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SPEAKERS

Monique Davis, Omkari Williams



Omkari Williams 00:19

Hello, and welcome to Stepping Into Truth, the podcast where we have conversations on race, gender and social justice. I'm your host Omkari Williams, and I'm so pleased that you're here with me today. Before we start this conversation, I want to say that as much as I love how intellectually stimulating these discussions are, they're meant to do more than pique our intellect. They're meant to move us into meaningful action. So as you listen, think about how you might be able to make a difference. And at the end of the discussion, my guests will give you some of their ideas about simple things you can do to move us closer to our social justice goals.



Omkari Williams 01:00

Today's guest is Monique Davis. Monique Davis is managing director for the Center for Art and Public Exchange (CAPE) at the Mississippi Museum of Art, and has recently been named the Chief Equity and Inclusion officer. CAPE is a Kellogg Foundation funded initiative that uses artwork exhibitions, engagement with artists and programming as a vehicle to have conversations about race and equity. Monique is responsible for creating brave spaces that expand the visitors perspectives and reveals our shared humanity. Monique is deeply committed to the belief that art has the power to transform and inform us. Monique is a CPA and a graduate of Howard University. And it is my great pleasure to have Monique on the podcast. Hi, how are you?



Monique Davis 01:51

Good, how are you?



Omkari Williams 01:52

I am wonderful and I am so looking forward to this conversation. We set this up a while ago and it seems lately, like whenever I set something up, and it's a month or two in the past, something happens in the intervening time that makes the conversation even more relevant. And I feel like that's exactly what happened here, you know, so I'm super excited. So I want to start with CAPE, the Center for Art and Public Exchange. And I'd love to have you tell us a little bit about it and why it was created in the first place, because I think it speaks in many ways to a larger conversation that we need to be having.



Monique Davis 02:33

So, as you mentioned in the introduction, CAPE is a Kellogg funded initiative that uses art as a way to talk about issues of race and equity. And so in Kellogg's racial reconciliation work, they realized that the population that they wanted to build deeper trust relationships with were primarily middle age, middle to higher income white folks. And you can't have a conversation that shifts the race and equity dynamic without having conversations with those people. And because the museum is viewed as a trusted place for that population, and they are our primary demographic, even though we're trying to shift that, that we would be the ideal place as a trusted partner to have artworks anchor these challenging and brave conversations. And so that was kind of the case statement that the team presented to Kellogg. And we had previously done work around Freedom Summer, in partnership with Tougaloo College which is kind of the birthplace of you know, Freedom Summer and we have close relationships with the Evers family, so our leadership team has done things that kind of expanded the conversation. But this was a unique opportunity to be really intentional about it, and to devote resources and artworks to it. And so while the conversation is among the dominant culture, we thought it was really important to use work by black and brown artists as the kind of anchor for those conversations.



Omkari Williams 04:30

I want to go back a little and just ask you to explain what Freedom Summer is because not everyone may be familiar with that.



Monique Davis 04:39

Oh, yes. And so I'm going to preface this by saying I'm not a historian. But Freedom Summer was organized by SNCC (Student Non-violent Coordinating Committee) I believe, and it was this massive effort to get white and black people from the north to come to the South to register people to vote and coalesce power. And it was led by Bob Moses, who's still with us and some other dignitaries and I'm missing their name because I'm an over 50 person.



Omkari Williams 05:18

That's fine, keep going.



Monique Davis 05:21

And their, their strategy was if they could, and they had trained had non violent training, if they could get enough white folks with them, that this would humanize the struggle. This would really protect them in a way but they also prepped the people that participated in this to be willing to die. And so when we had the 50th, we brought all the Freedom Riders down to Mississippi and had a celebration for a whole week. So we had Julian Bond before he passed. We had the widow of Schwerner who was one of the people that was killed and is a basis for Mississippi Burning, and so we had James Meredith, who integrated Old Miss, was the first black student. So we had we call them civil rights veterans here. We had Hollis Watkins, who was also part of that organizing effort and you know, God willing, he is still also with us. And we we have invited him he has participated in programming with us for CAPE. And we had the freedom singers here. So it was just like this unique point in time that you know, we're not sure how long these ancestors that are living they're still going to be with us.



