the work at hand.

Alexis Travis:

Right. And we often talk about this collective responsibility, right? Absolutely. It's not just UHW work. It's not just another department's work. It's all of our work together.

Kiyaana Cox Jones:

Absolutely.

Alexis Travis:

So to the end, MSU, as you know, has committed to becoming a health promoting university and inspired by the Okanagan Charter. You talked about the process of bringing the charter to life, planting, watering, and blooming. Would you elaborate on that a little bit?

Kiyaana Cox Jones:

Absolutely. Sorry, I'm going to look at my notes for this one. Well, one, you all had a great theme. So you brought me into something that was already great, this idea of blooming and it was throughout the whole days between the table setting and just the decorations. But one of the things that really stood out to me was this idea that at each level of the Okanagan charter, it's not a checklist. It's a process. It's a flow. And when we reorient health, that is the planting.

That is planting the seeds. And so it is making sure that we put health and wellbeing back in the right perspective because sometimes it's only been isolated to one particular office. And so it's Alexa's office. You all do that thing. But when we reorient health, it's not the thing, it's the culture of the campus. So that is where we plant seeds, and that requires us to plant seeds everywhere on campus. But you can't plant seeds and then not water them. So now we talk about promoting health for all and really emphasizing, well, who is all? All people, not just our students, but our staff, all of our staff, all of our faculty. And then this goes back to restorative practice talking about human beings. This idea of human beings didn't just mean students. Human beings means everybody on our campus, but also all places on our campus.

Is it in the theater and dance department? Is it in the athletics department? Is it in the chemistry lab? Where's hope springing up? Where's this work? Where's health and wellbeing springing up on our campus? And I use the analogy that I don't have a green thumb and that I would water plants and just water and think that I was done. And my husband's like, no, each plant has to be watered a particular way. And that means that you have to take the time to move things over and get down to make sure the water's getting deep down in there. Well, when we're doing this work, sometimes we're not promoting health for all. So when we're watering, we're trying to water a one size fit all. This requires that everybody or everybody on campus must water their individual seeds planted, which leads us to then that's how we sustain our environments. We sustain our environments and that's when we bloom. We sustain our environments by everybody putting their hands to the plow, by everybody doing this work together, by everybody being invested in health and wellbeing at the communal level so that our systems are impacted. And so we asked the question of, is our systems conducive to everybody? What policies may need to change? What practices may need to shift?

Alexis Travis:

Yeah. When you were talking about just the unique needs of each seed, it reminded me of senior vice president Nam Hubbard's comments about some plants need light and some plants need shade. Absolutely. You've got to know which plant and which seed you're watering and which seed you're caring for it to nurture it appropriately for it to bloom and to thrive. And so that's something I think that we should all take with us from today.

Kiyaana Cox Jones:

Yes.

Alexis Travis:

So speaking of today's summit and what we should take with us, what part of the program made you stop and say, "Aha, that's it." It was two.

Kiyaana Cox Jones:

The first was the student panel and the students sharing their experience about how they define this work, which is so important. But particularly, and I think you mentioned it later, there was one student who say, "We can't talk about being health and wellbeing and then take

Resources." Well, one, I love student. I love interacting with students. So I loved being on campus and doing that work. But what it reminds me is that they are at the heart of this, that we can't do health and wellbeing without student voices. They know what their student colleagues are going through. I often say like, they have their ear to what's happening and they share those things with us. Sometimes this goes to, when I talk about restorative practice, we can't do things to people or for them. We have to do it with them. The student panel reminded me that this work is important to do this work with them, with their perspective, with their ideas, even with disagreements. A student said that on the panel. It's okay to have conversations with us even in disagreement, but with is so important. And I talked about the power of width and that hope survives when we do this work with each other.

The other part was with Lisa. I can't remember

Alexis Travis:

What department she's in. Lisa Laughman. Yes. From our very own university health and wellbeing and the health promotion, engagement, accessibility and accommodations pillar. And she has the Spartan Resilience Education Program.

Kiyaana Cox Jones:

She won an award today.