Omkari Williams 06:41

Right, because we're talking 50 years ago, and they were teenagers and young adults at that point. I have to tell you, I got chills listening to you list the names. It was such a powerful moment of unity and, you know, there was so much pain and so much tragedy and still people persisted. And it was just very, very moving for me just hearing about that exhibit. So, because of Mississippi's painful past, I mean, and Mississippi has a uniquely painful past in many ways, and your work at Mississippi Museum of Art is to make art, a vehicle of healing and reconciliation. How do you build a healing exhibition on a painful past?

M

Monique Davis 07:35

You know, that is really a good question. And in an effort of radical transparency, we are still we are building the boat as we are rowing the boat. And so, I mean, one of the things that I have done in my practice is to have some really human centered language around community agreements and behavior, norms, and speaking from a place of your own internal experience and recognizing that everybody has different perspectives. But I also have what I call non-debatable, and one of the non-debatables is that racism exists. And it's all of our responsibility to dismantle it. And so people just kind of accept that as like a platform to even begin the conversation.

M

Monique Davis 08:25

But I find that art has the ability, even if you don't explicitly mention race, and you ask, really well formed questions, like what about this is interesting to you? What resonates with your own personal experience? That race conversations just kind of naturally come out of people being engaged with art and community and I think that's the thing that I'm really missing about COVID and trying to figure out how to create these really deep, meaningful, impactful engagements with art in a virtual environment. And how to have people be really radically open and vulnerable in a virtual setting. And I know that people younger than me because I'm at the edge of the baby boom, are digital natives and they don't have maybe the same need for that human connection face to face. But for me, there's an exchange of energy that happens when you share physical space with each other that's really hard to replicate over technology. And so, you know, I'm trying to figure that out as we move, continue to move this work forward.



Omkari Williams 09:48

I'm definitely going to come back to that but I want to for a little bit stick on this area. Because one of the things that I've always found interesting about art is its ability to cross those challenging conversational lines. And I'm curious about the structure that you use when you're having difficult conversations within your community.

M

Monique Davis 10:15

Well, I mean, we have like a few programmatic options. So one is Art and Coffee where we have really casual conversations about art with a community member, they go into the galleries, or we do it virtually. And they talk about what parts the piece of the artwork resonates with them. And that's, and so I call that in the range of experiences is like, baby food. It's really accessible, non threatening, as opposed to another program where we're

really explicit, and it's called Rephrasing.

 Monique Davis 10:47

So we had a program talking about migration, and documentation. And we had a panel of experts. We had Choctaw archaeologists, we had DACA recipient, and then we had somebody from the UK, and all of them had had touch points with the immigration system that weren't healthy. And that was surrounded by two artworks. One was MacArthur Binion, which is an abstracted painting of his birth certificate in a grid pattern that looks like a basket and I don't know if you remember a point in history, where birth certificates were black with white writing, so he cut those strips out and had it where he was listed as colored. So this huge abstracted painting of him kind of mining his identity.

 Monique Davis 11:37

And the counterpoint to that was a necklace by a Choctaw artists and she framed her CDIB card is called Certificate Degree of Indian Blood. And that's something that our government requires indigenous folks to document their identity. And then we had a conversation about how people have to carry certain amount of documentation around to navigate that system and how the artworks kind of informed that conversation. And at the end of that with a very diverse group, intergenerational, color, ethnicity, out of that conversation, people said, Well, how can we advocate for you? One, I didn't know what a CDIB card was to. I didn't realize that people that are undocumented contributed so much tax revenue to our system. Three, I didn't realize how broken the immigration system was.


 Monique Davis 12:38


And this was informed by a conversation that began because of art. And so the ability to match the themes of artworks with relevant social justice issues, in a setting that builds bridges of empathy and understanding is like is the sweet spot and you know, those are the situations that we continue to try to create an environment that's compassionate, and respectful, but also teach people how to speak from their own personal experience and not model what our leadership is modeling right now. Like to have a degree of curiosity, emotional intelligence, (laughter) you know?





Omkari Williams 13:27


Oh, you asked for so much.


 Monique Davis 13:32
Yeah,


 Omkari Williams 13:33
Yeah. Well, yeah, I have to say that. I did not know that. Indigenous people, Native American people were required to have that card. And when you said that, that hurt my heart. I mean, it's like asking people to prove their humanity and their belonging and then that just is heart wrenching. And thank you for bringing that to my awareness, and now I'm going to have to do some research on that. Because it, it just feels so massively wrong and


 Monique Davis 14:09
It's wrong, right

 Omkari Williams 14:11
and unfair. And wait, who are you to decide who belongs in the first place? So, anyway, I'm not going to go down that rabbit hole, right now. But, hmm...

 Monique Davis 14:19
You know, and, of course, it's different for different tribes. And believe me, I have a very elementary understanding of it. So this was just for one particular federally recognized tribe. But of course, the federal government doesn't even recognize all the tribes

 Omkari Williams 14:36
Right, as if somehow, Well, I guess it's kind of like testing. If you don't test, then you don't have a problem.

 Monique Davis 14:45
Right!

 Omkari Williams 14:46

So if you don't recognize the tribes, then they just don't exist. It's kind of like that, I guess. Who knew it could be so simple? So I find that whole structure that you just described so fascinating because it feels to me like these methodologies are definitely applicable beyond the world of museums. And especially in this time where we're really, as a country starting to directly grapple with our issues around race, it feels like this is a way to get into those conversations, that could be really beneficial in a larger framework. Mm hmm. So that's exciting.

M

Monique Davis 15:29

Yeah, I think so. I think, you know, ultimately, it's the marriage, or the connection between story and visual expression is that Oh, I like that. Yeah,



Omkari Williams 15:41

I think that's exactly right. And something you'd said earlier, you know, people would come and look at art and everyone's going to have a different reaction to what they see. I mean, some things are going to land and some things aren't depending on your own personal experience. But it creates sort of level playing field because you're all looking at the same thing. And it creates an opportunity for a conversation that you might not otherwise have. Because again, you're all looking at the same thing. You can talk about that thing, you can talk about how it impacted you, or how it didn't impact you, and start to find out what someone else's experiences. And I mean, to me, that's kind of the magic of art, and why I think it's so important and why I'm really worried now in this time of COVID, about how we're going to sustain this important connection. In a time when we can't just wander into a museum. I mean, when I walk around my neighborhood in Chicago, I pass a number of museums because Chicago, you know, you can't go five blocks without falling over one it seems. And I'm thinking how am I going to get back into those places. There's so many things I haven't seen yet. So many experiences I haven't had, how are you all navigating that?

M

Monique Davis 17:08

So we're doing digital programming, we're learning to do so we're prototyping quickly, digital programming. We're engaging with local artists more. So one example is like maybe two days after the George Floyd murder we had local poets, and a painter kind of create poetry in response to that, and we did it on Facebook Live. So we are learning technology. We are experimenting with different formats. Of course zoom is the one that we use the most. But thinking about how to engage people in conversations we did a

program I guess, was last Thursday, where we celebrated Pride month and we had a couple of drag queens on we had a special cocktail. We had somebody who used to work with the Human Rights Campaign who's now a policy adviser. And we just had a conversation and streamed it on, you know, really organic conversation, had a poet on and just streamed it on Facebook Live. And people participated. People ask questions, we had an artist show his artwork. So I mean, it can happen. It just has to be, it has to... Zoom. You know, zoom is this own new thing. You have the skills that are used in real life interactions are not necessarily the skills that translate well to the zoom platform. And people's zoom tolerance is maybe 60 minutes at best. So things have to be sharp and tight and move and you need like a lot of visuals.



Omkari Williams 18:49

Okay, so first off, I'm a little irritated that I didn't get an invitation to that event last week because it sounds like it was fun,



Monique Davis 18:57

I'll send you a Facebook live so I'm sorry, I didn't invite you.



Omkari Williams 19:02

Yeah, okay, well, I'll let that go this one time, but let's make a habit of it. Okay. But it's but I think you're making some really good points about how much we can absorb when we're actually not in physical proximity to people. Because to go to a cocktail party and spend three hours is not a big deal. Even for me, and I'm an introvert. You know, once I'm there, I'll get into conversations with different people. But the idea of spending three hours on zoom makes me just say immediately, oh, that's a hard, "No". So having to sort of compact everything into a timeframe and a visual pattern that people can absorb and not be overwhelmed by on the one hand, or bored by on the other hand, is really tricky. And I think it's a skill you're right, we're going to have to develop because, until and unless there is some sort of vaccine I don't see museums being able to open the way they've been open in the past. It's just how do you make that a safe environment?