Alexis Travis:

She Did. Yes. Yes.

Kiyaana Cox Jones:

There was a standing ovation for her and I can see why. The energy that she brought to the power moment was unforgettable. I often do power moments, but there was something special. But also what she curated was something that she created herself. Can you remind me with the sixth word? Yeah, the sixth word framework.

Alexis Travis:

Yes.

Kiyaana Cox Jones:

So I was blessed by Lisa because Lisa talked about the energy that was in the room. Lisa talked about the way in which this shows up on our campus and then she showed the tree and all of its roots and to remind us to get grounded in this work. And I could tell that Lisa is a vital part of your community by the way that the room shifted and responded to her.

You can tell that she is feet on the ground. She is there helping. She is there listening. She embodied the Spartan energy, the Spartan nature. And so those two things really stood out to me. Oh, and lastly, the frog analogy. And I heard it last night at dinner, but then to hear you speak about it and then to see it, and to think about this idea that we often see something is wrong and we ask people what's wrong with you. And in restorative practice, we have restorative questions that we use and we don't necessarily say, "Well, we don't say, why did you do that?" We often ask, "What happened? What were you thinking? What do you need? Who's been impacted?" And your presentation of really thinking about the frog. And often we see the frog and we go, "What's wrong with the frog?" Rather than, "What happened?" "What's wrong with the pad?"

"Or," "What's wrong with the pond or what's happening underneath the pond?" "So those three things really stood out to me, but overall it's the work that you and your team are doing. Alexis, I can't say it enough and I don't ... It's not to toot your horn. This is work that many other campuses around the world need to do.

Alexis Travis:

Thank you.

Kiyaana Cox Jones:

I'm pushing for it, pushing for it at other places, pushing for it at HBCUs, but this is the work that we really need to do. And it's not just for our students, but it's for the staff, it's for the faculty, but it takes people who are invested in it, and you and your team are invested in this work. So thank you for the work that you do when nobody's looking.

Alexis Travis:

Thank you. It's an honor to represent a team of such strong, committed health and wellbeing professionals. I always say, I get to be out there and talk about the work, and it's really a representation of

300 people who all show up mission focused every single day to do this work. So thank you for the acknowledgement. I take that for the team. Yes. Yes, yes, yes, yes, yes. I love that at the end of your presentation, the call to action was bloomed together, and that's really a nod to the collective nature of this work and the actions that we want to see on campus. So if there's one thing that attendees from the summit today or even our listeners listening now can take away and put into action, what would you say that should be?

Kiyaana Cox Jones:

So I found this really interesting fact about flowers and as I was thinking about this, I found this beautiful picture of whites, because go green, go white,

Of these beautiful white flowers in a field together. And the research, what I found is that flowers that are together, really they withstand the wind and the rain and the harsh weather. They withstand it ... They can do it better than being siloed. And when I think about this work, oftentimes there are people, you may be on your own campus and you may be doing this work by yourself and finding it hard and feeling really overwhelmed and stressed. And I want to encourage you to find some other flowers to bloom with, that blooming by oneself is not sustainable. Find people who are just as invested in our students, staff, and faculty, health and wellbeing as you and bloom together. And what that looks like is similar to what you all did is creating that coalition, whether it's students, faculty, staff, community partners, all the different colleges on your campus and finding somebody who, other people who represent this work and building that field of flowers so that way you all can bloom and withstand the hard times because there will be hard times, but withstand it together because you'll last longer when we are together.

But that's the thing because I think from the work that I'm doing, there are a lot of people who are doing this work alone and are feeling like I'm stuck. And so it would be encouraged to find some other flowers to bloom with.

Alexis Travis:

Yeah. It's the whole concept of we're stronger together. Absolutely. Thank you, Kiyaana, not just for being on the podcast now, but for your time and your time on campus. It's been a gift to all of us. Thank you. And we appreciate you. To our listeners, thank you for joining us. These conversations matter and your engagement helps move us closer to a place where health and wellbeing are priorities for students, faculty, and staff on campus. Until next time, take care and be well.