Monique Davis 20:08

Right. I mean, we're not doing public programs, any public programs until January, depending. And we are figuring out ways to maximize the outdoor space that we will probably need to mark off spots in our green space. So keeping the appropriate distance

apart. I mean, we are opening to the public. July the first but you know, it's going to be ticketed reservations, timed entry, you know, we just put grid tape down in the museum. So there's only going to be one person per box per square. So people can safely distance with a visual on the floor. I mean, so we are taking every precaution and we're also making masks mandatory. And we'll have masks if people don't bring their own



Omkari Williams 21:00

Yeah, and I believe it's the best way that you can do it. And it's going to really shift the experience of being in a museum. And there's nothing anyone can do to get around that, you know, where we have to adapt to what is the reality? It's just, it's just kind of a shame that that sort of leisurely stroll through a museum isn't going to be possible in the same way right now. Yeah.



Monique Davis 21:25

Yeah,



Omkari Williams 21:26

we can hope that it comes back. So I'm hoping it comes back. Yeah. I want to go back to something. And that's the idea of arts and civil rights initiatives, because I think that the connection between arts and civil rights are so profound, especially in the south, because you have so many black artists, people of color, who are artists who create their art around the really rich stories of enslaved people, of people in the Jim Crow South, of the Trail of Tears, of so many things like that. And they inform our conversation on civil rights without actually necessarily saying a verbal word. And I'd love to hear how you feel like arts and civil rights initiatives have evolved over time. In terms of the place they're taking up in our museums.



Monique Davis 22:28

You know, I am, I'm also artist myself. So I think culture, which is informed by art is the thing that moves people and policy is the follower of culture. And so most people are visual learners. based on you know, when you think about do people learn kinetically, auditory, visual, most people are visual. So being able to communicate a concept in a simple compelling, beautiful image is priceless and artists are prophets of that.



Monique Davis 23:11

And art can communicate a, and music too, but are can communicate a humanizing concept in a way that words can't do alone. And so I think the protest art of the 60s like we have the piece by Glenn Ligon says that says I am a man is called the Condition Report. Let's see. So that's in part of our permanent collection. And that was something that we were able to purchase with Kellogg funds. You have a Titus Kaphar piece that I'm not sure if you're familiar with his work, but he has a picture of, looks like Thomas Jefferson, but it's not, cut out flapped upside down and behind it you see this regal image of a enslaved woman, about half her face really magnified, beautiful and regal. And he does a lot of this kind of symbolism, where the predominant narrative is, like stripped away, and you see the Black person behind that, that made that narrative possible. And so I think what's different now then, in 60's, one is technology so things happen a lot quicker. I think the other thing that is also different is that our white brothers and sisters can no longer deny, because of technology, what systematic oppression looks like. It's on their phone.



Omkari Williams 24:40

Yes, that's very interesting. And I think that that inability to deny something is very significant because then it puts one in the position of making a choice. Either you're going to participate in that system or you To participate in the dismantling of that system, once you know it's there, you can't just pretend it that well you can pretend it doesn't exist. But you know, it's there. And I think that that's a point that we're at now in our in our country is people see it, they know it's there, and they're making their choices about whether to participate in upholding it or or dismantling it. We'll see how that plays out. But it's an interesting moment, that's for sure.



Monique Davis 25:31


It is interesting because you are making, I'm gonna get a little spiritual, but you're making a choice that is going to impact how your soul operates in the world. And, you know, my most simplest belief is that there are only two choices. There's fear, there's love. And we need to have a love revolution and be on the side of love and whatever tools, if art can be a tool to help transform people to move from fear to love. Because this this connection with this white identity in this ideal of white supremacist body, and this artificially created social construct is based in fear, ignorance and lack.





Omkari Williams 26:22


Yeah, I could not agree more. That's exactly the reason that the structure exists the way it does. And it's up to us to create a structure that is inclusive and does not come from that place of lack and fear and anxiety. So yeah, I completely agree. That actually brings me to something that I also wanted to talk with you about, which is, tell me what it's like being a black woman in the overwhelmingly white world of museums.


 M Monique Davis 26:59
Wow!

 Omkari Williams 26:59
Thought I was gonna let you get away with that one? No, no.

 M Monique Davis 27:04
Right! Did this really happen and or am I crazy?

 M Monique Davis 27:04
Okay. Oh, that's a that's a complex answer. So, I think it's a both/and it's because my job centers around being equipped to have these conversations. It's a, something I feel deeply committed to. On one hand. On the other hand, it requires a significant support network in bolstering by black women at other institutions to be a sound check. You know, you know how Black women have the, "Am I crazy check"?

 M Monique Davis 27:53
Right. And so I have a strong network of fierce women warrior friends. It practices my compassion muscle in ways that I had not anticipated. It is making me fearless in one way and also investigating my own internalized inferiority, in another way, is causing me to have to be brave to have these difficult conversations, even though it's my job, you know, I just don't ever want to be seen as the disrupter or the angry Black woman or I'm the person that always has to bring these issues up. But I am the person who always has to bring these issues up. is

 M Monique Davis 28:39
So there's an emotional toll to that. And I and you know, and, full transparency, I am still

navigating how to create boundaries and self care rituals and feed myself to be ready to go in with my full self, but I did make a leap this year Omkari. I did make a leap, that said, I am just going to say the things. I'm going to be respectful. I'll Monique-ify, it, I'll say it really nicely. But I am not going to internalize, I'm not going to hold it in anymore to make people feel comfortable. I'm going to say the things because that's what you asked. That's why I'm here.



Omkari Williams 28:39

Yes.



Omkari Williams 29:21

Yes. Yes.



Monique Davis 29:22

I'm going to say the things. And then we'll develop systems. We'll you know, we'll do some scholarly research. But I also want to equally value research that we deem is non scholarly, because museums do have this reputation, well earned, of worshipping the European canon, and only valuing one set of characteristics and virtues. And so on one hand, okay, there's that but there's this whole untapped mine of beautiful experiences coming from other parts of the world. From indigenous folks, from African folks, or Haitian folks that weren't viewed as when I say, "Fine Art" that were put in this box of "Folk Art", but that's part of the white supremacist culture where you devalue were created by Black and brown people. And so, you know, it's a it's an interesting dance that I'm always doing, but I'm learning a lot. I appreciate my colleagues and I'm, you know, Omkari I'm trying to figure out like, you know, how to how to grow this work and eventually move it to something else. Like, how does Monique get to be a consultant in the world and travel once this is over and her kids are gone from college and she could work for herself?



Omkari Williams 30:44

Right? Right. The dream. I think it's so important, though, what you're saying because I think it's true for women in general, but it's especially true for Black women and women of color, that being the one who says the thing is always feels very scary. And I am so glad to hear you say that you're being brave in that way, because you're being brave then sort of ripples out and gives permission to other women, other Black women, other brown women and girls to be brave to say the thing that needs to be said. And that's what it's going to

take. I mean, we just have to keep saying the things because otherwise, it's easy for people to just pretend that those things are not actually happening.



Monique Davis 31:36

Right.



Omkari Williams 31:36

And that's what we've lived with for our entire lives and for the lives of our ancestors. And that cycle needs to end. And so saying the thing, Monique, whatever that is great, because I also trust that you're not going to throw a bomb. You're going to say the thing in a way that people can take it in and that matters, too. Because if no one can hear what you're saying then what difference does it make you know? You might as well be talking to the dog?



Omkari Williams 31:49

I always say you can't shame people into enlightenment.



Omkari Williams 32:07

No, you cannot. No, you cannot. And I think that's a really important thing that's happening is that I'm hoping that I'm right about this. I feel like what's happening now are more conversations and less shaming. And that feels really important to me, because conversations are what's going to make the difference. shaming just hardens people in their positions. So that's never worked. We're coming up on our time in a bit, but I want to ask you, just two more questions. The first one is, so for you, as a Black woman living in Mississippi, working at a museum, what's been the thing that has surprised you the most about where you are and the people you've met and the experiences you've had?



Monique Davis 33:00

The thing that has surprised me the most is people's willingness to have this conversation. So I grew up in Washington DC. And you know, the myth when you're in, well, technically it's the south, but not really. But when you're in a certain part of the country, you have this myth about what Mississippi is and what racism looks like, and how it manifests itself. But the thing that has surprised me is how welcoming people are, and how open they are and

interested, even before George Floyd, in having this conversation and figuring out a way to move forward that's restorative and healing. And so I have, I continue to be surprised at that. And the willingness to make mistakes, because I always say, you know, you're not gonna get this right and it's okay. But I also do believe that's there's power in affinity groups. And a dear friend of mine reached out to me and said, "Well, what should we do? You know, we want to start a book club" and I gave her, you know, a list of books she should read. And I said, if you want a person of color to come facilitate a discussion, then you need to pay them.



Omkari Williams 34:17

Right.



Monique Davis 34:18

I said, it's not going, it can't be me.



Omkari Williams 34:23

No, definitely you want someone who's not a good friend, because things are hard conversations.



Monique Davis 34:29

Right, it's a hard conversation. And then right after George Floyd, I'm saying because you all, you all will probably say some things that will be triggering for me as a mother of five young Black men, and I don't need to be there. I've got to protect myself. But you need an experienced facilitator who knows how to do this and you all should invest some resources into doing that.



Omkari Williams 34:50

Yeah, that's a really, really important thing for people to understand. to remember is, this is hard work. Work on both sides for different reasons, but it's hard work on both sides. So yeah, that's really important. Well, the last thing I'd like to ask you is something I asked my guests lately, which is, what are three simple actions you can suggest people take if they're interested in advancing the cause of equity or equity in the arts as specifically, what are three things they can do?



Monique Davis 35:27

Buy art from Black artists. Number one,



Omkari Williams 35:32

Definitely.



Monique Davis 35:34

Number two, watch Robin de Angelo's White Fragility YouTube series if you don't have the time to invest in reading the book because she captures the major concepts in that lecture series. And this is and it was informative for me as a Black woman, because she names the stages and the defenses and what people how people react. So I think is equally useful for white people as it is for Black people. I would say do that. And for my white brothers and sisters, I would say, put on a new set of glasses and begin to recognize patterns that our Black and brown friends have been talking to you about for years. So really begin to interrogate, why are Black schools underfunded? Begin to interrogate, why is there's a significant wealth gap between Black households and white white households. Begin to interrogate, why are Black and brown people and indigenous people suffering from COVID at a much more magnified rate, then our white counterparts? Begin to interrogate, why are white people being given a pass for opioid addiction while Black people were criminalized for crack. And those are just like surface level patterns. That white people need to begin to notice and ask questions. Why?



Omkari Williams 37:06

Those are excellent. Those are excellent. And they are also, besides being good subjects for self inquiry, they're really good subjects for conversation, and for having a dialogue about what's happening. And I strongly suggest that the dialogue starts with your other white friends, friends and family members before you take it out to people of color. And just be aware that this is your work to do if you're a white person and to not have it be something that you expect people of color to help you with, just automatically because as Monique said, you know, a conversation that might be difficult for you as a white person can be really triggering for a Black person and there's a quantitative difference and a qualitative difference between those two states. So, those are great. Thank you so much, Monique,



Monique Davis 38:04

You're welcome.



Omkari Williams 38:06

I have loved this conversation. I'm so glad that we had an opportunity to talk. And people will be able to find out more about you in the Episode Notes for this conversation and the Mississippi Museum of Art and the CAPE program and all the work that you all are doing, especially since a lot of it's going to be virtual now. It'll be really easy for people to participate, and join in on what you all are doing down there because you've done some just incredible, incredible installations and exhibitions from what I've been able to see just from the website. So it's it's really exciting work. Thank you for doing it.



Monique Davis 38:45

I'm honored to do it.



Omkari Williams 38:46

Yeah. And I, you know, maybe when we're on the other side of this, which I hope is soon, we can have another conversation about what we've all learned in the art world through this experience, because I think there's gonna be some amazing art that comes out of the last few months of what's happened in American life and just the world in general. So thank you again, Monique. It's really been a pleasure. And I hope I get to speak with you again very soon.



Monique Davis 39:16

Same here. Thank you for the opportunity, anytime.



Omkari Williams 39:22

Thank you all for joining me for this episode. It's definitely a challenging time right now. But it's also a time in which we have the opportunity to make significant change. So figure out what you can do, and then do it. If you'd like to support this podcast, you can do that in my Patreon community for as little as \$3 a month. You'll find a link on my website omkariwilliams.com. And as always remember, change starts when we share our stories, so keep sharing yours. I'll be back with another episode very soon.

